



# From Teasing to Torment:

A Report on School Climate  
in Pennsylvania



PENNSYLVANIA



A Report from GLSEN's Research Department

# From Teasing to Torment: A Report on School Climate in Pennsylvania

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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

### **Biased language was both frequently heard and pervasive in Pennsylvania schools:**

- A vast majority of Pennsylvania students reported hearing homophobic remarks such as “faggot” or “dyke” (82%), or the expressions “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay” (93%) from other students in school.
- Sexist remarks and negative comments about someone’s gender expression (e.g., saying a male student acts “too feminine”) were heard frequently—80% of students heard other students use sexist language, and almost two-thirds (61%) heard remarks regarding gender expression.
- About a third (35%) of students who reported hearing homophobic or sexist remarks said that they heard them from most or all of the students in their school.
- Many teachers and other school staff did not intervene when hearing students use biased language. A third or more of Pennsylvania students reported that faculty and other school staff rarely or never intervened when homophobic, racist, or sexist remarks were made in their presence (37%, 34%, and 33%, respectively).
- Students heard teachers and other school staff use biased language as well—about a fifth of students heard school staff make sexist (20%) and homophobic (18%) remarks.

### **Bullying, name-calling, and harassment were serious problems in Pennsylvania schools:**

- Forty-one percent of Pennsylvania students said that bullying, name-calling, and harassment were serious problems in their schools, and less than half (47%) of Pennsylvania students reported that they felt very safe in their schools.
- In addition to physical appearance, students reported that the most common reasons other students were bullied were sexual orientation and gender expression.
- Forty-one percent of students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of a personal characteristic, such as their physical appearance or sexual orientation.
- Nearly two-thirds (62%) of students reported that they had been verbally harassed in the past year because of a personal characteristic. Pennsylvania students most commonly reported harassment related to physical appearance with almost half (43%) reporting this type of verbal harassment in the past year.
- Nearly one-fifth of students reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation (17%) or their gender expression (18%).
- One-fifth (20%) of students reported that they had been physically harassed or assaulted in the past year.

### **Incidents of harassment and assault were often not reported to school authorities. When reported, responses of faculty and other school staff were often inadequate:**

- Half (51%) of respondents who experienced harassment or assault at school never reported the incidents to a teacher, principal or other staff person.
- Nearly a third (30%) of students who had been harassed or assaulted did not report an incident because they believed that teachers or staff would not address the situation, or that reporting would only make the situation worse.
- Of those who reported an incident, less than half (47%) said that school authorities took some sort of immediate action was taken to appropriately address the situation.

### **LGBT students lacked access to resources and supports:**

- Less than half (46%) of Pennsylvania students reported that they were protected by a safe schools policy that specifically mentioned sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. A quarter did not know if their school had a policy of any kind.
- Only 12% of Pennsylvania students reported that their school had a GSA or other type of club addressing LGBT student issues, which is far lower than the national percentage (22%).
- Students at schools with comprehensive safe schools policies were more likely to report that school personnel intervened in response to hearing homophobic and racist language. They were also more likely to report incidents of harassment and assault to school personnel than students at schools without such policies.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Pennsylvania teachers and other school staff need training to address the inconsistency in their responses when hearing students make derogatory remarks and when learning of incidents of harassment and assault in school. In addition, schools should establish and enforce “no tolerance” policies regarding the use of biased language by school staff.
- Given that less than half of Pennsylvania students reported being protected by comprehensive safe schools policies in their schools, state-level school legislation that provides specific enumerated categories, such as sexual orientation and gender identity, must be adopted.
- School staff and administrators must ensure that students are made fully aware of any safe schools protections provided by their school.

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, 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, particularly their attitudes toward and experiences with anti-LGBT behavior at 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, and can be found on GLSEN’s website ([www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)). The following is a report of findings based on the responses of youth who were attending schools in Pennsylvania 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 218 respondents were attending schools in Pennsylvania at the time of the survey. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the majority of students were white and in high school, and more than half of the sample was male. Six percent of students reported being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT).<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of respondents attended public schools, and most were in suburban areas. About a tenth (11%) of students were attending private or parochial schools, the majority of which were religious-affiliated (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. Thus, it is important to examine the frequency and pervasiveness of biased language in school. Students were asked how frequently they heard homophobic, racist, sexist, and religiously-biased remarks from other students.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

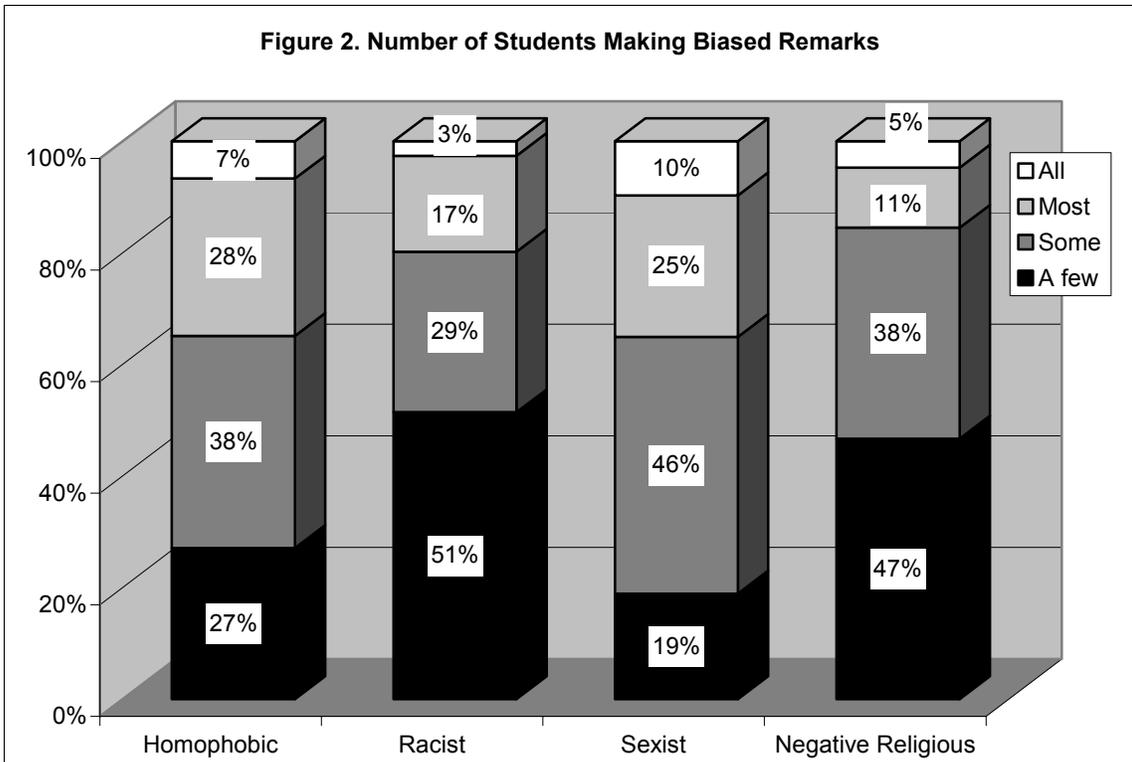
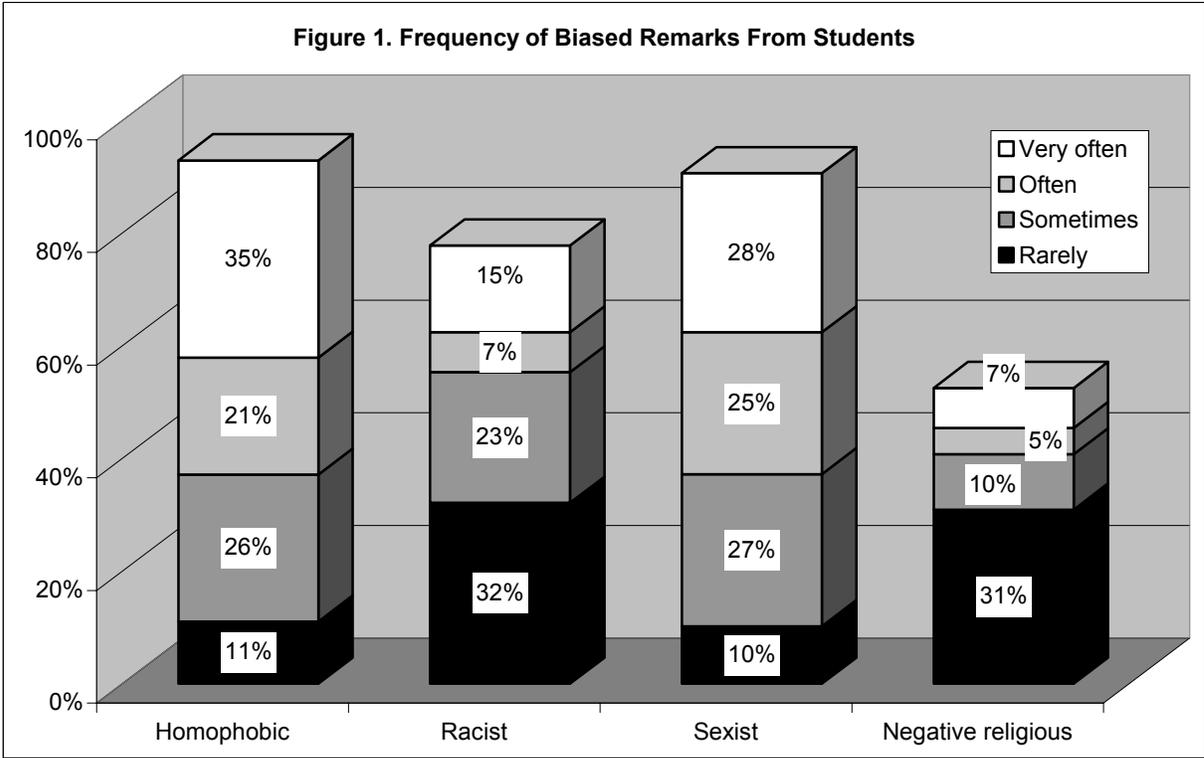
<sup>2</sup> The category “LGBT” includes respondents who were transgender, lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning or “other.”

