



From Teasing to Torment: A Report on School Climate in Ohio



A Report from GLSEN's Research Department

From Teasing to Torment: A Report on School Climate in Ohio

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The **Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network** is the leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students. Established nationally in 1995, GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

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KEY FINDINGS

Bullying, name-calling, and harassment were serious problems in Ohio schools:

- Nearly half of Ohio students said that bullying, name-calling, and harassment were serious problems in their schools (43%).
- The percentage of students in Ohio who thought that bullying was a somewhat or serious problem in their schools was higher than in the national sample (43% vs. 36%).
- In addition physical appearance, students reported that the most common reasons students were bullied were sexual orientation and gender expression.

Biased language was both commonly heard and pervasive in Ohio schools:

- Half (49%) of the students reported that homophobic and sexist language were often heard in schools. A smaller number reported racist and negative religious comments being heard often (22% and 7%, respectively).
- Of the Ohio students who reported hearing homophobic remarks in school, over a third (37%) said it was from most or all of their classmates.
- Of the students who reported hearing sexist remarks, nearly half (46%) said it was from most or all of their classmates.
- About a third of Ohio students reported that faculty/staff rarely or never intervened when homophobic, racist, or sexist remarks were made in their presence (37%, 28% and 33%, respectively).

Ohio students often reported feeling unsafe in school. Experiences of verbal and physical harassment and assault in school were not uncommon:

- Only about half (53%) of Ohio students reported that they felt very safe in their schools.
- About a third (34%) of the students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of a personal characteristic, such as their race/ethnicity or sexual orientation.
- Over half (56%) of the students reported that they had been verbally harassed in the previous year.
- About a quarter (23%) of the students reported that they had been physically harassed or assaulted in the previous year.

Most students never reported incidents of harassment and assault to teachers and staff. Among those who did, many students said that their reports were ignored or that they received an ineffective response:

- Nearly two-thirds (66%) of respondents who were harassed never reported the incidents to a teacher, principal or staff person.
- Of those who reported an incident, nearly a third (27%) said that school personnel did not take steps to appropriately address the problem.
- Many of the students who did not report an incident believed that teachers or staff would not care or that reporting the incident would only make the situation worse.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ohio lawmakers and school officials must create anti-harassment/assault policies in all schools. These policies must offer explicit protection to students based on personal characteristics such as sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and race and ethnicity. Such inclusive policies have been shown to be more effective than general anti-bullying policies that do not provide enumerated categories.
- School districts must actively train teachers on how to protect students who are the targets of harassment and assault. They must be made particularly aware of incidents in which students are targeted because of personal characteristics such as sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and race and ethnicity.

INTRODUCTION

In 2003 GLSEN conducted its third national survey of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) youth—the 2003 National School Climate Survey (NSCS), the only national survey to document the experiences of LGBT youth in school. Results from this survey revealed that school can be an unsafe and hostile environment for many students, particularly those who are LGBT. Name calling, harassment and bullying, as well as the use of derogatory language by students were common occurrences in our nation’s schools and were often not properly addressed by teachers and other school staff.¹ Given the limited attention paid by federal, state and local policy makers to LGBT youth, and because GLSEN’s work to make all schools safe for LGBT students is on-going, it is important to keep informed about the experiences of LGBT students in their schools. Understanding the experiences of the general school population is key to meeting this challenge. GLSEN hoped to broaden the scope of its research by documenting the attitudes and experiences of all students in secondary school. For this reason, GLSEN commissioned Harris Interactive to conduct a national survey of secondary school students and teachers. Topics covered in the survey included exposure to biased language, the frequency of bullying, name calling and harassment, and students’ personal experiences with harassment and assault at school. The full report from this study, *From Teasing to Torment: School Climate in America*, also includes results from a national survey of secondary school teachers, can be found on GLSEN’s website (www.glsen.org). The following is a report of findings based on the responses of youth who were attending schools in Ohio at the time of the survey. Data collection and analysis of the national survey of students and teachers was conducted by Harris Interactive. Analysis of state oversampled data in this report was conducted by GLSEN’s Research Department.

RESULTS

A total of 196 respondents were attending schools in Ohio at the time of the survey. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the majority of the sample was white, about half were male, and most were in high school.² Nine percent of respondents reported being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). The vast majority of respondents attended public schools. Most of the students attending non-public schools were in religious-affiliated schools (see Table 2).

Biased Language in School

Biased Language from Students

Hearing derogatory remarks about oneself or others can create a hostile school environment for all students. Therefore, students were asked to report how often they heard various forms of biased language from other students. The two most commonly cited types of biased language were homophobic language, such as “faggot”, “dyke”, or “queer”, and sexist language, such as calling a girl a bitch, calling a boy a “girl” or statements that girls are not as capable as boys. As shown in Figure 1, approximately three-fourths of the students reported that they heard homophobic (70%) and sexist language (79%) at least some of the time. Homophobic and sexist remarks were heard significantly more often than racist or negative religious remarks.

¹ Kosciw, J. G. (2004). *The 2003 National School Climate Survey: The school-related experiences of our nation’s lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth*. New York: GLSEN.

² A “high school” represents those schools that only have grades between 9th and 12th. Schools that include lower grades are referred to as “middle schools”.

Table 1: Demographics of Survey Participants

Gender

Female	49%
Male	51%

Race/Ethnicity

White	84%
Black/African American	5%
Latino/a	8%
Asian or Pacific Islander	1%
Mixed/Other racial background	2%

LGBT Status

Non-LGBT	91%
LGBT	9%

Grade

6th Grade	2%
7th Grade	4%
8th Grade	16%
9th Grade	15%
10th Grade	17%
11th Grade	18%
12th Grade	28%

Average Age = 15.5 years

Table 2: School Characteristics

Grade Levels

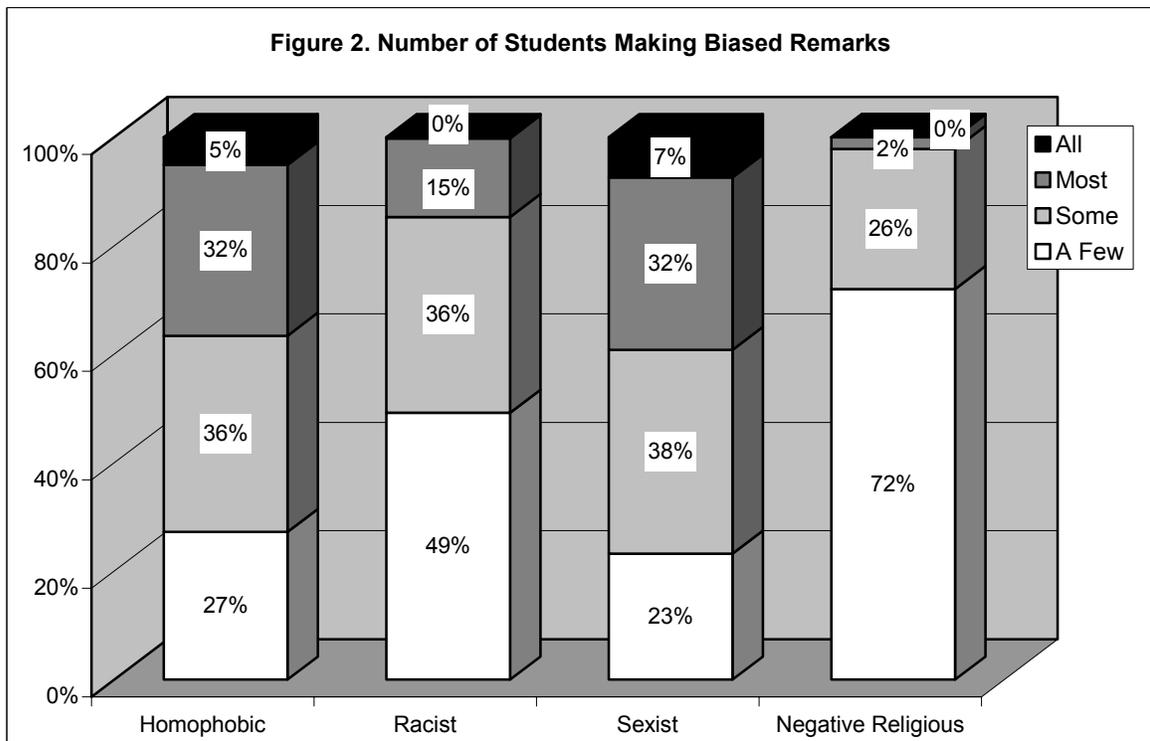
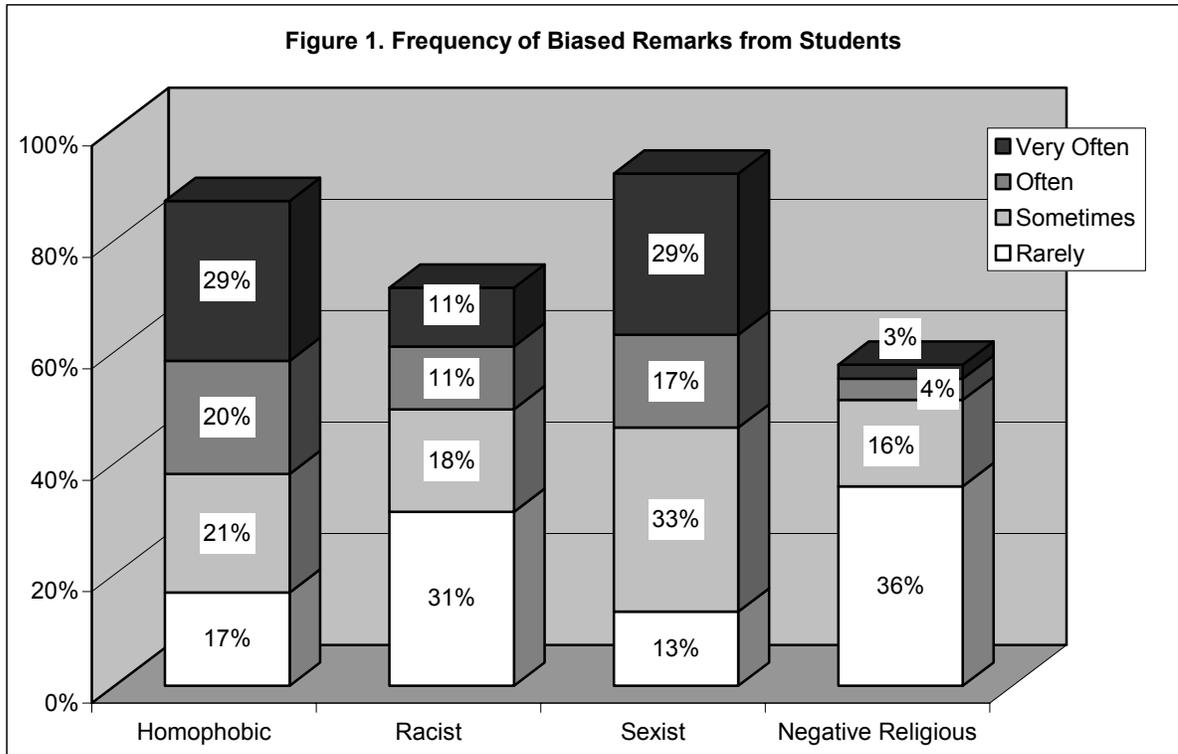
K through 12 school	3%
Middle school	23%
Upper school (middle and high school grades)	2%
High school	72%

