

LGBTQ-Inclusive and Supportive Teaching Practices: The Experiences of LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ Educators

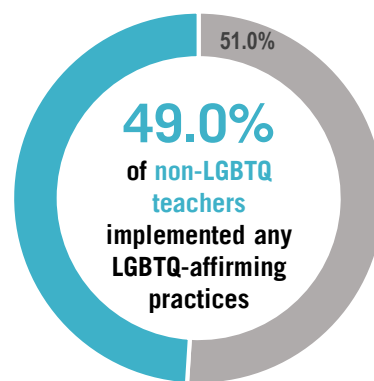
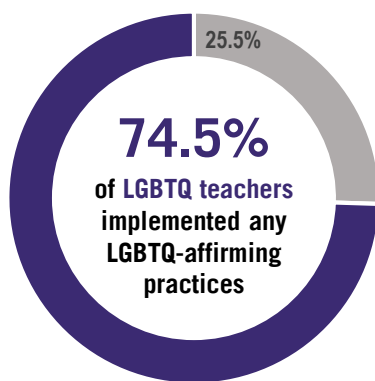
Supportive teachers and school staff can have a positive effect on the educational experiences of any student, increasing student motivation to learn¹ and positive engagement in school.² Teachers and other school personnel are a particularly important resource for LGBTQ³ students, who experience hostile school climates and are at greater risk of victimization and discrimination than their non-LGBTQ peers.⁴ For LGBTQ youth, having access to supportive school personnel can be critical for improving their school experiences and academic achievement.⁵ However, schools are not only unsafe spaces for LGBTQ youth; LGBTQ educators may also face hostile school climates. Many LGBTQ educators face barriers to LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive teaching⁶ and fear repercussions based on their LGBTQ identity.⁷

All teachers can create a supportive classroom environment and challenge anti-LGBTQ attitudes and behaviors in their schools by engaging in LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive practices that promote LGBTQ youth safety and wellbeing.⁸ We found in *From Teasing to Torment: School Climate Revisited*, a national survey of secondary school teachers and students, that half of teachers (50.3%) do engage in such practices to create a safe and welcoming environments in their classrooms and schools. These practices include:

- Providing support to individual LGBTQ students one-on-one;
- Displaying visual signs of support for LGBTQ people (e.g., GLSEN's Safe Space stickers);
- Informally discussing LGBTQ topics with students;
- Including LGBTQ topics in their curriculum;
- Serving as an advisor to a student club addressing LGBT issues (e.g., GSA);
- Educating other staff or advocating for staff training about LGBTQ issues; and
- Advocating for LGBTQ-inclusive policies



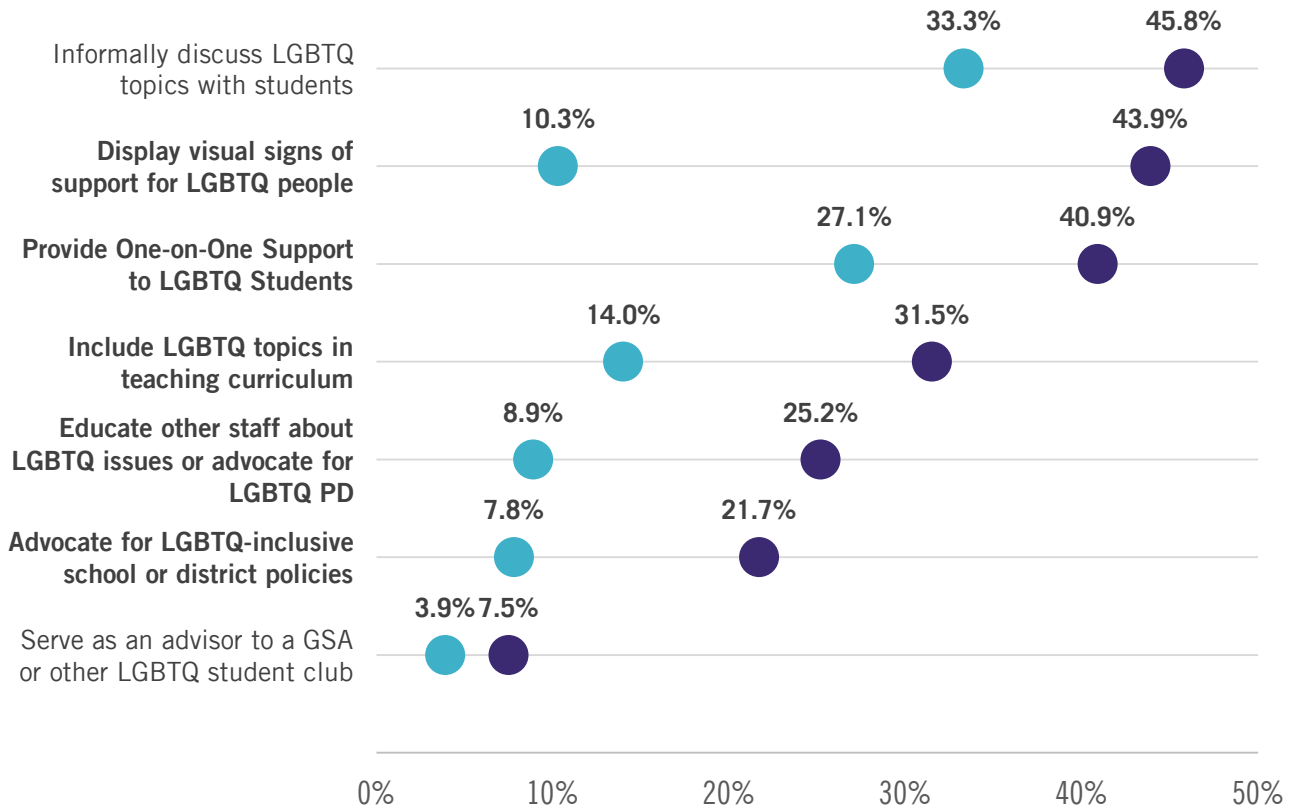
LGBTQ teachers were more likely to engage in LGBTQ-affirming and supportive teaching practices than were teachers who were not LGBTQ (See Figure 1).⁹