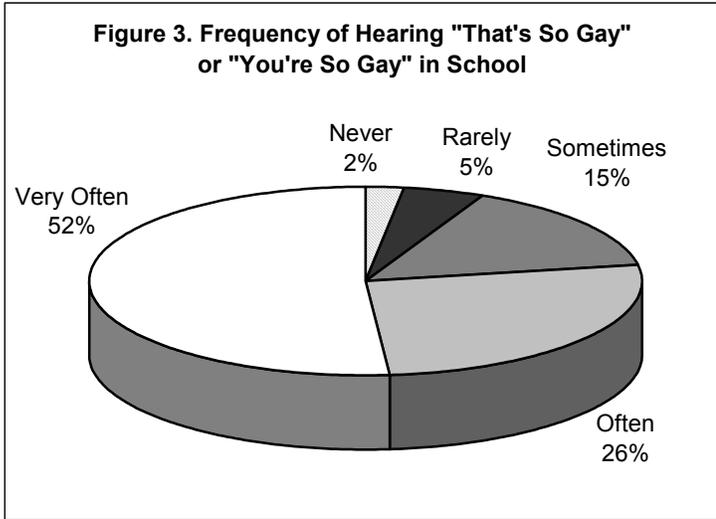
**Table 1. Demographics of Pennsylvania Participants**

<b>Gender</b>	
Female	44%
Male	56%
<b>Race</b>	
White	85%
Black/African American	8%
Latino/a	3%
Asian or Pacific Islander	1%
Native American/Alaskan Native	<1%
Mixed racial background	3%
<b>LGBT Status</b>	
Non-LGBT	94%
LGBT	6%
<b>Grade</b>	
7th Grade	5%
8th Grade	15%
9th Grade	26%
10th Grade	19%
11th Grade	17%
12th Grade	18%
<b>Average Age = 15.2 years</b>	

**Table 2. School Characteristics**

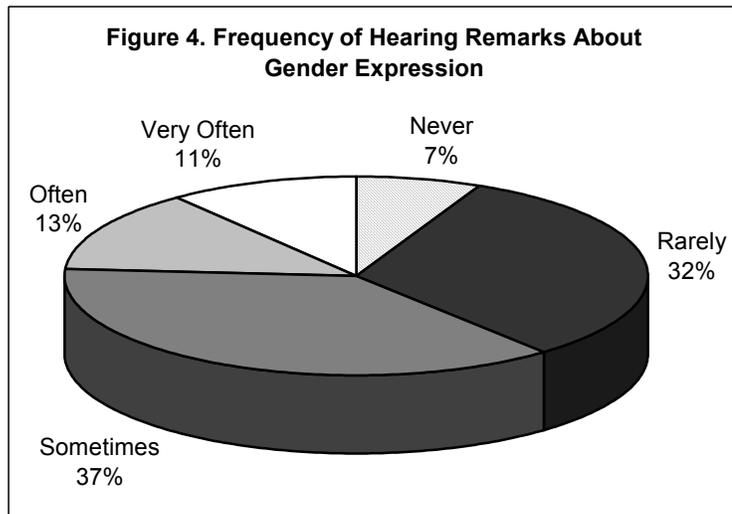
<b>Grade Levels</b>	
K through 12 school	2%
Lower school (elementary & middle school grades)	1%
Middle school	19%
Upper school (middle & high school grades)	7%
High School	71%
<b>School Location</b>	
Urban area	16%
Suburban area	54%
Small town or rural area	30%
<b>School Type</b>	
Public school	89%
Private school	11%
<i>Religious-affiliated school</i>	86%
<i>Other independent or private school</i>	14%





### Homophobic Remarks

Homophobic remarks such as “faggot,” “dyke,” or “queer” were pervasive in Pennsylvania schools. As Figure 1 illustrates, over three-fourths (82%) of students reported that they heard homophobic remarks at least some of the time and over half (56%) said that they heard such remarks often or very often. Use of such language was not limited to simply a few students—35% of respondents who reported hearing homophobic remarks said that they heard them from most or all of the students at their school (see Figure 2).



An even larger number of Pennsylvania students reported hearing homophobic expressions such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay”—expressions commonly used to indicate that something or someone is valueless or stupid. As shown in Figure 3, the vast majority (93%) of students reported hearing these comments at school at least some of the time, and over three-quarter (78%) heard them often or very often.

### Negative Remarks about Gender Expression

Youth who do not express themselves in ways considered to be gender-appropriate by others must often contend with

negative experiences, such as being called names and being harassed, particularly at school.<sup>3</sup> Respondents were asked how often they had heard remarks about a person’s nontraditional gender expression, such as a male student acting too “feminine,” or a female student acting “too much like a boy.” Nearly two-thirds (61%) of students reported hearing these remarks at least sometimes and about a quarter (24%) heard such remarks even more frequently (see Figure 4).

### Sexist Remarks

Sexist remarks, such as calling a girl a bitch, or saying that girls are not as capable as boys, were also heard quite frequently in Pennsylvania schools. As shown in Figure 1, 80% of students reported that they heard sexist language at least some of the time and half (53%) reported hearing these remarks often or very often. Additionally, about a third (35%) of the respondents heard sexist remarks from most or all of the their peers (see Figure 2).

<sup>3</sup> 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.

### *Racist Remarks*

Although racist remarks were heard less frequently than homophobic or sexist remarks, they were not uncommon in Pennsylvania schools. Almost half (45%) of respondents reported hearing racist remarks from students at least some of the time, and about a quarter (22%) said they heard these remarks often or very often (see Figure 1). Furthermore, a fifth of the respondents who reported hearing racist remarks said that they heard them from most or all of the students at their school (see Figure 2).