School Location

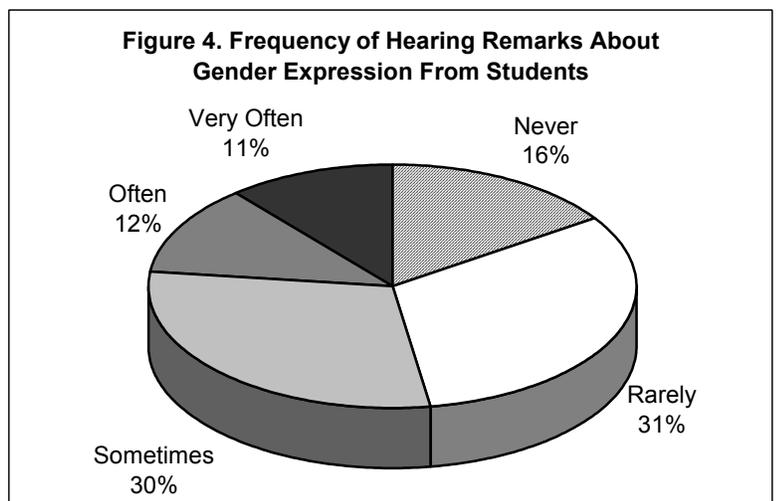
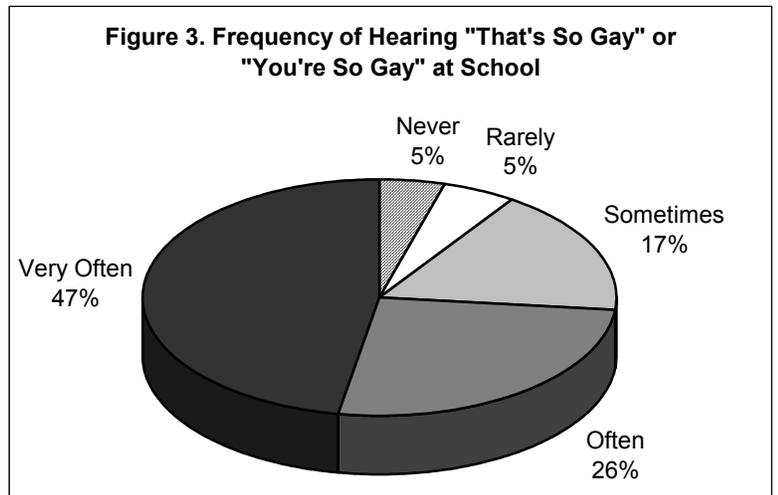
Urban area	20%
Suburban area	55%
Small town or rural area	25%

School Type

Public school	91%
Private school	9%
<i>Religious-affiliated school</i>	<i>75% of private school youth</i>
<i>Other independent or private school</i>	<i>25% of private school youth</i>



Of all students who reported hearing biased language, over a third of the students reported hearing homophobic (37%) and sexist (39%) comments from most or all of their classmates (see Figure 2). These findings were significantly greater than racist or negative religious comments. In addition to homophobic remarks like “fag” and “dyke,” an even larger number of Ohio students reported hearing homophobic comments such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay” in which the word “gay” is used to mean stupid or worthless. As shown in Figure 3, about 90% of students reported hearing these comments at school at least some of the time. Negative comments about gender expression, such as telling a boy that he is acting too much like a girl or telling a girl that she is acting too masculine, were also heard frequently. Over half (53%) of students reported that they heard these remarks at least some of the time (see Figure 4).



Biased Language from Teachers and Other School Staff

While less frequent than student remarks, study participants also reported hearing homophobic, racist, sexist, and negative religious language from Ohio teachers and staff at their school (see Figure 5). Although not surprising that the frequency of these remarks from teachers and staff is less than from students, one would expect that NO teacher would make these kinds of remarks in front of students. Even the smallest number of biased remarks from teachers, staff, and other authority figures may send a message to students that such language is permissible to use in school. In fact, when the reported frequency of biased remarks by teachers or staff was high, the reported frequency of students’ biased remarks was also high (see Figure 6). Similarly, when respondents reported that teachers never made biased remarks, they also reported that students’ biased remarks were much less frequent. These findings suggest that students may be learning that prejudiced remarks are appropriate because they hear teachers and staff say them.

Intervention Regarding Biased Remarks

Participants were asked how often teachers and other students corrected or criticized biased remarks in school. With regard to teacher intervention, many of the students reported that teachers and staff had not intervened when biased remarks were made in their presence. For example, as shown in Figure 7, about 40% of students reported that teachers and staff rarely or never corrected or criticized homophobic or sexist remarks. A somewhat smaller percentage of students reported such inaction by teachers or staff with regard to racist

