SAFE SCHOOLS IMPROVEMENT ACT (SSIA) OF 2019

The Safe Schools Improvement Act (SSIA) amends the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 to protect every student from bullying and harassment in K-12 schools, regardless of actual or perceived race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and religion. SSIA has earned bipartisan support from members of Congress since it was first introduced over a decade ago. The bill provides flexibility to state and local education agencies to make schools safer. SSIA will improve school climate, education, and health outcomes for all students by:

- **Prohibiting** harassment and bullying in K-12 schools with specific enumeration of students on the basis of actual or perceived race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and religion.
- **Adopting** policies at the local level that address the unique needs of all communities.
- **Encouraging** positive and preventative approaches to school discipline that minimize students' removal from instruction and ensure that students are not subject to disproportionate punishment.
- **Collecting, evaluating, and reporting** data on bullying and harassment to identify more effective ways to make schools safe.

GLSEN's research shows that LGBTQ students, particularly those who are transgender, experience bullying and harassment at disproportionate rates and that these patterns of victimization have serious consequences for students. Students who are LGBTQ people of color continue to be impacted by bullying and harassment based on race and ethnicity, in addition to bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Overall in 2017, homophobic remarks and victimization rates leveled off, after years of measured improvements. Among the many findings within the 2017 National School Climate Survey, are:

- The vast majority of LGBTQ students (87.3%) experienced harassment or assault based on personal characteristics, including sexual orientation, gender expression, gender, religion, race and ethnicity, and disability. Seven in ten LGBTQ students (70.1%) experienced verbal harassment based on sexual orientation, more than half based on gender expression (59.1%) or gender (53.2%).
- More than a third of LGBTQ students (34.8%) missed at least one day of school in the last month because of feeling unsafe at school, and at least two in five students avoided bathrooms (42.7%) and locker rooms (40.6%).
- The frequency of verbal harassment based on gender expression increased from 2015 to 2017, after years of decline, and there were no improvements in reports of physical harassment and assault based on gender expression from 2015 to 2017.
- Hostile school climates negatively affect LGBTQ students' mental health and educational outcomes. LGBTQ students who experienced high levels of anti-LGBTQ victimization were nearly twice as likely to report they do not plan to pursue post-secondary education. Also, LGBTQ students who experienced high levels of anti-LGBTQ victimization and discrimination had lower GPAs, lower self-esteem, and higher levels of depression.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

■ **Why does SSIA explicitly protect students on the basis of actual or perceived race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and religion?**

SSIA protects every student and explicitly enumerates groups of students who are the most vulnerable and, therefore, likely to face bullying. Based on findings from the 2017 GLSEN School Climate Survey, LGBTQ students who attended schools with enumerated policies were safer than those who attended schools with generic policies or without any anti-bullying policies.

■ **How will SSIA help educators identify new solutions to address bullying in schools?**

SSIA will establish a process to collect, evaluate, and report data on bullying and harassment in every school district that receives ESEA funds. This new source of standardized information will better measure incidents of bullying and harassment in every school. It will also help educators at the local, state, and federal levels determine which programs and services are most effective.

■ **What about the process of implementing SSIA?**

SSIA provides discretion to states and school districts on how to implement the law. Policies established under SSIA can and should look different depending on the unique characteristics of communities in every state. Reporting requirements in SSIA are designed to be incorporated into data collection efforts that schools already manage in order to minimize the burden on staff.

■ **Do states and localities already have safe schools laws that protect students?**

In 2019, 21 states and Washington, D.C. have passed enumerated anti-bullying laws that protect all students. SSIA provides protections for all students regardless of the state where they live.

To view current maps of state level policies, visit GLSEN at https://www.glsen.org/article/state-maps

Additional information:

GLSEN Public Policy Office

202-347-7780

publicpolicy@glsen.org

1015 15th Street NW, 6th Floor, Washington, D.C. 20005