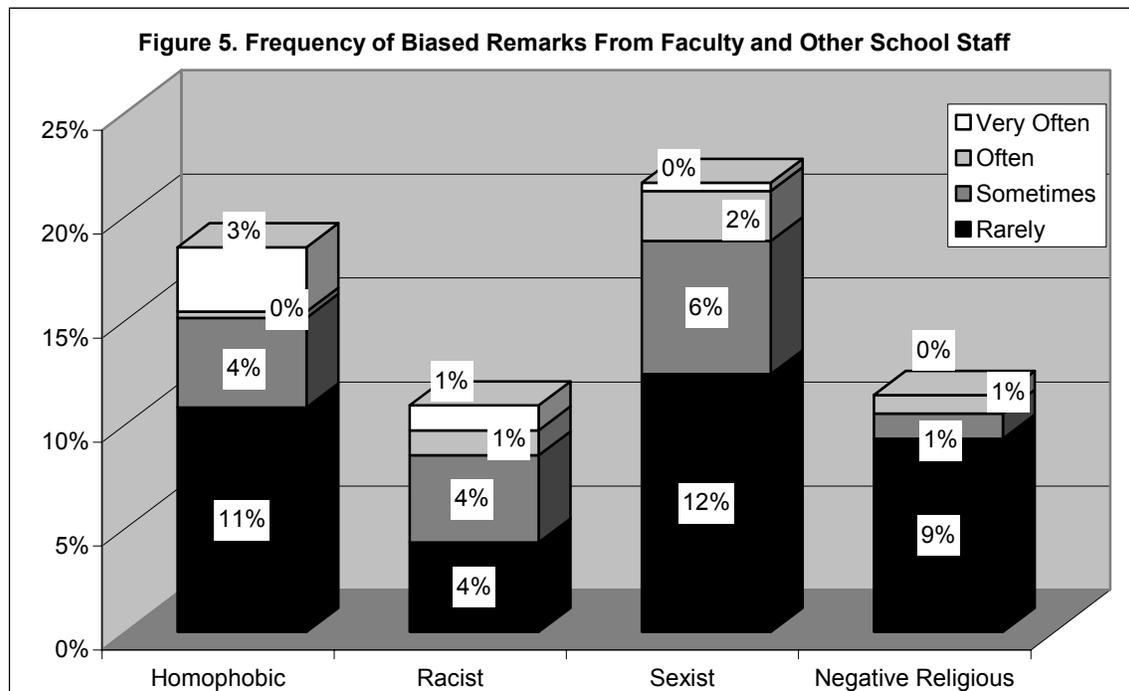
### *Negative Religious Remarks*

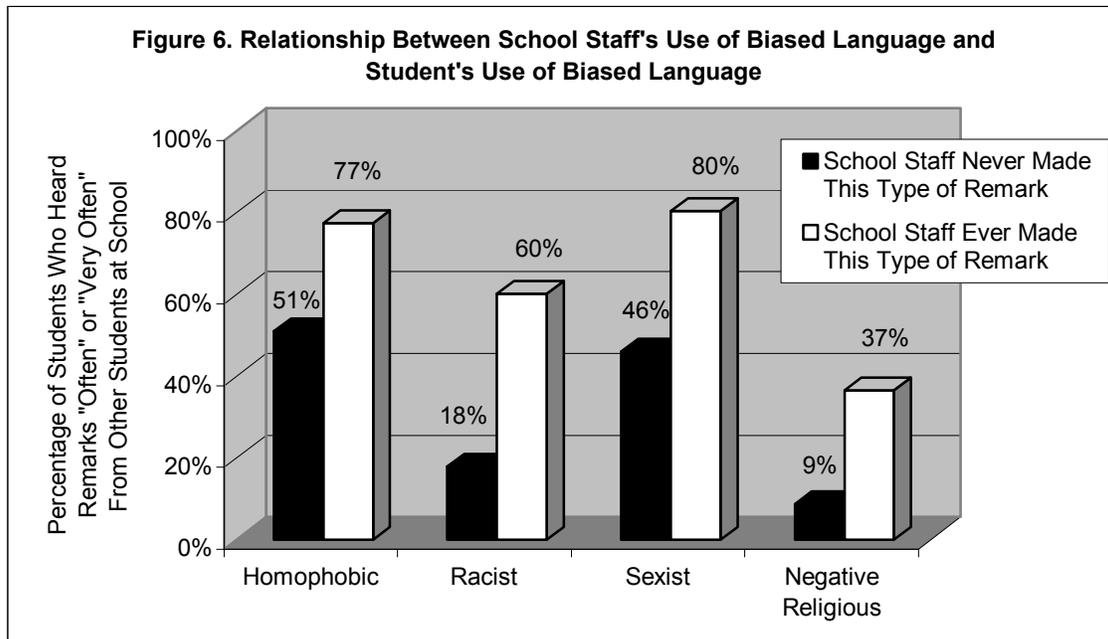
Negative remarks about a person’s religion were least commonly heard by respondents. As shown in Figure 1, close to a quarter (22%) of respondents heard such remarks at least some of the time, and 12% heard them often or very often. Less than a fifth (16%) reported that all or most of the students at their school made negative religious remarks.

### Biased Language from Faculty and Other School Staff

Hearing biased language from authority figures, such as a teacher or school principal, may send a message to students that use of such language in school is permissible. Accordingly, respondents were asked how often they heard homophobic, racist, sexist and negative religious remarks from faculty and other school personnel. As shown in Figure 5, sexist and homophobic remarks were the most frequently heard biased language—about one-fifth of students heard teachers or staff make homophobic (18%) and sexist (20%) remarks. A sizable percentage of students also reported hearing racist (10%) and negative religious (11%) remarks from school personnel.

Although biased remarks from school authorities were not overly frequent, given their possible impact on students, any biased language coming from educators is troubling. In fact, students who reported that they heard biased remarks from teachers or other school staff were more likely to report hearing homophobic, racist, sexist and negative religious remarks from their peers at school. For example, Figure 6 shows that respondents who





reported that school staff made homophobic remarks were more likely than respondents who said that school staff never made such remarks to report that their peers frequently ("often" or "very often") made homophobic remarks at school (77% versus 51%). There were similar relationships with regard to racist, sexist and negative religious remarks made by school personnel.

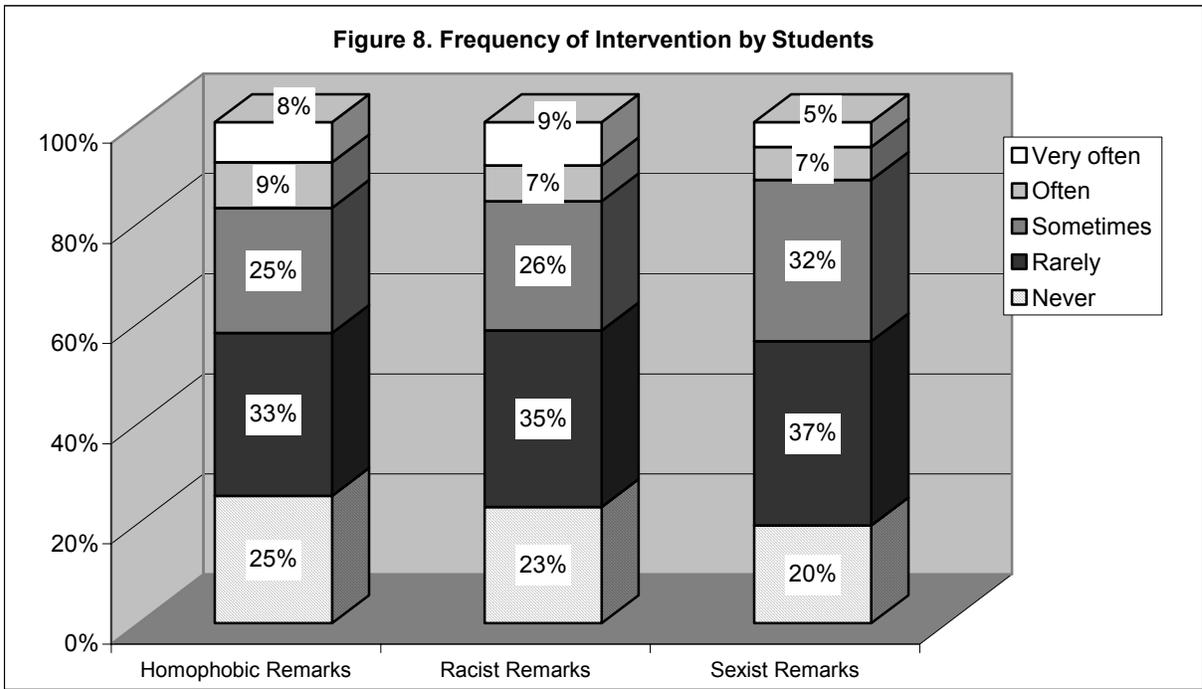
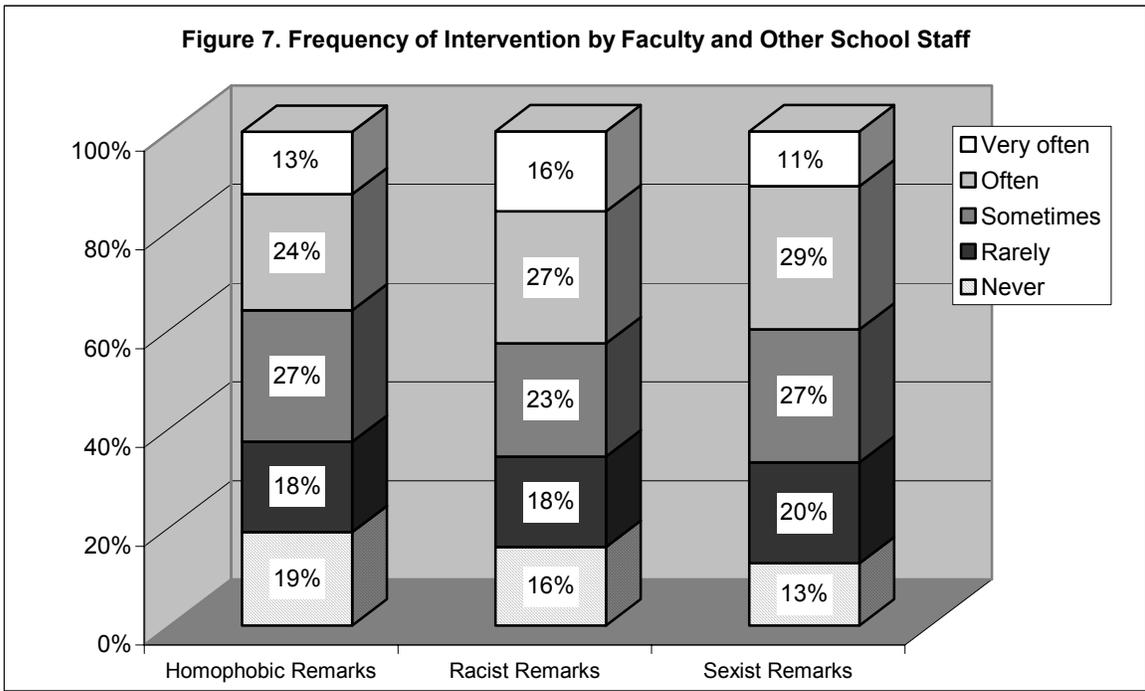
### Intervention Regarding Biased Remarks

#### *Intervention by Faculty or Other School Staff*

In addition to the frequency of hearing biased language at school, respondents were asked how often teachers and other school staff corrected or criticized biased remarks made in their presence. Many respondents reported that school personnel did not intervene when hearing students make homophobic, racist or sexist remarks in school. As shown in Figure 7, over a third (37%) of Pennsylvania respondents reported that teachers and other school staff rarely or never corrected or criticized homophobic remarks made in their presence. A similar percentage of students also reported that school personnel rarely or never corrected racist (34%) and sexist (33%) remarks. The lack of consistent intervention by school personnel when hearing use biased language may send a message that such language is tolerated in Pennsylvania schools.