Figure 5. Frequency of Remarks from Teachers or Other School Staff

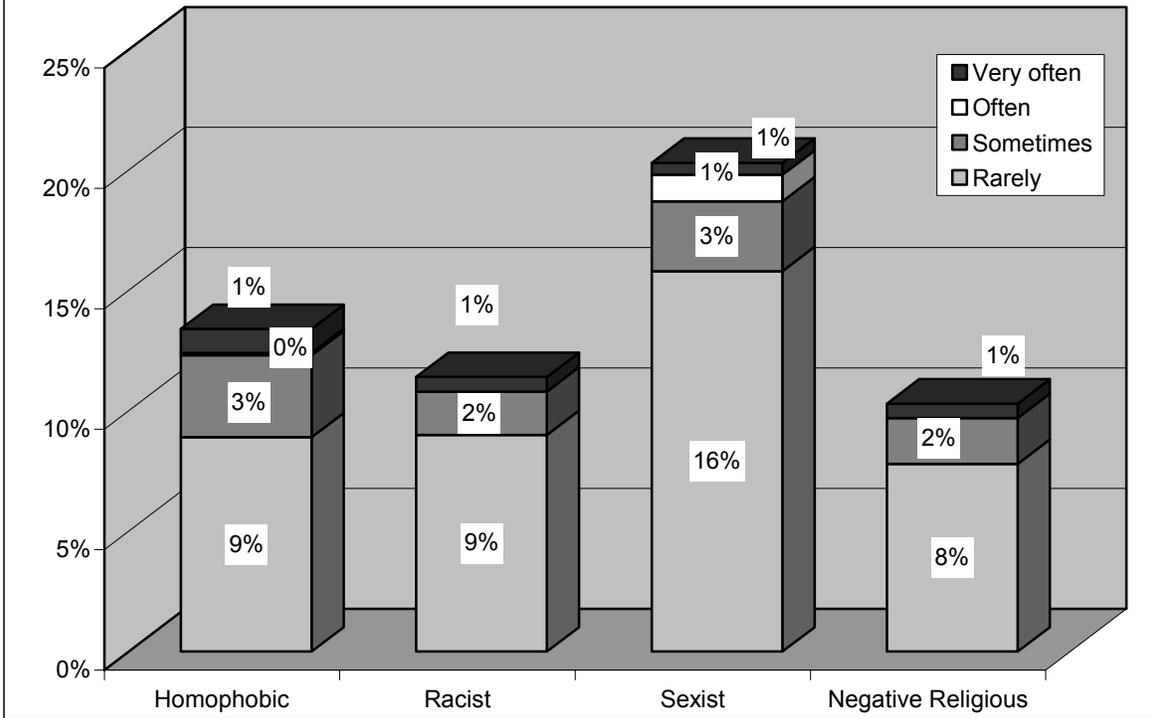
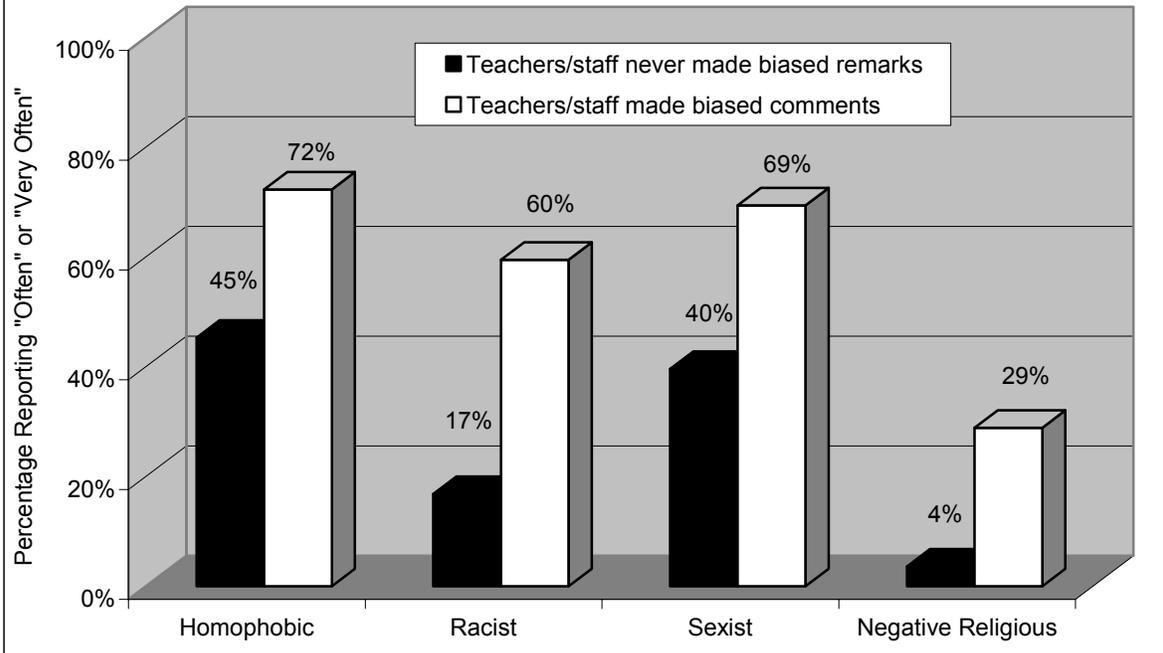
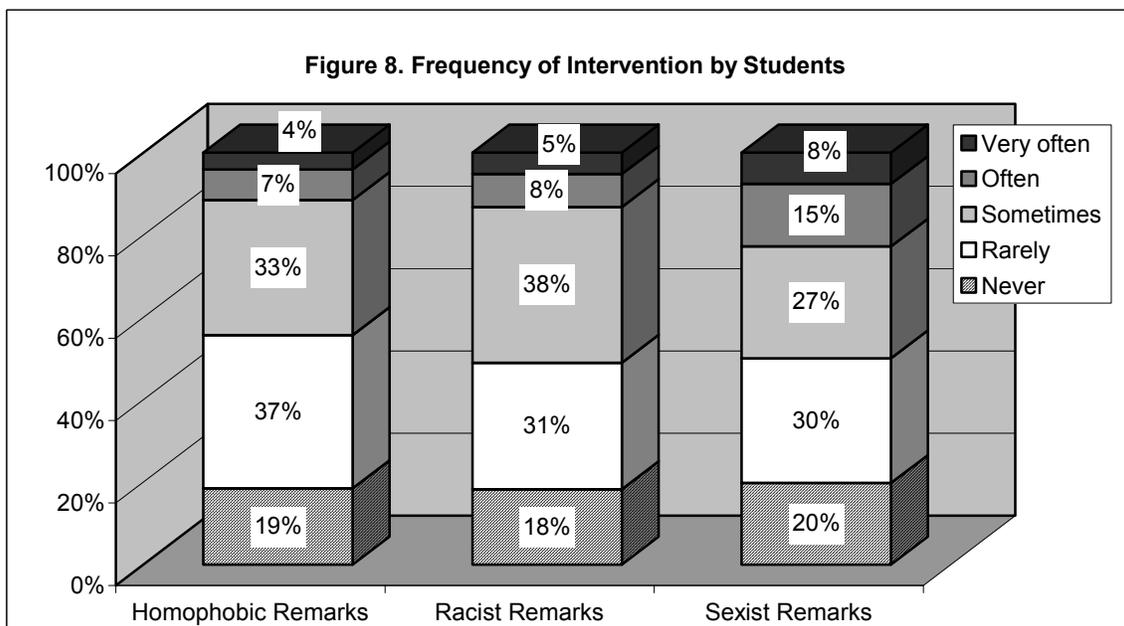
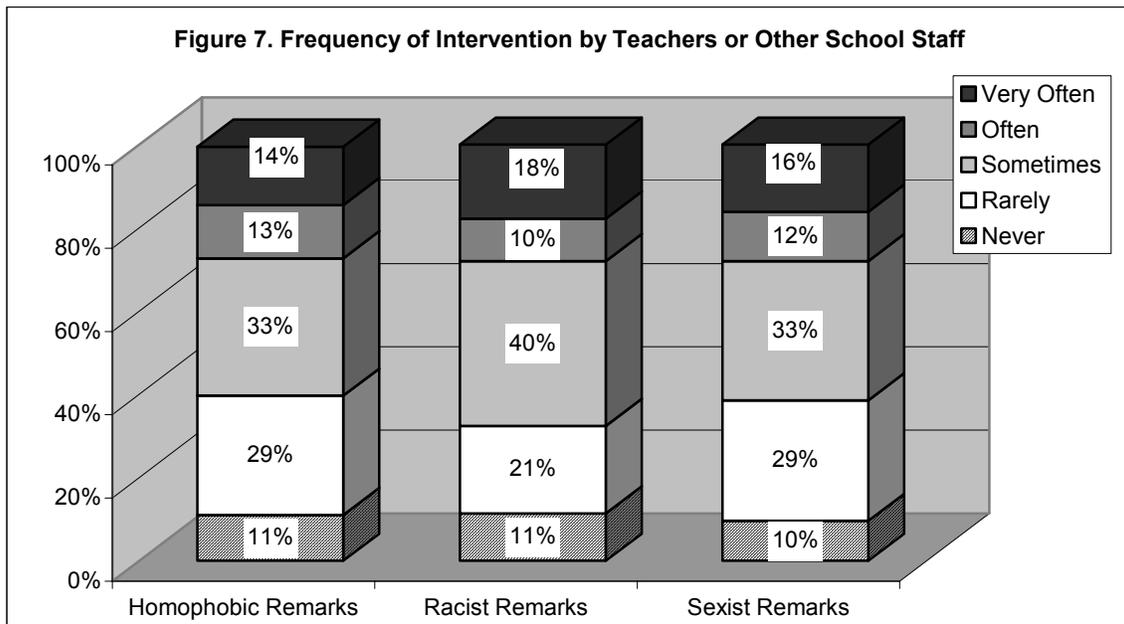


Figure 6. Relationship Between Teachers' and Students' Use of Biased Language



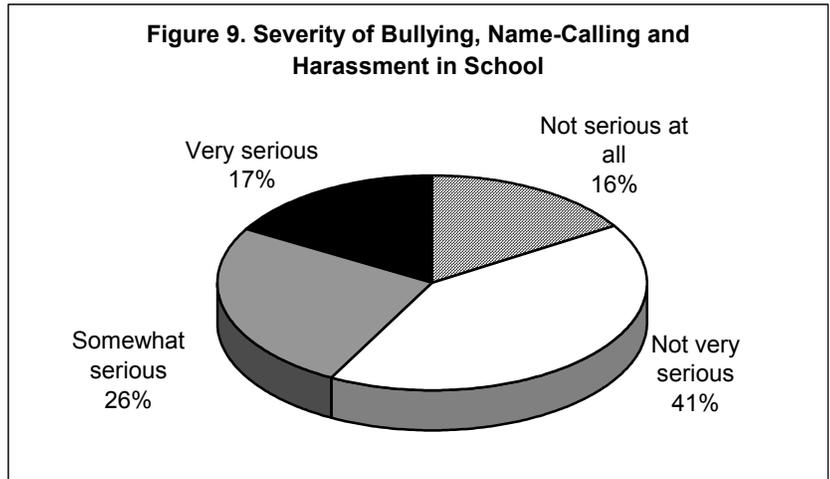
remarks – about a third reported this happened rarely or never. Overall, the findings suggest that many teachers and staff are not intervening when students make offensive and bigoted remarks. The failure to correct prejudiced language may indicate to students that such behavior is permissible, and thereby contributes to a hostile school environment for students.

Although one would expect teachers and school staff to bear the responsibility for addressing problems of biased language in school, students intervening amongst themselves is another indicator of school climate. As shown in Figure 8, approximately half of students in the survey reported that other students rarely or never intervened in response to racist (49%) and sexist (50%) remarks, and over half rarely or never intervened in response to homophobic remarks (56%).