Additionally, as seen in the figure below, LGBTQ teachers were more likely than non-LGBTQ teachers to engage in almost all LGBTQ-affirming and supportive practices. These results show that LGBTQ teachers are a particularly important source of support for LGBTQ students.

Teachers' Engagement in LGBTQ-Inclusive and Supportive Teaching Practices

Percentage of LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ teachers reporting engaging in each practice



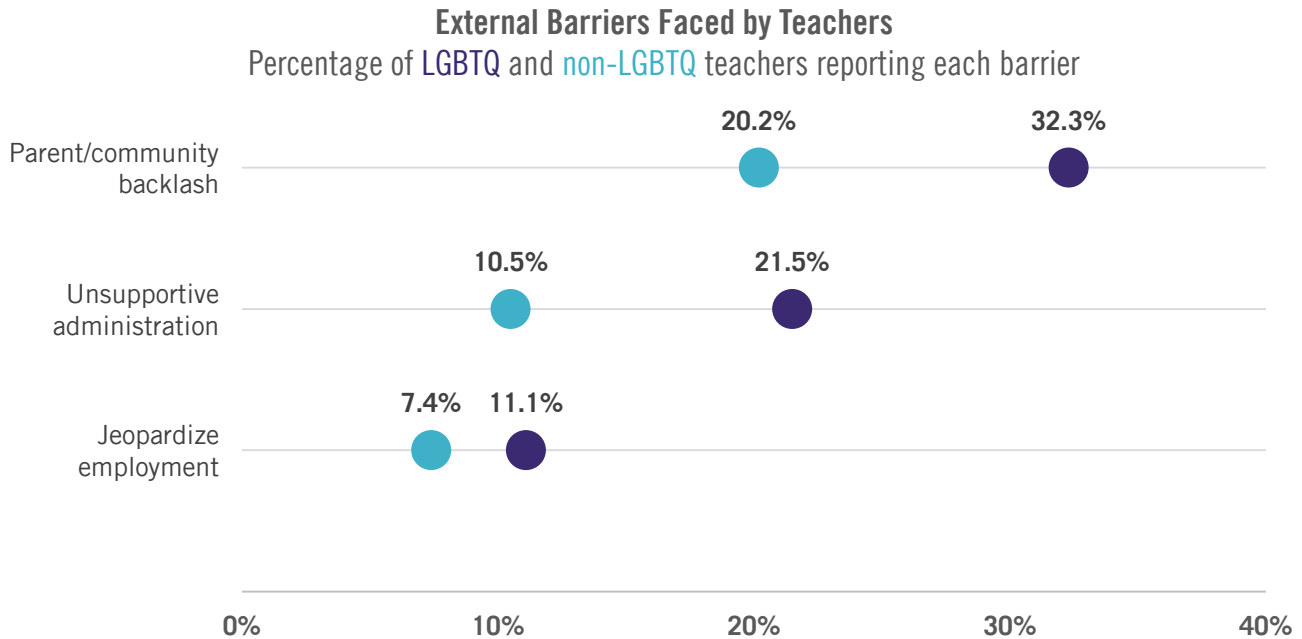
Note: Bolded items mark a significant difference between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ teachers