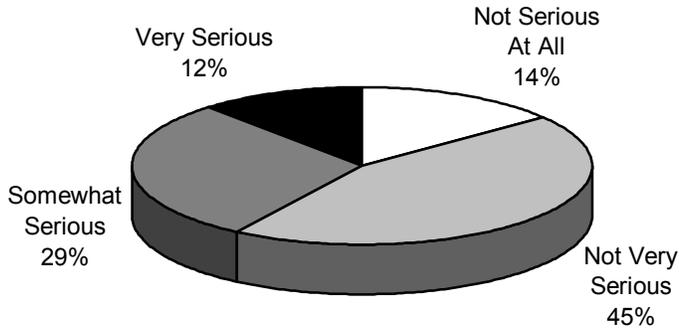
#### *Intervention by Students*

The degree to which students intervene when hearing derogatory language from their peers is another indicator of school climate. Students' own failure to intervene may be indicative of a school atmosphere in which use of such language is considered acceptable. Thus, students were asked how often they heard other students correct or criticize biased remarks made in school. As shown in Figure 8, over half of the study participants reported that other students rarely or never intervened in response to homophobic (58%), racist (58%), and sexist (57%) remarks.



## Severity of Bullying, Name-Calling and Harassment in School

**Figure 9. Severity of Bullying, Name-Calling and Harassment in School**



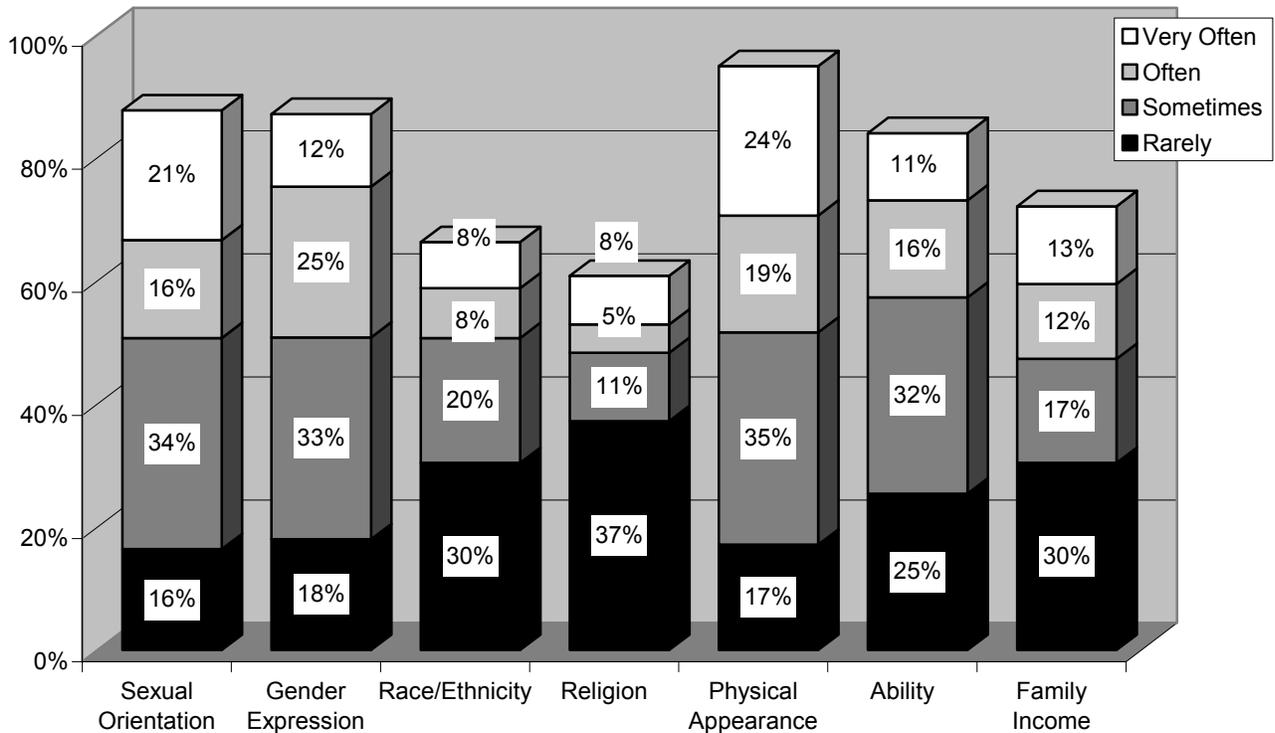
Survey respondents were asked about their perceptions of the severity of bullying, name-calling and harassment in their schools. As Figure 9 illustrates, 41% of respondents reported that these behaviors were somewhat or very serious issues troubling Pennsylvania schools.

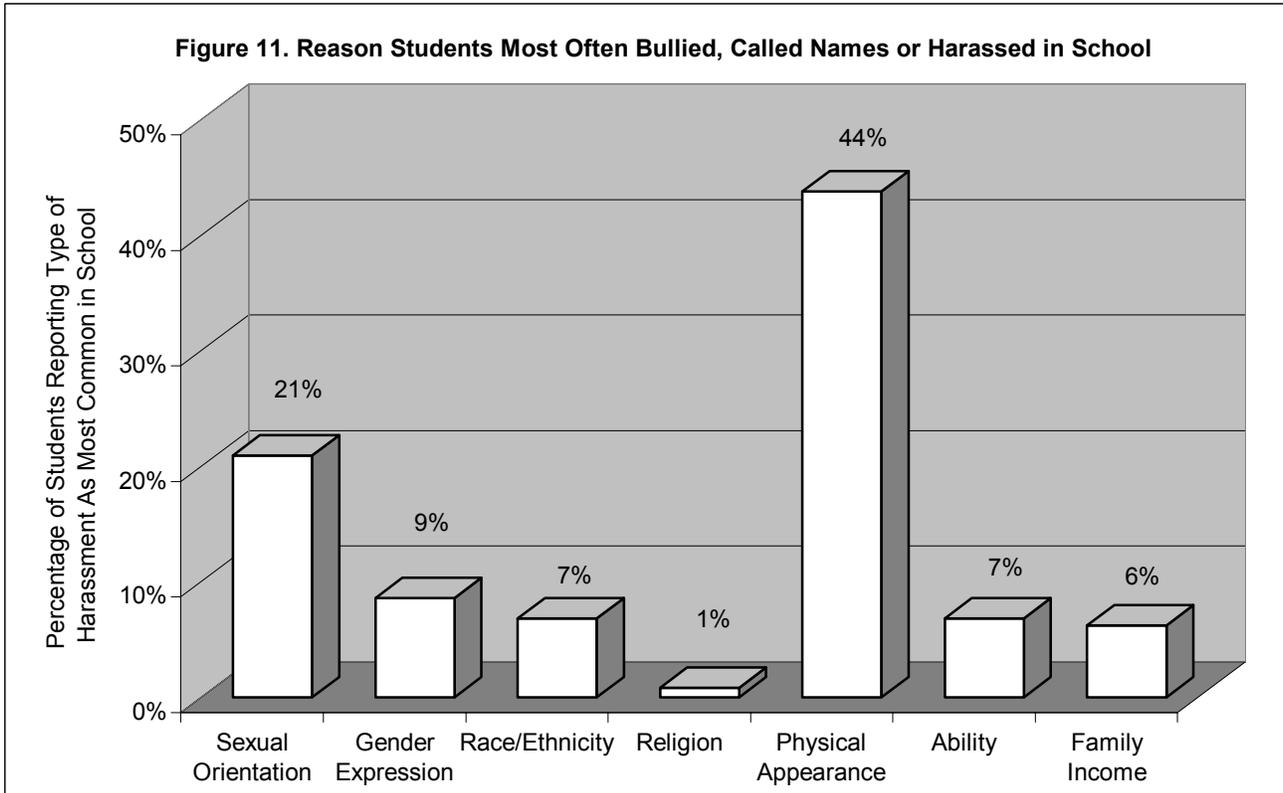
Students were also asked about the frequency of witnessing other students being bullied, called names, or harassed in school. Figure 10 shows that Pennsylvania students were most frequently bullied, called

names, and harassed because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender expression and physical appearance (looks or body size) – over three-fourths (78%) reported that students were harassed or bullied at least sometimes based on how they physical appearance, and nearly three-fourths of respondents said that harassment occurred at least some of the time because of students’ sexual orientation (71%) or gender expression (69%).

Although not as frequent, a sizeable percentage of respondents also reported that students were bullied, called names or harassed at least some of the time because of their academic ability (59%), family income (42%) or their race or ethnicity (36%). Bullying and harassment based on students’ actual or presumed religion was reported to occur least

**Figure 10. Frequency of Bullying, Name-Calling and Harassment**





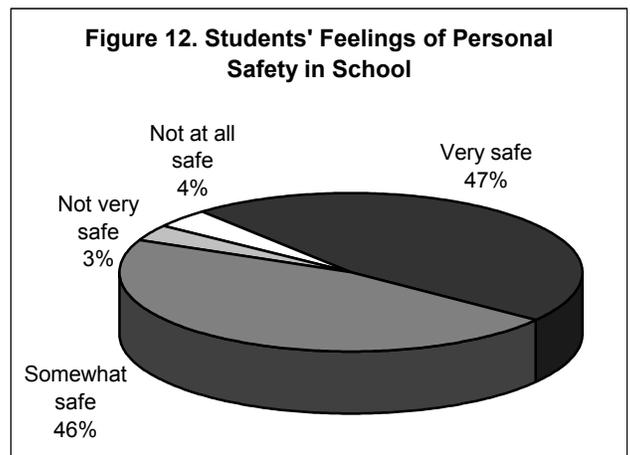
frequently, with a quarter (24%) of respondents reporting that this type of harassment occurred at least sometimes in Pennsylvania schools.