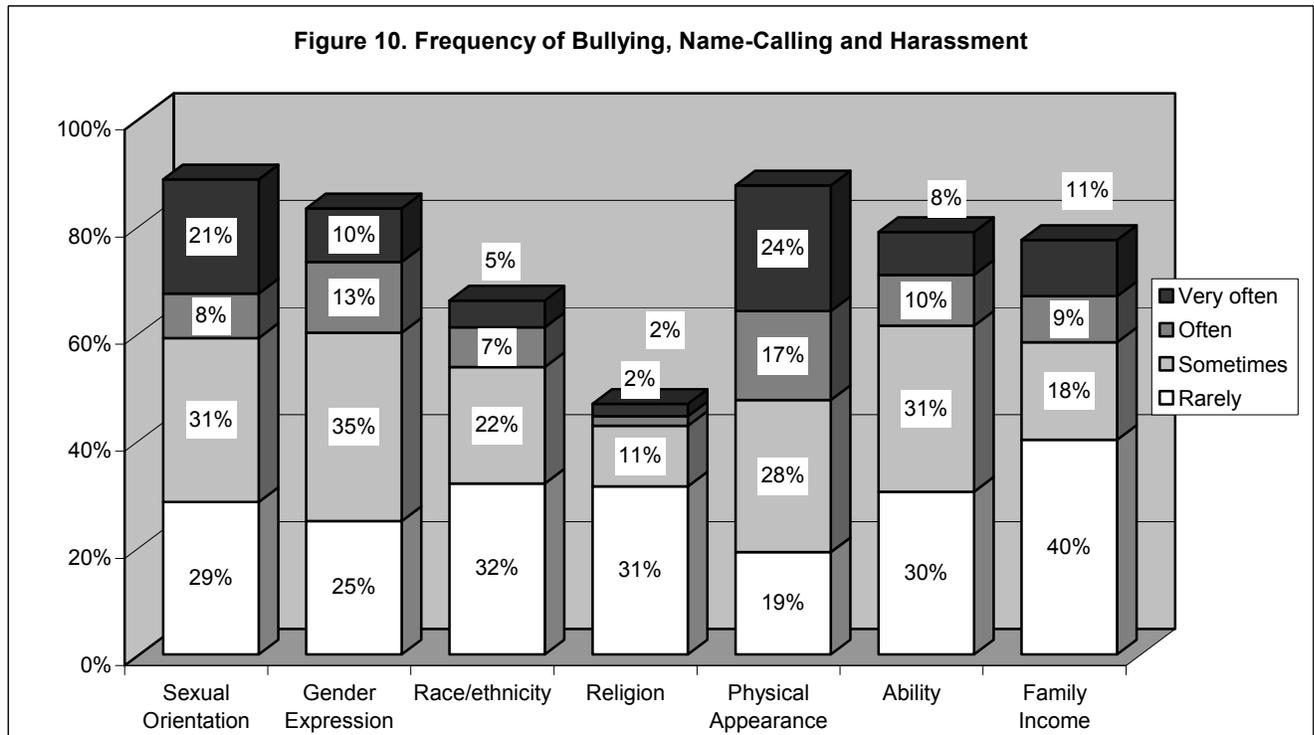


Severity of Bullying, Name-Calling and Harassment in School

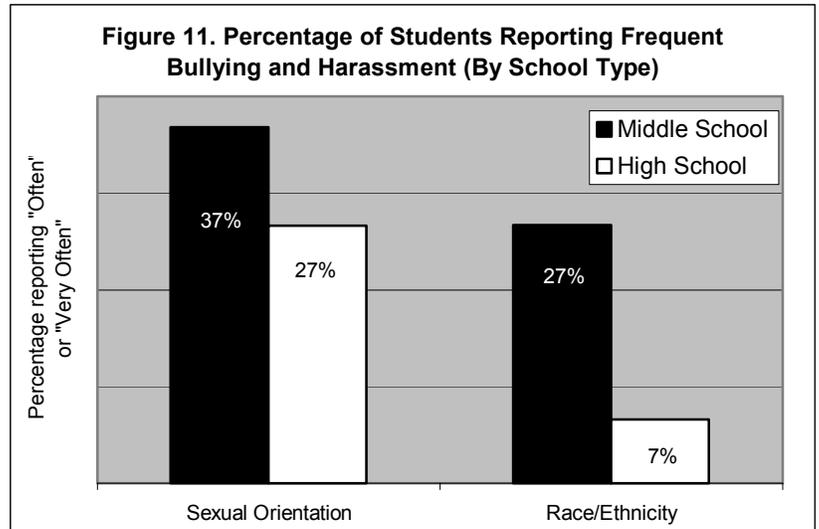
All students have the right to an education, yet when schools do not provide safe learning environments they impede the opportunity to learn. Respondents were asked how serious bullying, name-calling, and harassment were at their schools. As shown in Figure 9, nearly half (43%) of the students reported that bullying, name-calling, and harassment were at least somewhat serious, and nearly one-fifth (17%) of the students reported that these were very serious problems at their school. These findings indicate that bullying and harassment are commonplace in many Ohio schools. In fact, the percentage of students in Ohio who thought that bullying was a somewhat or serious problem in their schools was higher than in the national sample (43% vs. 36%).



Participants were asked how frequently students in their schools were bullied for various reasons. Figure 10 shows the frequency with which respondents reported other students are harassed, called names or bullied for certain personal characteristics in Ohio schools. A majority of participants said that bullying occurred at least some of the time because of students' sexual orientation (60%), gender expression (58%), and physical appearance (looks or body size) (69%). Students from Ohio were similar in these reports to students from the rest of the nation with two exceptions. Students from Ohio reported a lower frequency of harassment based on religion but a higher frequency of harassment based on family income.

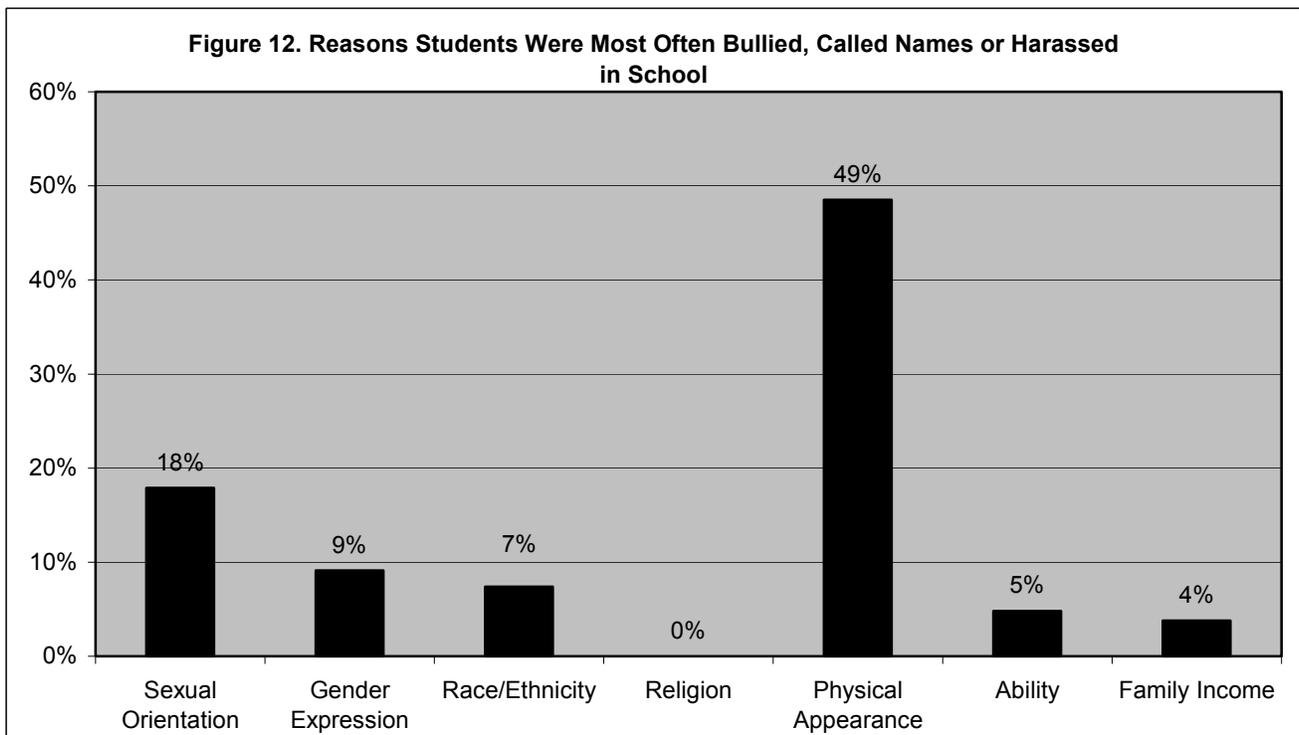


Seriousness of bullying and harassment also differed between high schools and middle schools. Students from middle schools were more likely to report that bullying was a serious problem in their school. Specifically, over half (56%) of middle school students reported that bullying and harassment were at least somewhat serious, whereas slightly over a third (37%) of high school students felt these issues were serious. These findings indicate that while bullying and harassment are serious problems in many schools, they seem to be more common in middle schools.



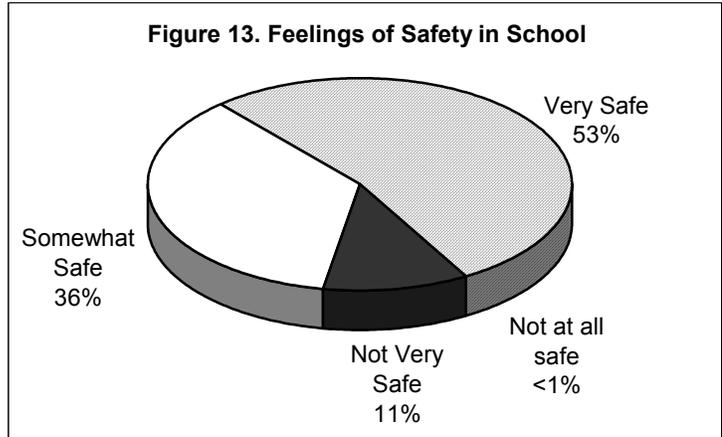
The frequency of bullying based on sexual orientation and race/ethnicity differed between high school and middle school students. As shown Figure 11, middle school students reported more frequent bullying for both characteristics than high school students.

Students were also asked to indicate the most common reason people were bullied, called names, or harassed in their schools. As shown in Figure 12, most Ohio students (49%) cited physical appearance as the most common reason students are bullied and harassed, followed by sexual orientation (18%) and gender expression (9%). These findings may indicate that sexual orientation, gender expression, and appearance are related. Specifically, LGBT students and students who express their gender differently may be teased or ridiculed because their looks and appearance do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes. Findings suggest that schools need to do more to address bullying based on these reasons.