However, half of teachers (49.7%) do not engage in any LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive practices. Most teachers faced barriers to engaging in such practices. In *From Teasing to Torment: School Climate Revisited*, when teachers were asked about the various reasons why they might not have engaged in LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive teaching practices or why they might not have engaged in them as much as they would have liked, the majority of teachers (73.6%) indicated that they faced at least one barrier to engaging in LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive practices.¹⁰

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Some LGBTQ teachers fear that they will lose their job because of their LGBTQ identity or because they engage in LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive teaching practices. Although most teachers report some barriers to engaging in LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive practices¹¹, LGBTQ teachers were more likely

than non-LGBTQ teachers to report experiencing barriers from external sources such as backlash from administration, parents, and community, and job security, as opposed to internal barriers like personal beliefs and logistical concerns like not having enough time.¹² Over one-fifth of LGBTQ teachers (21.5%) said that their administration would not support their efforts (vs. 10.5% of non-LGBTQ teachers). Perhaps more concerning, one in ten LGBTQ teachers (11.1%) said that engaging in these efforts could jeopardize their employment (vs. 7.4% of non-LGBTQ teachers).



In addition to fearing the loss of their job because of their LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive teaching, many LGBTQ educators fear risk to their employment simply because of their LGBTQ identity. One-third of LGBTQ educators (33.9%) in the *National Survey of Educators' Perceptions of School Climate* felt that their employment would be at risk if they came out to an administrator. Many teachers who did come out experienced negative consequences such as being threatened with job loss, not having their contracts renewed, or being reassigned and investigated.¹³ When teachers are fired because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, it sends a clear message to students and teachers about how LGBTQ people are perceived and treated.¹⁴

LGBTQ employment nondiscrimination laws and policies protect LGBTQ teachers.

As of June 15, 2020, LGBTQ identities are recognized as a federally protected class, making it illegal to fire someone because of their sexual orientation or gender identity in all 50 states, territories, and Washington D.C.¹⁵ However, to date, there has not been time to implement and enforce the decision, so the weight of this legal interpretation of sex discrimination that includes sexual orientation and gender identity will likely not automatically translate to change and improvement in school climate for teachers and students across the U.S. Many teachers may remain unaware or insufficiently informed about this Supreme Court decision and what it means personally for them and their employment rights. Administrators may also not be adequately informed on what this decision means and may continue to

think it is legal to discriminate based on LGBTQ identity, creating hostile school and employment climates for LGBTQ teachers.

Although LGBTQ people are now recognized as a protected class as a result of this ruling and cannot be terminated because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, teachers can still be terminated because of their performance and other just cause. As such, it is possible that in schools with administrations who are against positive LGBTQ inclusion, LGBTQ-inclusive practice by teachers and other school personnel could be deemed poor performance, and these staff could be terminated as a result. In fact, in 5 states, it is illegal to mention or discuss LGBTQ identities in health classes.¹⁶ School staff, particularly those who are not educated on the specific parameters of their states' "No Promo Homo" laws, may avoid including LGBTQ topics not only in sexual health education classes, but also in other course out of fear of breaking the law.¹⁷ In contrast, five states have laws that establish curricular standards that are inclusive of LGBTQ identities and require local communities to develop LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum.¹⁸ In such states, LGBTQ-inclusive teaching is encouraged, and teachers would not be at risk for job loss due to their LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum. Finally, the Supreme Court's decision on employment protections did not address religious exemptions to the law, leaving private religious schools with the ability to discriminate against and fire teachers for being LGBTQ.¹⁹ Thus, advocates and policy makers should work to pass LGBTQ-inclusive curricular standards legislation in states across the country, strike down the five remaining "No Promo Homo" laws, and oppose religious exemptions for private religious schools. An important next step in improving school climates for LGBTQ teachers and students is to ensure that teachers cannot be fired for engaging in LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive work.

Conclusions and Recommendations

LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive teaching practices create safer environments for LGBTQ students.²⁰ Research indicates that any teacher who implements these practices can face backlash from their administration, the parents of students at their school, and the larger community. Sometimes teachers, especially LGBTQ teachers, even fear that their actions will jeopardize their employment if they implement the LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive affirming practices we know help LGBTQ students thrive.