As shown in Figure 11, when asked which characteristics were most often targeted for bullying, name-calling and harassment, the largest percentage of respondents (44%) reported that physical appearance was the most common characteristic, followed by actual or perceived sexual orientation (21%). Fewer than 10% of respondents said that the most targeted characteristics were gender expression (9%), race/ethnicity, academic ability, family income and religion.

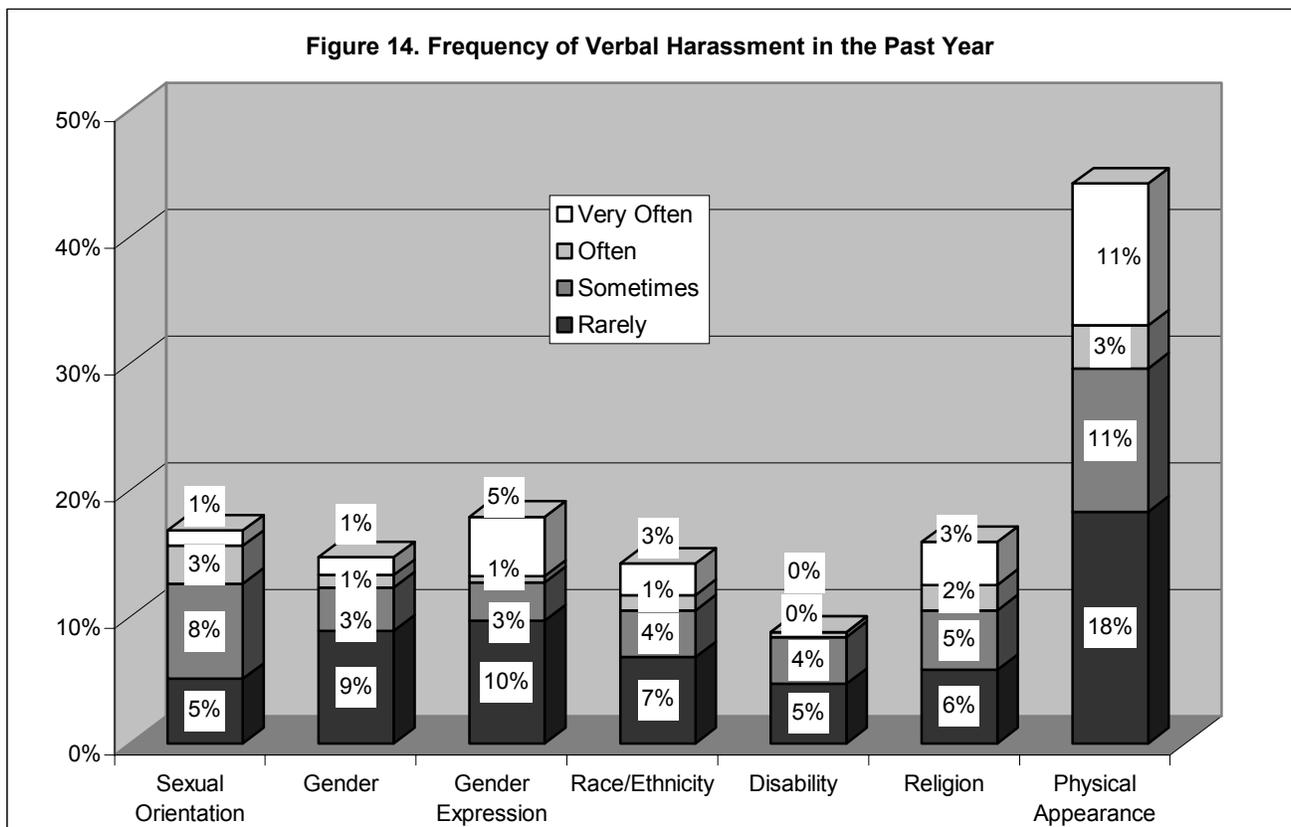
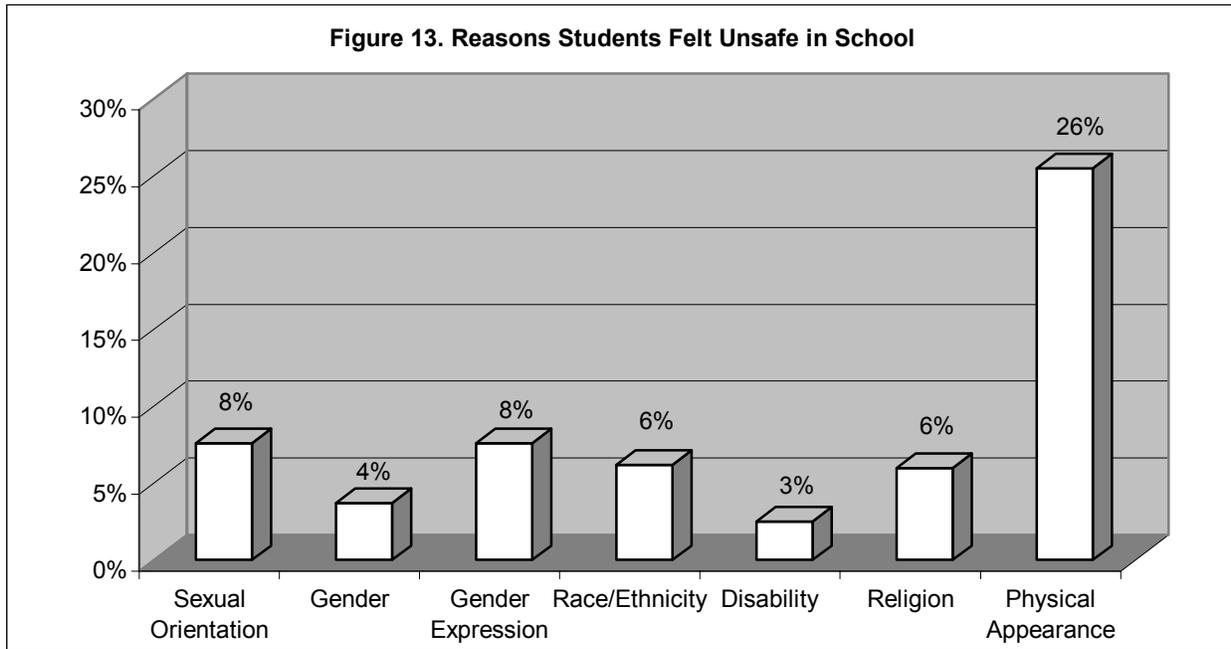
### Personal Experiences of Bullying, Name-Calling and Harassment

In addition to reporting the frequency of witnessing bullying, name-calling and harassment experienced by other students, respondents were asked a range of questions regarding their personal safety in school and their own experiences of being verbally or physically harassed or assaulted in school. Less than half (47%) of Pennsylvania respondents reported feeling very safe in school (see Figure 12).

To further our understanding of why students do not feel completely safe at school, respondents were asked whether they felt unsafe because of one or more personal characteristics, such as their



sexual orientation, gender, gender expression, race or ethnicity, disability, religion or physical appearance (looks/body size). More than a third (41%) of respondents reported that they felt unsafe in their school because of one or more of the personal characteristics listed. As Figure 13, respondents most commonly reported feeling unsafe because of their appearance (26%). Nearly a tenth of the students reported that they felt unsafe because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or they way they expressed their gender (8% each).