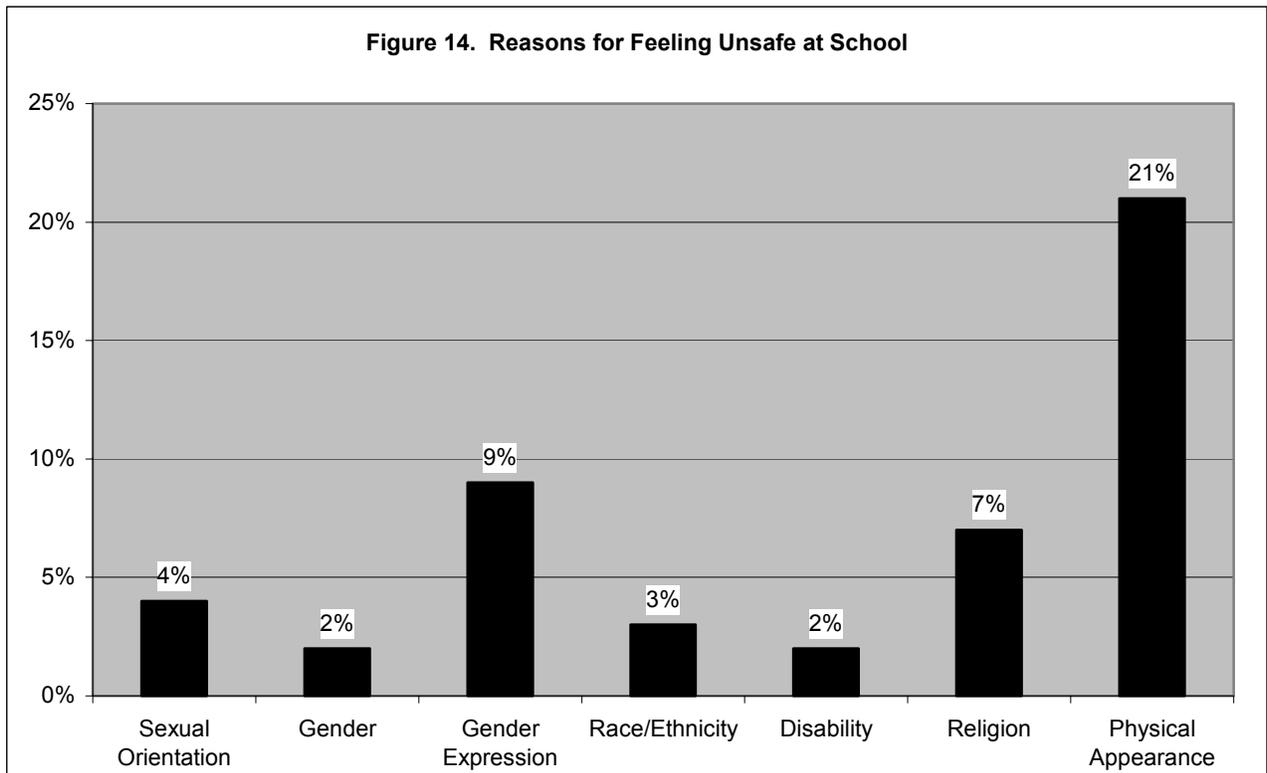
Safety in School

Students were asked a range of questions regarding their personal safety in school and their own experiences of being the target of bullying, name-calling, and harassment. As shown in Figure 13, only about half (53%) of Ohio students felt very safe in their schools, and more than a tenth (11%) reported feeling not very safe or not at all safe.



Students were asked whether they felt unsafe in school because of one or more personal characteristics.

About a third (34%) stated that at least one personal characteristic made them feel unsafe. As shown in Figure 14, the largest number of Ohio students reported feeling unsafe because of their physical appearance (21%). The second more frequent reason for students feeling unsafe in school was their gender expression with nearly a tenth (9%) of the students reporting that they felt unsafe for that reason. Given that the sample was predominately white and predominately non-LGBT identified, it is not surprising that less than 5% of students felt unsafe because of their race or sexual orientation. In contrast, even though the sample was evenly split by gender, the number of students reporting that they felt unsafe because of their gender was quite low.



Personal Experiences of Bullying, Name-Calling and Harassment

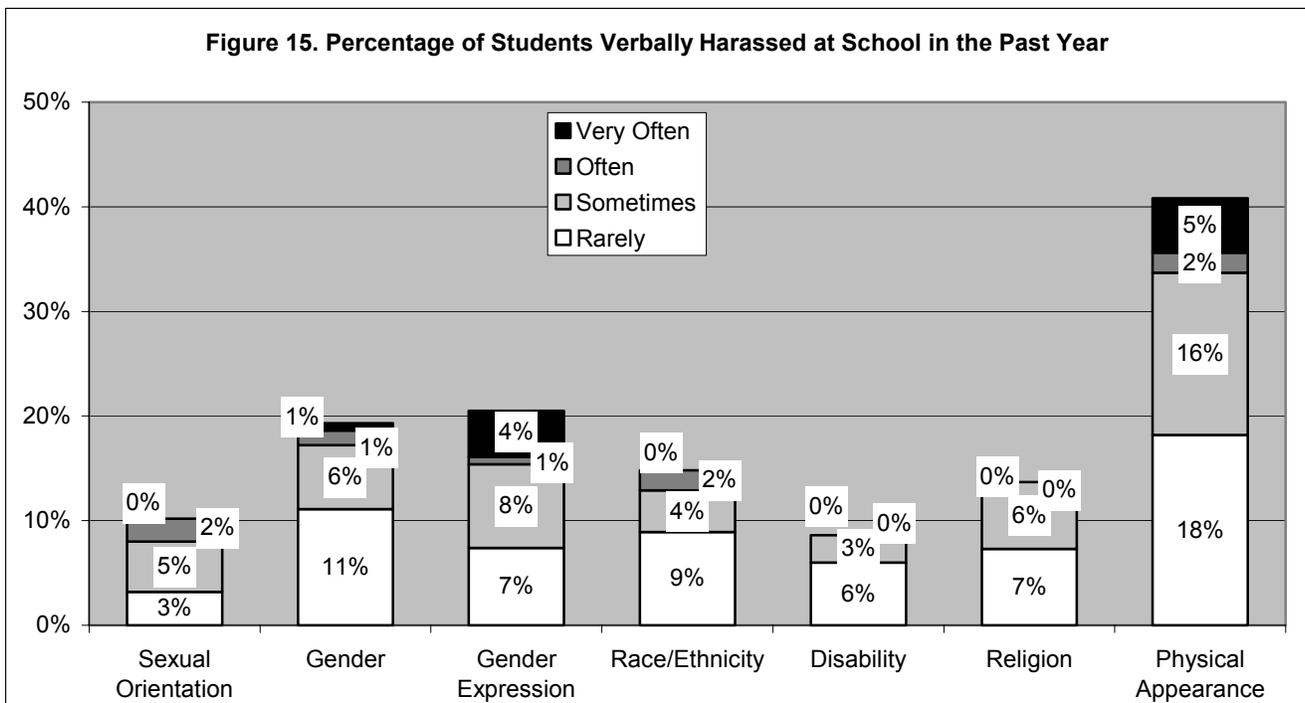
Verbal Harassment

A high percentage of students reported personally experiencing harassment at school in the previous year. Over half (56%) of Ohio students reported that they were verbally harassed in school in the previous year. As shown in Figure 15, the most common reason for verbal harassment was physical appearance (41%) followed by gender expression (20%) and gender (19%). Perhaps because of the small percentage of LGBT-identified students in the survey, only a tenth (10%) of the students reported that they were verbally harassed because of

their sexual orientation. Interestingly, over half (52%) of the students who reported being the target of harassment because of their sexual orientation were not LGBT-identified students and almost three-fourths (71%) of those students who reported being verbally harassed because of their gender expression were also not LGBT-identified. Intolerance directed at students' sexual orientations and gender expression creates a hostile environment that negatively affects heterosexual students as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students.

Physical Harassment and Assault

Figure 16 shows the frequencies of reported physical harassment or assault by students in Ohio schools.³ As with verbal harassment, physical harassment or assault based on physical appearance was most frequently reported (17%). In addition, over a tenth (11%) of Ohio students reported that they were physically harassed/assaulted because of their gender



³ Given the low incidence of physical harassment and assault, Figure 16 represents only whether students ever experienced the particular event, i.e., those who reported “rarely,” “sometimes,” “often” or “very often.”

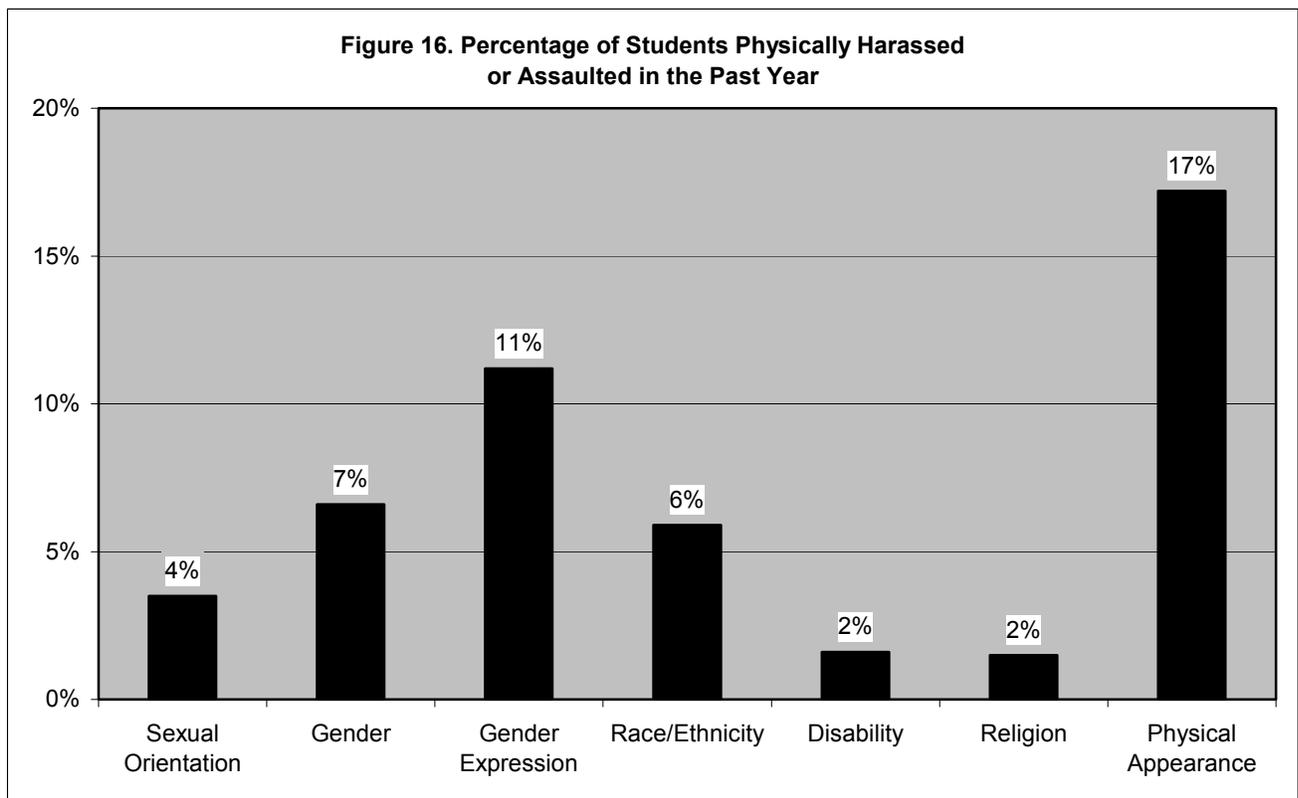
expression. These findings are particularly disturbing given the severe nature of the experiences, which makes even less commonly cited reasons a cause for alarm.