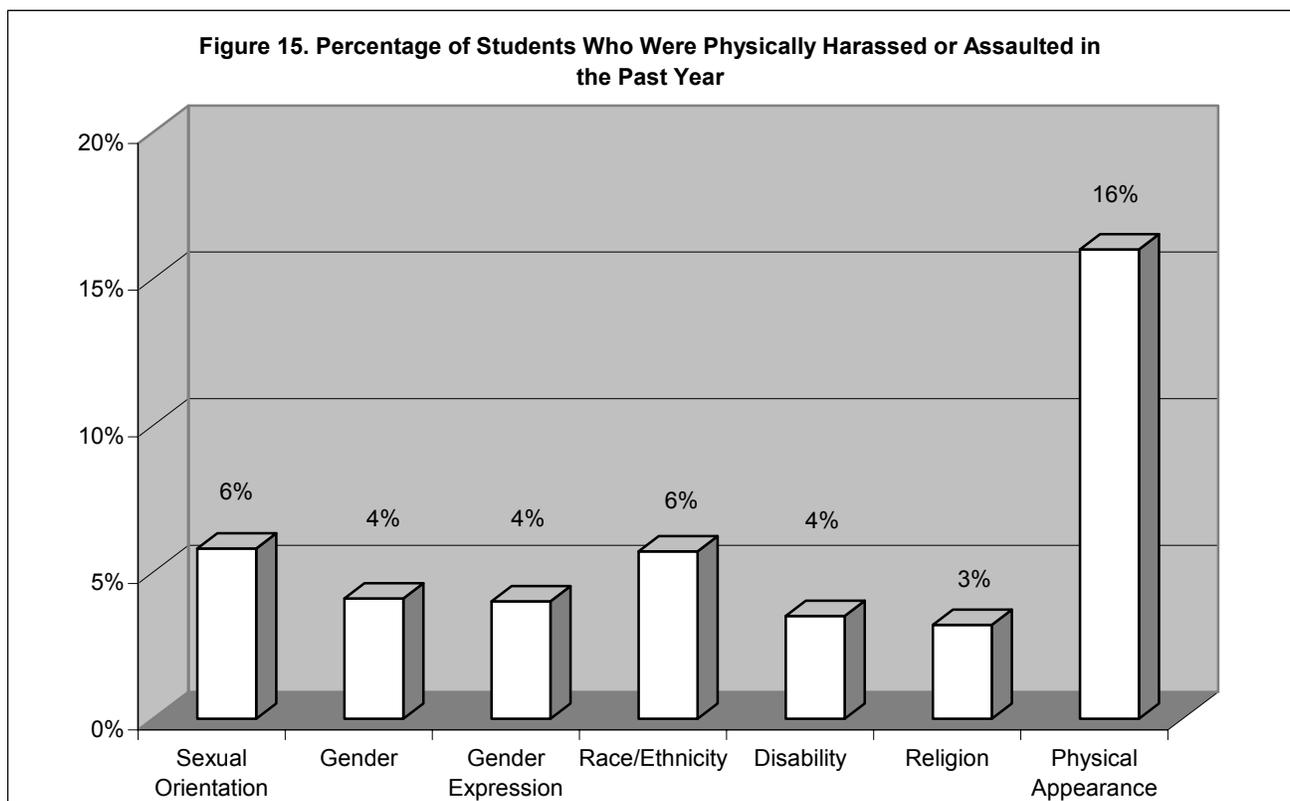


## Verbal Harassment

Survey respondents were asked how often they had personally been verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) at school in the past school year. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of Pennsylvania students reported that they had been verbally harassed during the previous year. As shown in Figure 14, the most common reason for verbal harassment was physical appearance—almost half (43%) of respondents reported that they had been verbally harassed based on their looks or body size. Furthermore, nearly one-fifth of the students reported that they had been verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation (17%) or gender expression (19%). A sizeable percentage of students also reported being verbally harassed based on other characteristics, including their gender (14%), race or ethnicity (15%), a real or perceived disability (9%) and their religion (16%). The results indicate that verbal harassment of all types is an unacceptable problem in Pennsylvania schools.

## Physical Harassment and Assault

Survey respondents were also asked if they had been physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) or assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon) at school in the past year. Given the extreme nature of these forms of harassment, it is not surprising that both physical harassment and physical assault were reported to occur less frequently than verbal harassment. Nevertheless, such behaviors were not uncommon in Pennsylvania schools. One-fifth (20%) of students reported that they had been physically harassed or assaulted in the previous year.<sup>4</sup> As shown in Figure 15, physical appearance was the most commonly



reported reason for physical harassment or assault (16%), followed by sexual orientation and race/ethnicity (6% each). It is worth noting that every characteristic had been the basis for harassment or assault in Pennsylvania schools for at least some students during the past year. Given the severity of these types of events, any occurrence of physical harassment or assault in school is unacceptable.

### Other Forms of Harassment

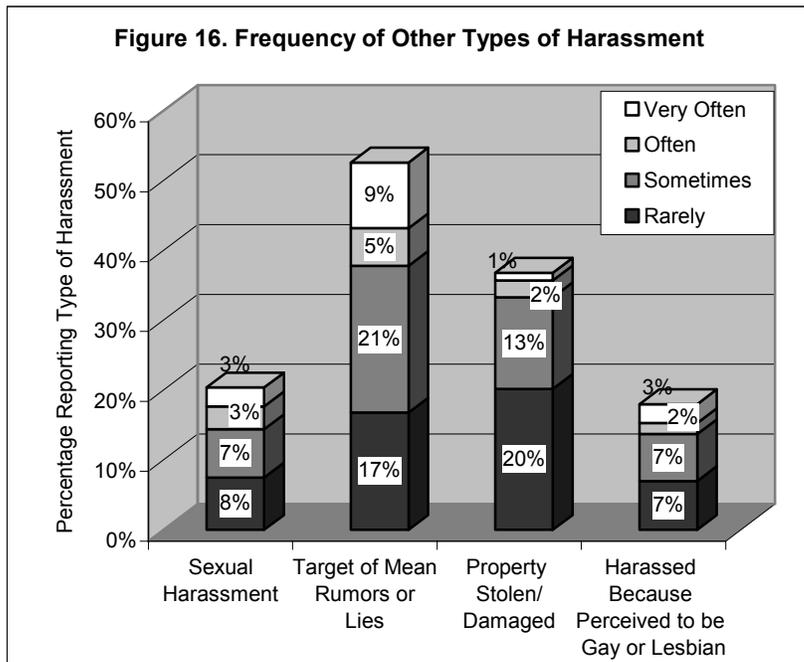
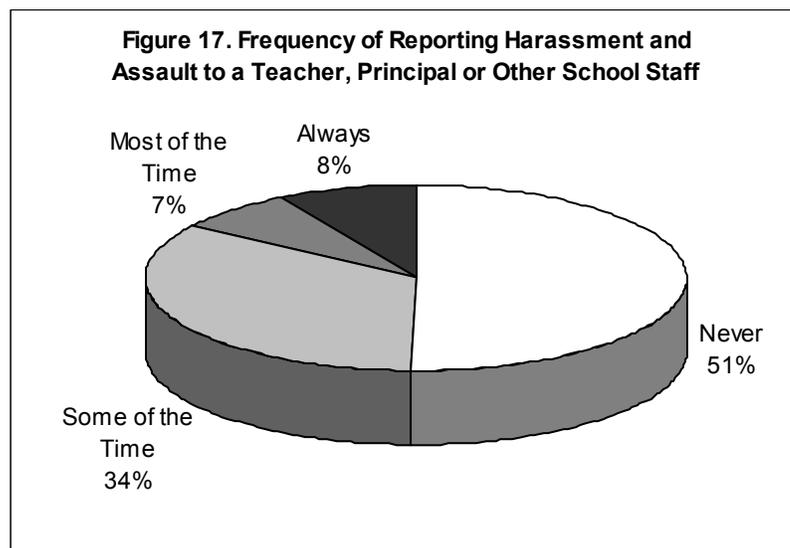


Figure 16 illustrates other forms of bullying and harassment that students experience in school, specifically sexual harassment (e.g., someone touched their body without their permission), being the target of mean rumors or lies, having property damaged or stolen at school, and being harassed because they were perceived to be gay or lesbian.<sup>5</sup> Of these types of harassment, Pennsylvania students most frequently reported being the target of mean rumors or lies, with about half (52%) reporting some occurrence in the past year, followed by having one's property deliberately damaged or stolen, with a third (36%) reporting any occurrence in the past year. About a fifth of respondents reported that they had been harassed because they were perceived to be gay or lesbian (19%), or that they had been sexually harassed (21%).



### Reporting Incidents of Harassment

Incidents of harassment often went unreported. Among Pennsylvania students who experienced any form of verbal or physical harassment or assault, half said that they never reported an incident to a teacher, principal or other school staff member (see Figure 17). High school students were even less likely to report an incident of harassment or assault to school personnel than students in middle school. Specifically, over half

<sup>4</sup> Given the low incidence of physical harassment and assault, Figure 15 represents only whether students ever experienced the particular event, i.e., those who reported "rarely," "sometimes," "often" or "very often."

<sup>5</sup> 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.

(58%) of high school respondents never reported incidents of harassment or assault, whereas a third (34%) of middle school respondents never reported incidents.

Respondents who did not report incidents of victimization to school authorities were asked why they had not done so. Nearly a third (30%) who did not report incidents of harassment or assault to school personnel did not do so because they felt that it was not serious enough to report (e.g., it was a joke or done "in fun"):

*It wasn't serious enough or didn't get to the point where I really feared that someone was going to hurt me.*

*The guy was just saying stuff about my butt, he was never super serious about it, it just bothered me a little. I wouldn't report it until he got serious and gross about it."*

It may be that the events were truly minor. However, it may also be that some students have a high tolerance for victimization events in school, or have become so inured to such experiences that they do not feel the need for intervention or feel hopeless that the school climate could ever improve. In fact, about a tenth (11%) of the Pennsylvania students expressed that they did not report incidents of harassment because they felt the situation was hopeless:

*It wouldn't have mattered if [I] had reported, because the administration would not have done a thing about it.*

*When you are in high school teachers do not care and will tell you that you should just suck it up and not tattle like a second grader.*

*What's the point? They won't do anything anyway. I'm a smart girl. I can take care of myself.*

*Nothing would happen even if it was reported.*

*It's not really worth it, because they won't do anything.*

About a fifth (19%) of respondents did not report incidents of victimization to school personnel because they thought reporting would make the situation worse in some way:

*I didn't want to be [a] cry baby...didn't want to be made fun of more.*

*I would rather just shrug things off than make someone even more mad at me.*

*Because that just leads to more incidents. I take my own action by hitting the person who starts things.*

As with the student in the last quote above, many students (22%) reported that they would rather handle the situation themselves rather than report it.

For many respondents, reporting incidents of harassment and assault to a teacher or other school staff person did not elicit a helpful response. Less than half (47%) of the respondents who reported victimization events to school authorities said that some sort of immediate action was taken (e.g., suspended the perpetrator). Instead, a number of respondents were told that the staff person would look into the situation, or reported that nothing was done. For example, one 10th grader stated that after reporting an

incident, school staff told him “that they would look into it and never really did.” Due to a lack of effective response by school authorities, another student, an 11th grader, eventually had to change schools:

*They said they would follow through with it, but nothing ever happened. After a while, they just stopped seeing me. And after that, they denied it ever happened. I now attend private schooling, where I feel incredibly safe, but all of these experiences happened at the local high school.*

These findings suggest that schools need to find more effective ways of dealing with harassment and assault issues. Because students do not often report harassment to school staff, school staff may not be fully informed as to the dangers their students face in school. Yet students may not increase their level of reporting until they see that teachers and other staff consistently address these problems when they arise. In order to break this cycle, schools must take the first step by implementing effective school policies around safety issues and trainings for school personnel on how to address incidents of harassment and assault.

### **School Climate and Academic Indicators**

Students’ school attendance, level of school engagement and educational aspirations may be affected by negative experiences, such as harassment and feeling unsafe at school. When asked about their school attendance in the last month, 8% of respondents reported that they had missed a class at least once because they felt unsafe at school, and 5% had missed an entire day of school because they felt unsafe going to or from school. Over a tenth of respondents also reported that they had friends who had missed a class (12%) or an entire day at school (13%) in the last month due to safety concerns.

Students who did not feel safe in their schools were less likely to report that they liked school than other students – 6% of students who did not feel safe at school reported liking school, compared to 57% of students who felt somewhat or very safe at school. Similarly, students who believed that bullying and harassment were serious problems at their school were less likely to report that they liked school (47% vs. 58%).

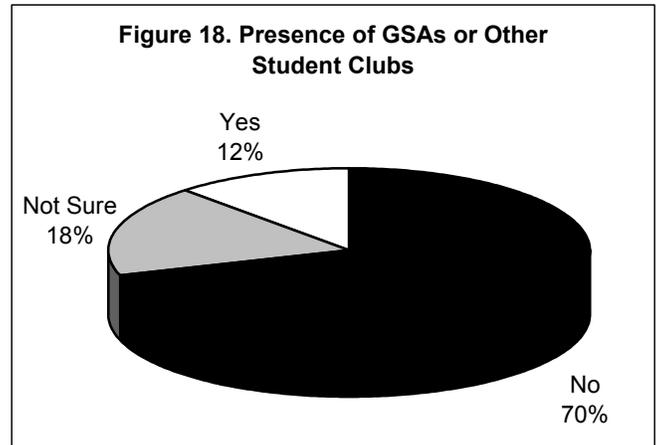
Feelings of safety were related to educational aspirations as well. Pennsylvania students who did not feel safe at school were less likely to say that they definitely planned to go to college than those who did feel safe (32% vs. 69%). Furthermore, respondents who had been verbally harassed at school because of their sexual orientation were less likely to have definite plans for college than respondents who had not been verbally harassed (44% vs. 73%).

### **LGBT Resources and Supports in Schools**

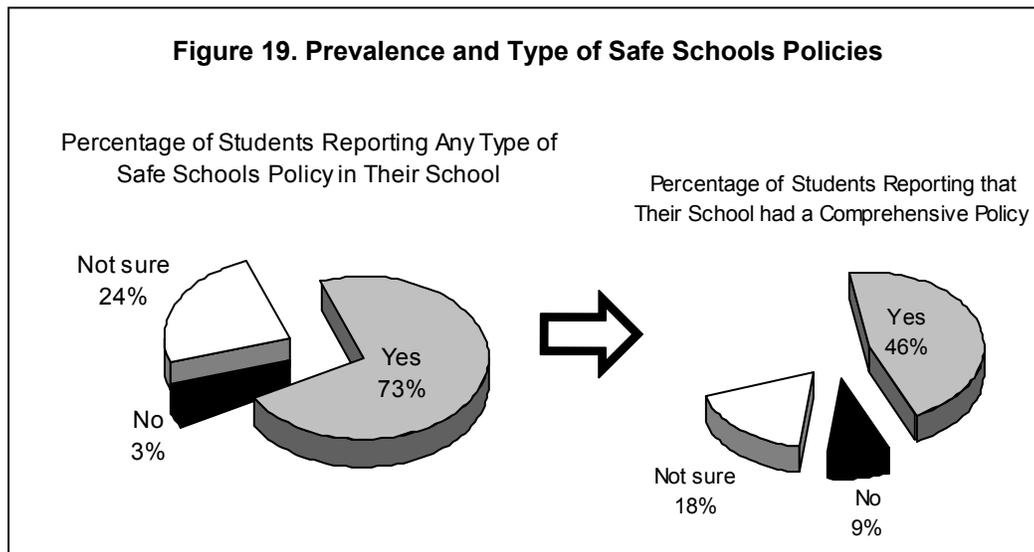
Bullying, name-calling and harassment because of actual or perceived sexual orientation as well as hearing homophobic remarks were reported to occur quite frequently in Pennsylvania schools. A high frequency of homophobic remarks, bullying and harassment may create a hostile learning environment, particularly for LGBT students. The existence of supportive resources may help mitigate the negative effects of such a climate.

Supportive school clubs. Supportive school clubs that address LGBT student issues, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), are one potentially important source of support for LGBT

students. Unfortunately, as shown in Figure 18, only 12% of Pennsylvania respondents said that their school had this type of supportive organization in place for students, far less than the 22% of students from the national survey.



**Safe Schools Policies.** Another potentially important source of support is the existence of anti-harassment or safe schools policies that provide explicit protection for LGBT students by including sexual orientation and gender identity/expression within the policies. As illustrated in Figure 19, about three-quarters (73%) of respondents believe that their school had some kind of policy for reporting harassment and assault. Nearly two-thirds Pennsylvania students believed that their schools had a comprehensive policy, one that explicitly mentions sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression. Thus, less than half (46%) of all Pennsylvania respondents reported that they were protected by comprehensive safe schools policies (see Figure 19). It is important to note that about a quarter (24%) of respondents were unsure whether or not their school had any kind of safe schools 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 Pennsylvania schools need to do a more thorough job of informing their students about their rights and protections.

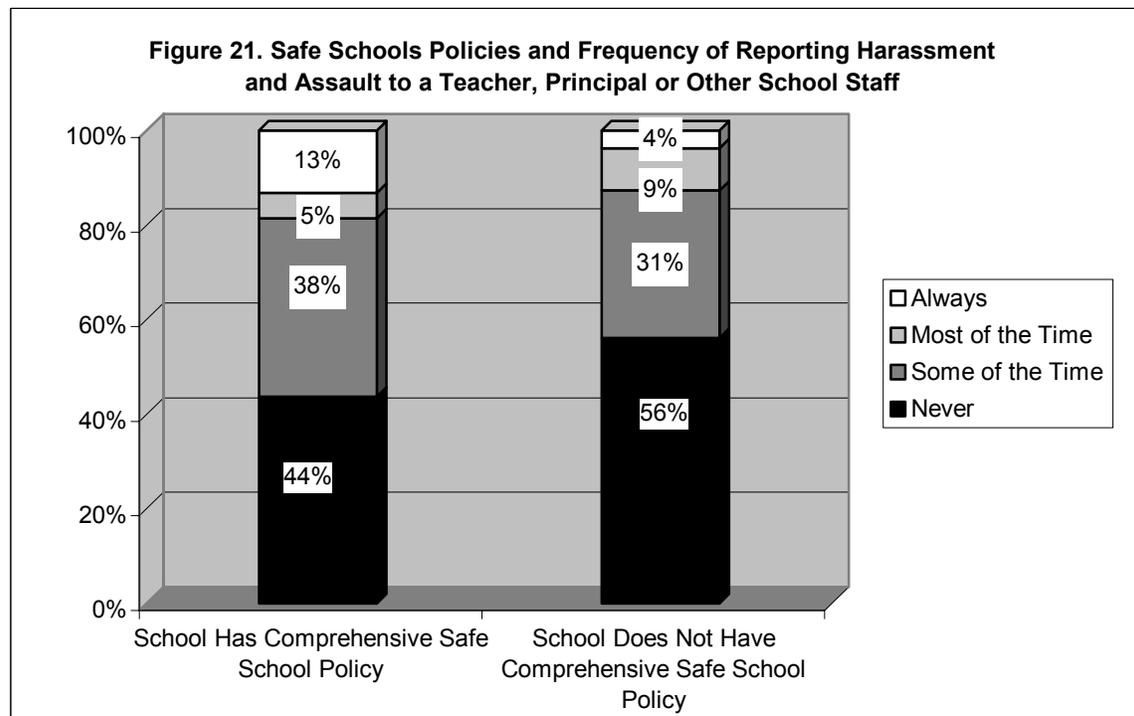
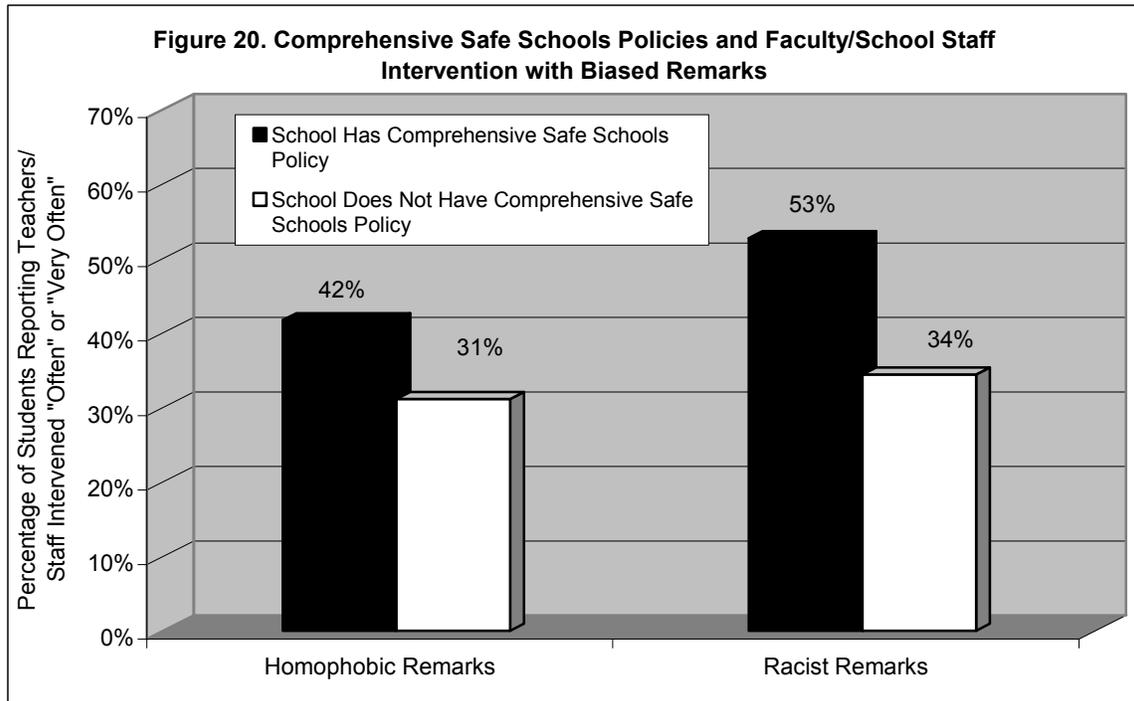