Other Forms of Harassment

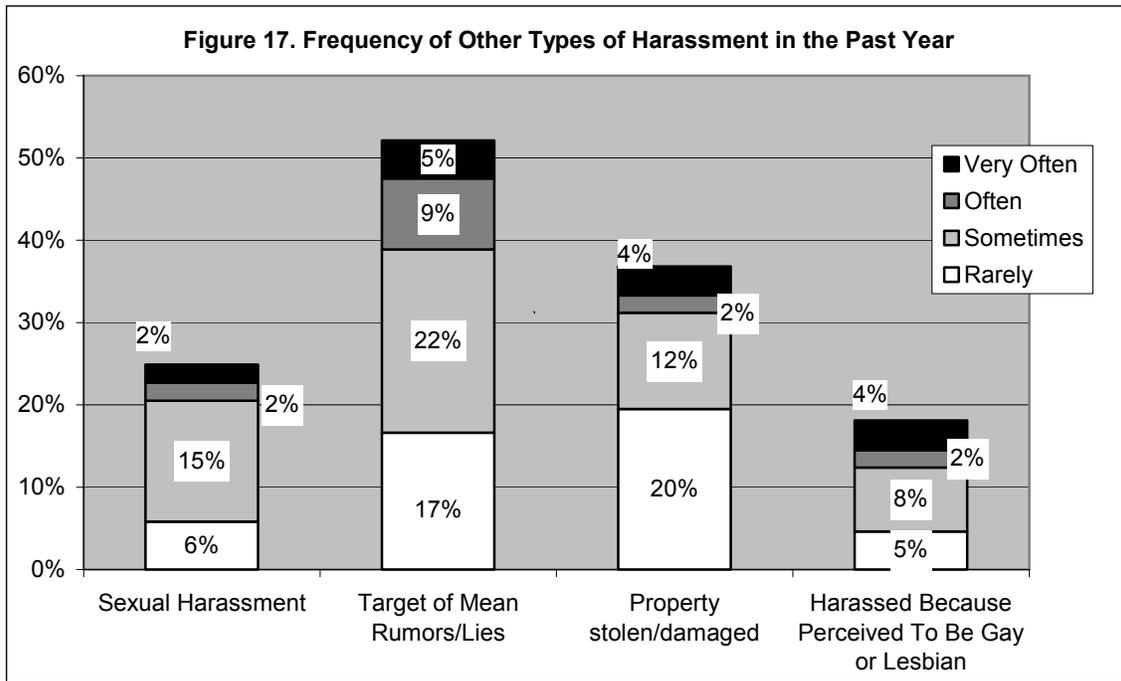
Figure 17 illustrates other forms of bullying and harassment in school.⁴ Of these types of harassment, students most frequently reported being the target of mean rumors or lies with over half of the students reporting that it had happened in the past year. Over a third of students also reported that their personal property had been damaged or stolen in school in the previous year. Whereas 10% of Ohio students had reported being harassed because of their actual sexual orientation in the past year (see Figure 17), nearly 20% reported that they had been harassed because others thought they were gay or lesbian, the majority of whom identified as heterosexual.

Reporting Incidents of Harassment

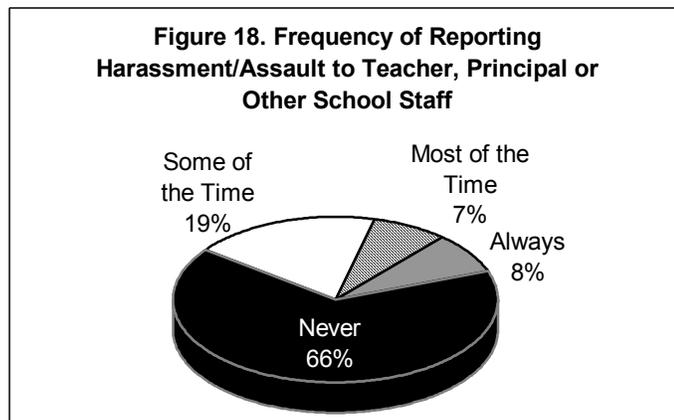
Among Ohio students who experienced any form of verbal or physical harassment or assault, two-thirds (66%) said that they never reported the incident(s) to a teacher, principal or other school staff member (see Figure 18). Among students who reported at least one incident, nearly a third (27%) said that school personnel did not take steps to correct the problem or ensure that it would not occur again. For example, a female participant in the 12th grade stated that the teacher or staff person she talked to following an incident did “nothing. They just ignored it like nothing had ever happened.”



⁴ Unlike the previously discussed frequencies of verbal harassment and physical harassment or assault, students were not asked whether these types of harassment were specifically related to a personal characteristic. For example, students may be the target of mean rumors or lies because of their sexual orientation or religion or for no apparent reason.



Of those who did not report an incident, a tenth (10%) said that they did not think teachers or staff would be concerned about the problem or believe the student (see Figure 19). In addition, nearly a quarter (23%) of students said that reporting the incident would only make the problem worse. For example, one female participant in the 8th grade explained that she did not report an incident of harassment and assault because:



[Teachers and staff] don't really care, and if they talk to the kid who did it, they just get mad and do something worse.

These findings suggest that schools need to find ways to deal more effectively with harassment and assault issues, especially in high schools. Specifically, teachers and staff must be better trained to respond to incidents of harassment and assault. In addition, school officials must implement anti-harassment policies that specifically protect students based on personal characteristics such as sexual orientation, gender expression and physical appearance. The inclusion of teacher training and protective policies may change negative school climates and help students feel more comfortable reporting incidents of harassment and assault.

Differences in Incidences of Harassment and Assault by School Type

Important differences were found between high school and middle school students on feelings of safety and experiences of verbal and physical harassment/assault. Nearly a third (30%) of middle school students reported feeling unsafe in their schools

Figure 19. Reasons for Not Reporting Harassment or Assault

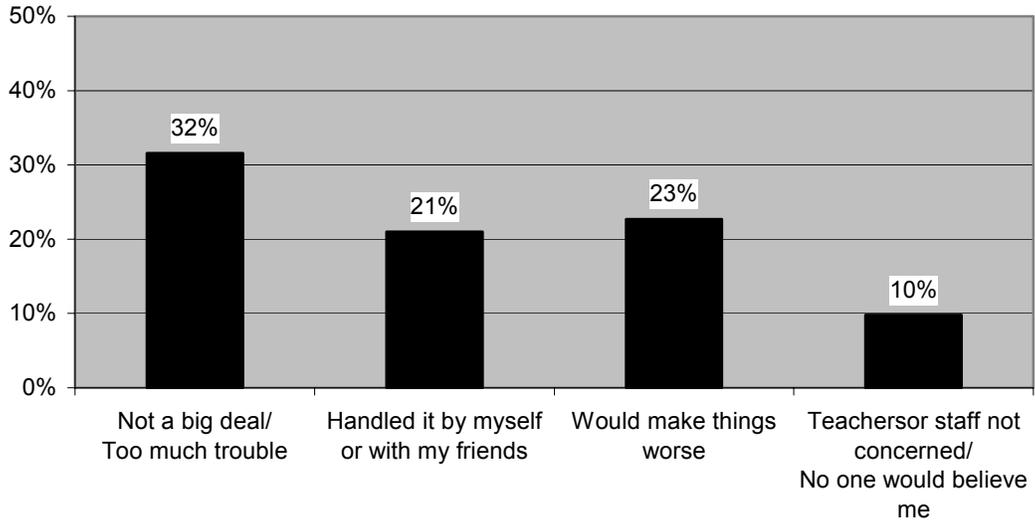


Figure 20. Percentage of Students Verbally Harassed in the Past Year (by school type)