Several important differences were found between students at schools with comprehensive safe schools policies and students at schools without such policies. Students from Pennsylvania schools that had comprehensive safe schools policies, compared to those from schools without such policies, were:

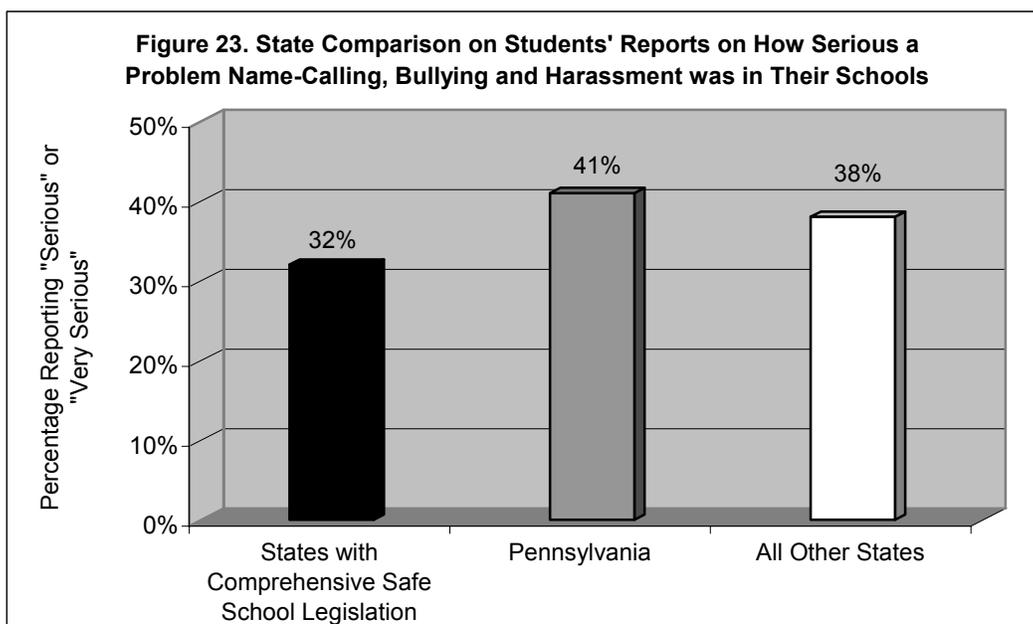
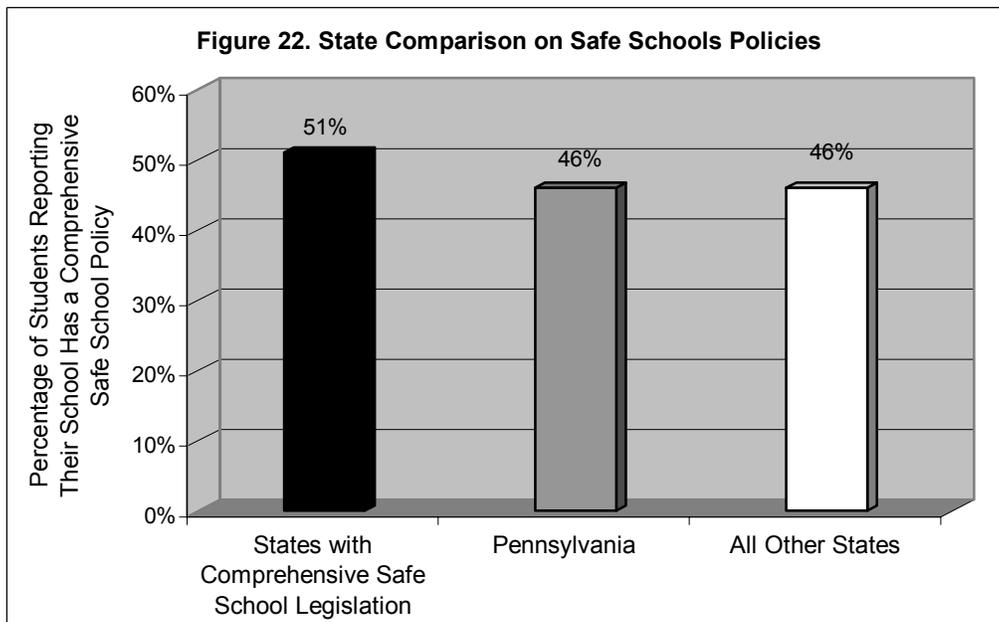
- More likely to report that teachers and staff intervened often or very often in response to homophobic remarks made in their presence, as shown in Figure 20 (42% vs. 31%);
- More likely to report that teachers and staff intervened often or very often when racist remarks were made in their presence, as also shown in Figure 20 (53% vs. 34%);

- More likely to have reported incidents of harassment and assault to school personnel (56% vs. 44%), as shown in Figure 21;
- Less likely to report that they felt unsafe ("not at all safe" or "not very safe") in their schools (4% vs. 10%).

These findings suggest that comprehensive policies that specifically mention sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression may help to make Pennsylvania schools safer



for all students, yet Pennsylvania does not have statewide comprehensive safe school legislation that specifically protects students from bullying and harassment. Pennsylvania's Board of Education does have a non-discrimination policy that specifies that no one should be barred from access to educational services and includes protection based on sexual orientation; however, such policies may not afford students protections from bullying and harassment. In fact, results from this survey suggest that this policy is not sufficient. As shown in Figure 22, the percentage of students in Pennsylvania who reported having a comprehensive safe schools policy was no different than the percentage of students from states with no state school legislation or policy, and was significantly lower than students from states with comprehensive laws in place. Furthermore, more students in Pennsylvania than students in states with comprehensive laws reported that bullying and harassment were serious problems in their schools, and were no different than students from states without protective laws or policies (see Figure 23).



## **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The results from this study indicate that issues of school safety, bullying, name-calling, and harassment were serious for many students in Pennsylvania. Biased language, especially homophobic and sexist remarks, was commonly heard among students and often went uncorrected by teachers and other school staff. Biased language was even heard from some teachers and school staff. Respondents reported that students were frequently bullied and harassed because of their personal characteristics, especially their physical appearance, actual or perceived sexual orientation and their gender expression. It is particularly disturbing that nearly two-thirds of Pennsylvania students reported that they had personally been verbally harassed, and one-fifth of students reported that they had been physically harassed or assaulted in the previous year. Half of Pennsylvania students did not report the incidents of harassment or assault to a teacher, principal or other staff member, many because they thought it would make the situation worse or that school personnel would not take appropriate action.

The results of this study indicate that much work needs to be done in Pennsylvania to ensure that all students have access to a safe and supportive learning environment and that the state's Board of Education non-discrimination policy is not sufficient in protecting students in school. Given that only half of Pennsylvania students reported being protected by comprehensive safe schools policies in their schools, it is imperative that lawmakers and school officials create state-level safe school legislation that offers explicit protection to students who are targets of bullying, harassment and assault based on personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Findings from this report suggest that comprehensive safe schools policies may increase teacher and other staff intervention in response to biased language, student feelings of safety, and student reporting of incidents of harassment and assault to school personnel. Pennsylvania teachers and other school staff need training to address the inconsistency in their responses when hearing students make derogatory remarks and when learning of incidents of harassment and assault in school. In addition, schools should establish and enforce "no tolerance" policies regarding the use of biased language by school staff. Teachers and staff who understand their role in enforcing protective policies are likely to do so more effectively, ultimately improving the safety and quality of the school environment for all students.

## **ABOUT THE METHODOLOGY**

Student interviews 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 between January 13 and 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.