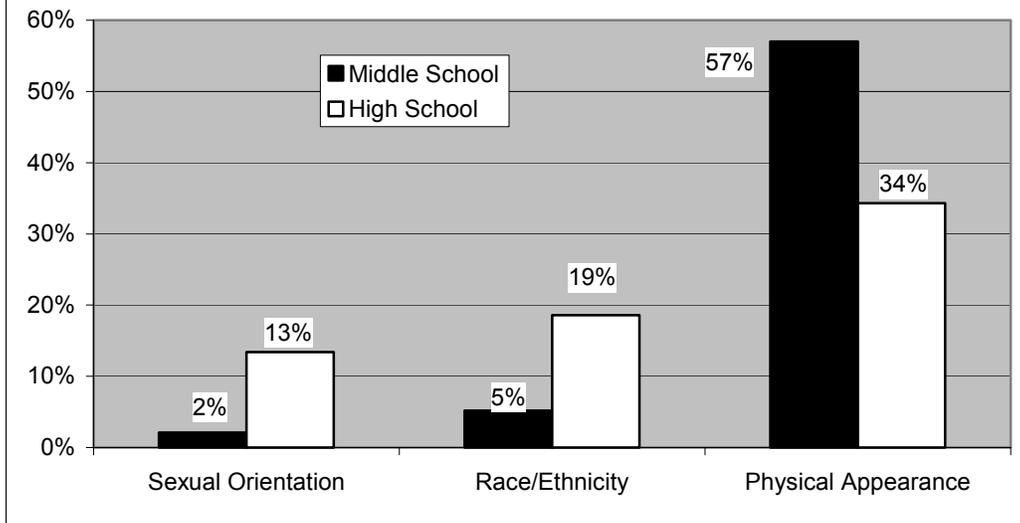
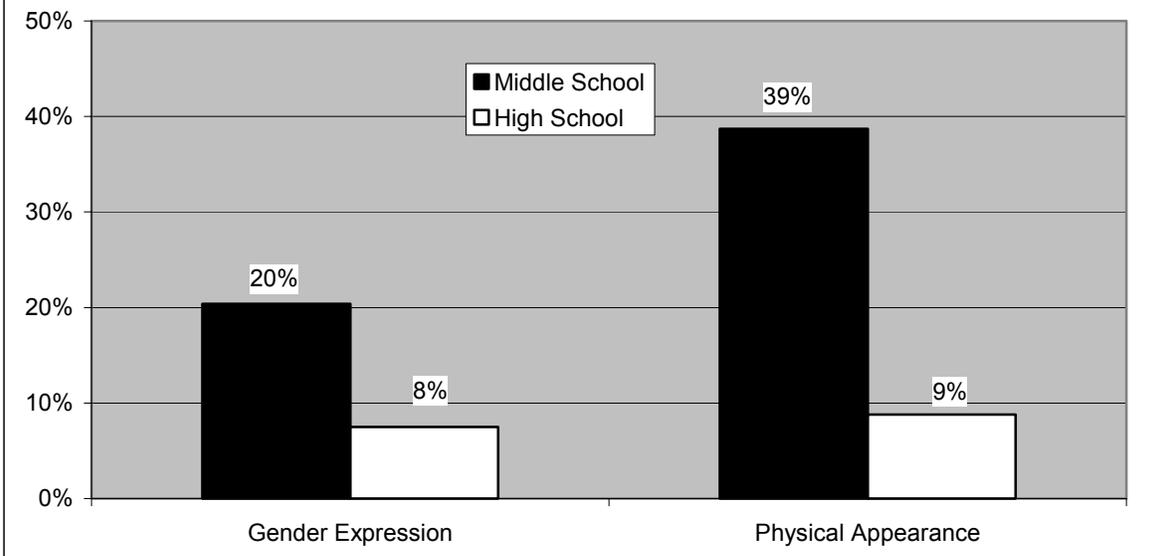


Figure 21. Percentage of Students Physically Harassed/Assaulted in the Past Year (by school type)



as compared to 3% based on sexual orientation and race/ethnicity than middle school students, though middle school students reported more verbal harassment based on physical appearance (see Figure 20).

Middle school students reported more physical harassment or assault based on gender expression and physical appearance than high school students. Specifically, as shown in Figure 21, one-fifth of middle school students experienced harassment/assault based on gender expression and over a third (39%) experienced harassment/assault because of appearance. In contrast, less than a tenth of high school students experienced harassment/assault because of gender expression (8%) and appearance (9%). These findings indicate that middle schools appear to be more physically dangerous for certain students, especially those targeted because of their gender expression and appearance.

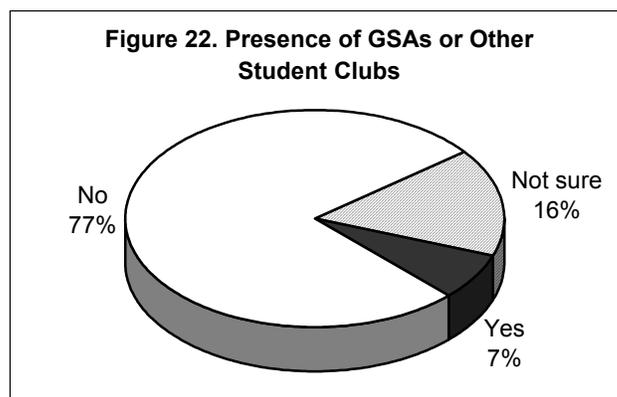
School Climate and Educational Indicators

As stated previously, students have the right to an education but many students cannot take full advantage of this education if they feel unsafe in their schools. Students were asked if they themselves or their friends had missed a class or an entire day of school in the previous month because they felt uncomfortable or unsafe in the class or on their way to and from school. Nearly a tenth of Ohio students reported that they had friends who had missed a class (9%) or an entire day of school (9%) due to safety concerns. Furthermore, nearly a tenth of the youth reported that they themselves had missed a class (9%) or an entire day of school (7%) because of safety concerns. Not surprisingly, students' feeling of safety in school was strongly related to missing classes or days of school.

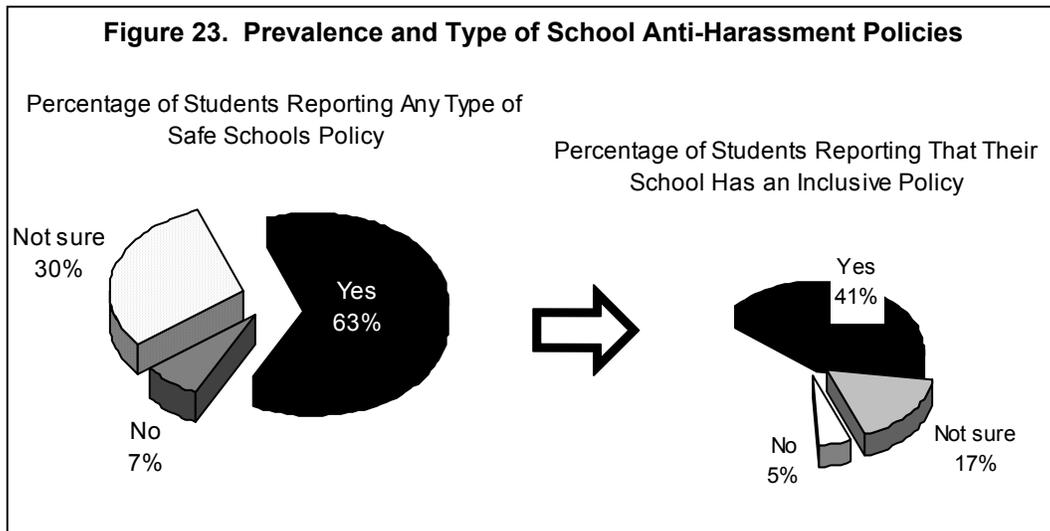
The majority of respondents reported that they liked school (60%) and that they planned to attend college (89%--the remaining 11% were undecided about their college plans at the time of the survey). However, students who did not feel safe in their school were far less likely to report that they like school (6% vs. 67%) and less likely to report that they plan to attend college (60% vs. 92%). In addition, respondents who reported that bullying, name calling or harassment were somewhat or serious problems at their schools were less likely than other students to report liking school (46% vs. 72%) and planning on college (81% vs. 94%).

LGBT Resources and Supports in School

The high frequency of homophobic remarks, bullying, verbal harassment, and physical harassment and assault suggests that it is essential for LGBT students to have resources and supports in schools that they can access. One important type of support is school clubs that address LGBT student issues, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs). Unfortunately, Ohio students were less likely than the national average (22%) to have GSAs. In fact, only 7% of the students reported that their school had this type of supportive organization in place for LGBT students (see Figure 22).

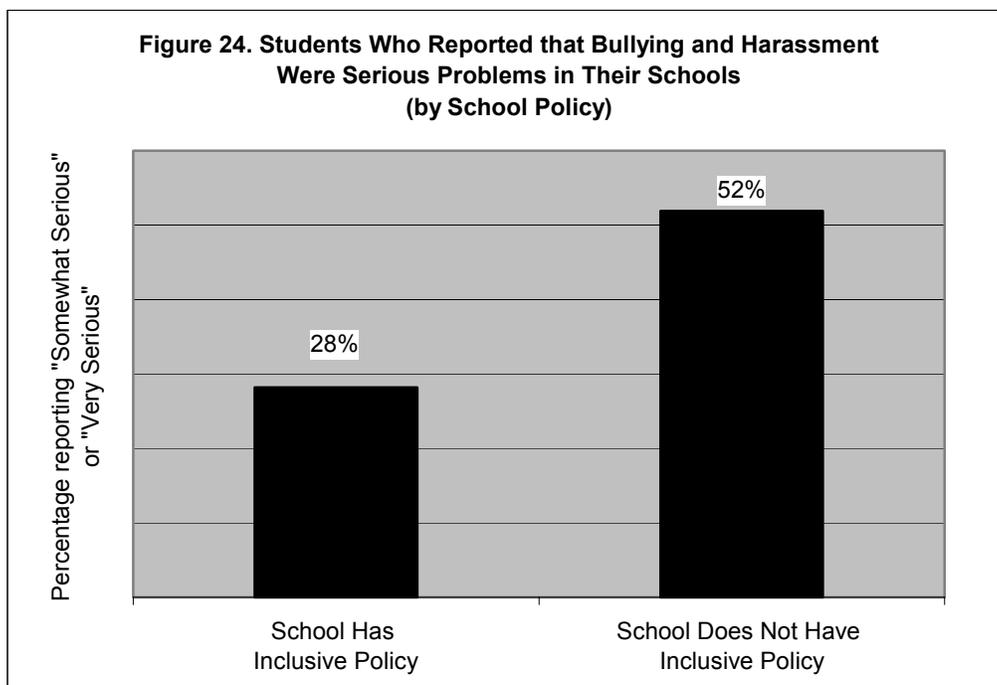


Another potentially important source of support is the existence of anti-harassment policies that protect LGBT students by explicitly including sexual orientation and gender identity or expression. As shown in Figure 23, more than half of the students in Ohio reported having

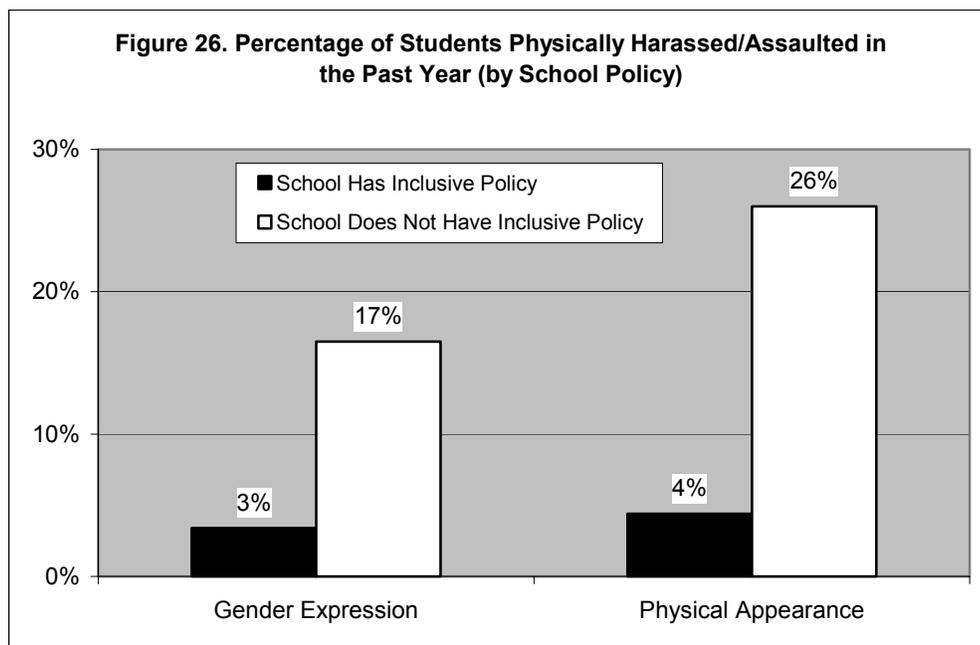
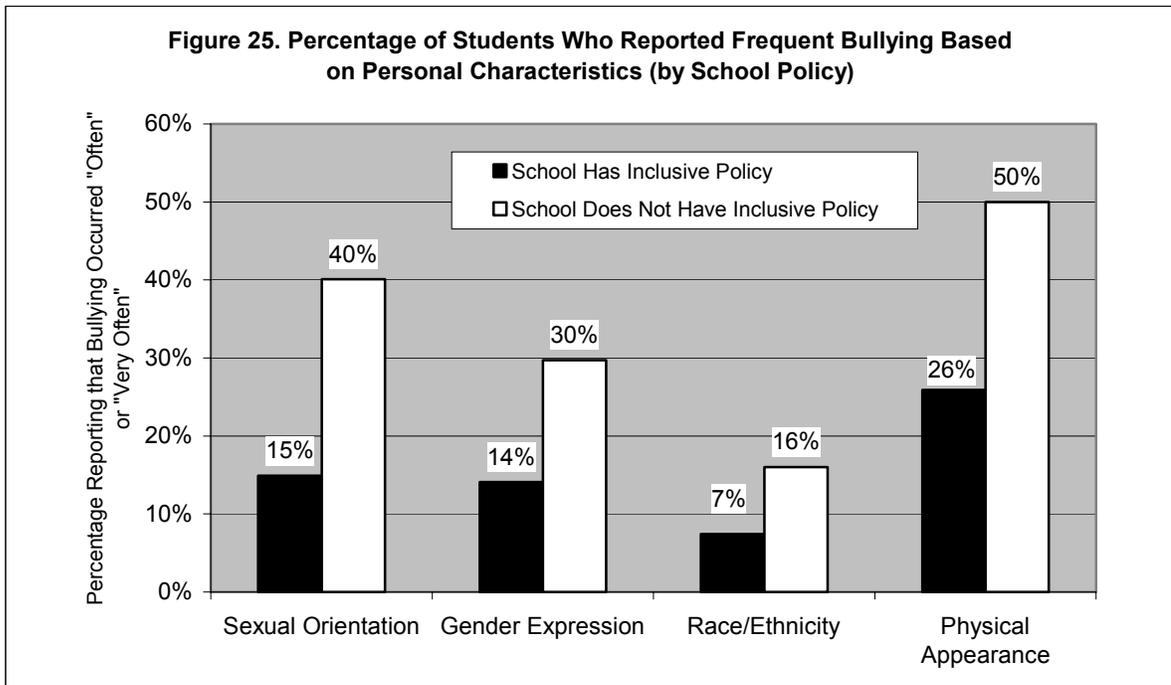


some type of safe school policy in their school. It is important to note that almost a third of students were unsure whether or not their school had any protective policy. While it is possible that these students were not aware of a policy because one did not exist, it is also possible that the students were not informed about existing policies and that these Ohio schools need to do a more comprehensive job of informing their students. Only two-thirds of those students who reported having a policy also reported that the policy specifically mentions gender identity/expression. Thus, only about 40% of Ohio students are protected by inclusive protective school policies.

Seriousness of bullying and harassment differed between schools with different anti-harassment policies. As shown in Figure 24, about half (52%) of the students who came from schools without an inclusive anti-harassment policy felt that bullying and harassment were at least somewhat serious, whereas about a quarter (28%) of students from schools with inclusive policies felt these issues were at least somewhat serious. In addition, students from schools that have inclusive anti-harassment policies reported that other students were bullied less often based on sexual orientation, gender expression, race/ethnicity and physical appearance than students in schools without such protective policies (see Figure 25).



Students from schools with inclusive anti-harassment policies were also more likely to report that they themselves felt safer and harassed less in school. Nearly one-fifth (18%) of students in schools without inclusive policies felt unsafe, whereas only 2% of students who came from policy inclusive schools felt unsafe. As shown in Figure 26, students who came from schools with inclusive anti-harassment policies were less likely to experience physical harassment or assault based on gender expression and physical appearance. Nearly one-fifth (17%) of the students from schools without inclusive policies reported that they were physically harassed or assaulted in the previous because of their gender expression and over a quarter (26%) because of their physical appearance. In contrast, less than 5% of students from policy-inclusive schools reported similar experiences, highlighting the importance of inclusive policies.



SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results from this study indicate that issues of safety, bullying, name-calling, and harassment are serious for middle and high school students in Ohio. Biased remarks are commonly heard among students and often go uncorrected by teachers and staff. Homophobic and sexist remarks are the most pervasive and frequently heard among students. It is particularly disturbing that over half of Ohio students reported that they had been verbally harassed in the previous year, and a quarter of students reported that they had been physically harassed or assaulted in the previous year. Among those verbally harassed, a tenth were harassed because of their sexual orientation and about one-fifth for their gender expression. Among those students who were harassed for any reason, most do not report the incidents to a teacher, principal or staff, often because they think saying something will only make a situation worse or that teachers and staff will not care. Among those who did report an incident of harassment or assault, nearly a third of respondents said that no steps were taken to correct the situation or prevent it from happening again. Such inaction on the part of school personnel only serves to reinforce students' beliefs that teachers and staff would not help when needed.

Based on the findings presented in this report, it is imperative that Ohio lawmakers and school officials create anti-harassment/assault policies in all schools. In addition, these policies must offer explicit protection to students who are targets of bullying, harassment and assault based on personal characteristics such as sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and race and ethnicity. General policies that do not explicitly mention protection for these groups will likely fall short of creating needed changes in schools since many students may believe that certain prejudiced behaviors are acceptable and therefore do not count as "real" forms of bullying, harassment, and assault. In addition, specific plans that explain how these protective policies are to be implemented must be created to ensure that the policies are enforced. Without specific implementation guidelines, schools run the risk of having a written policy that does little to protect students.

Given the pervasive inaction reported by students, Ohio school districts must also actively train teachers and staff so that they know how to effectively protect students who are the targets of prejudiced acts because of personal characteristics such as sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and race and ethnicity. Teachers and staff who understand their role in enforcing protective policies are more likely to do so effectively, ultimately improving the safety and quality of the school environment for all students.

ABOUT THE METHODOLOGY

Student interviews for the national survey were conducted online by a nationally representative sample of 3,450 public and private/parochial students ages 13 to 18. Within this sample, an oversample of students was drawn from Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and Virginia. Interviews averaged 15 minutes and were conducted from January 13 to January 31, 2005. Sample was drawn from the Harris Poll Online (HPOL) multimillion member online panel of cooperative respondents from over one hundred countries. Invitations for this study were emailed to a selected sample of the database identified as residing in the United States and being a student between the ages of 13 and 18. Data for the national survey were weighted to reflect the national population of children ages 13 to 18 for key demographic variables (gender, age, race and ethnicity, size of place, region, and parent's education). Demographic weights were based on U.S. Census data obtained via the March 2004 Current Population Survey (CPS). For the national survey, a post weight was applied to the student data to adjust for the twelve state oversampling so that the regional distribution reflects the nation as a whole. State-specific data including that which is presented in this report does not reflect this postweight.