LGBTQ teachers are more likely than non-LGBTQ teachers to engage in LGBTQ-affirming practices and are leading the charge in ensuring a welcoming school climate for LGBTQ students. LGBTQ teachers are important supports for LGBTQ youth, but they face unique challenges navigating their identity and their employment. Though LGBTQ teachers are now protected from the threat of being fired for coming out at school, they still may face school climates that are hostile and unwelcoming, which in turn can impact their LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive teaching.

There is much that can be done to improve school climates for students and teachers, particularly those who are LGBTQ, and create environments that are supportive and inclusive of LGBTQ people and issues. Advocates, policymakers, educators, and other key stakeholders should work to make school climates safe and affirming for all teachers by:

- Ensuring that LGBTQ school staff know their rights. LGBTQ school staff must know about the existence of these protections and understand how their rights are protected;
- Educating school administrators and districts on the recent Supreme Court decision and the legal implications it has for LGBTQ employee protections;
- Working to pass inclusive curricular standards at the state level that include and affirm LGBTQ identities and require communities to development curriculum;

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- Repealing remaining “No Promo Homo” laws in the five states that have them;
- Opposing efforts by religious education institutions that use religion as a pretext for discrimination and seek exemptions from federal civil rights laws, along with state and local protections, that should make schools safer for LGBTQ students and teachers; and
- Critically assessing the experiences of LGBTQ teachers with the goal of creating a supportive climate where LGBTQ teachers feel free to engage in LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive teaching.

As a result of this work, LGBTQ teachers will know and understand their rights, empowering them to more confidently engage in LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive practices. Furthermore, schools and educators across the nation can take steps to improve hostile climates and provide LGBTQ students with a safe and affirming environment. In addition to LGBTQ-supportive teachers and LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, schools should also ensure that students have access to inclusive and supportive school policies and supportive student clubs such as Gender Sexuality Alliances (GSAs). The presence of these resources create welcoming and safe school climates where all students can thrive and succeed.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ruzek, E. A., Hafen, C. A., Allen, J. P., Gregory, A., Mikami, A. Y., & Pianta, R. C. (2016). How teacher emotional support motivates students: The mediating roles of perceived peer relatedness, autonomy support, and competence. *Learning and Instruction, 42*, 95-103.
- ² Wang, M. T., & Eccles, J. S. (2013). School context, achievement motivation, and academic engagement: A longitudinal study of school engagement using a multidimensional perspective. *Learning and Instruction, 28*, 12-23.
- ³ For simplicity, throughout this report we use the acronym “LGBTQ” when referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer students, as well as in reference to the LGBTQ population in general, and when referencing any particular items from GLSEN’s or others’ surveys, even when those survey items used “LGBT.”
- ⁴ Greytak, E. A., Kosciw, J. G., Villenas, C. & Giga, N. M. (2016). From Teasing to Torment: School Climate Revisited, A Survey of U.S. Secondary School Students and Teachers. New York: GLSEN.
- ⁵ Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Zongrone, A. D., Clark, C. M., & Truong, N. L. (2018). The 2017 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation’s schools. New York: GLSEN.
- ⁶ Greytak, E. A., Kosciw, J. G., Villenas, C. & Giga, N. M. (2016). From Teasing to Torment: School Climate Revisited, A Survey of U.S. Secondary School Students and Teachers. New York: GLSEN.
- ⁷ Wright, T. E., & Smith, N. J. (2015). A safer place? LGBT educators, school climate, and implications for administrators. *The Educational Forum, 79*(4), 394–407.
- ⁸ Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Zongrone, A. D., Clark, C. M., & Truong, N. L. (2018). The 2017 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation’s schools. New York: GLSEN.
- ⁹ To examine differences in engaging in any LGBTQ-supportive effort by LGBTQ status, we conducted a chi-square: $\chi^2(1) = 22.54, p < .001, \phi = .149$.
- ¹⁰ Greytak, E. A., Kosciw, J. G., Villenas, C. & Giga, N.M. (2016). From Teasing to Torment: School Climate Revisited, A Survey of U.S. Secondary School Students and Teachers. New York: GLSEN.
- ¹¹ Greytak, E. A., Kosciw, J. G., Villenas, C. & Giga, N.M. (2016). From Teasing to Torment: School Climate Revisited, A Survey of U.S. Secondary School Students and Teachers. New York: GLSEN.
- ¹² To examine differences in each type of barrier by LGBTQ status, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted, Pillai’s trace = .033, $F(3, 914) = 10.46, p < .001$. Univariate tests for external barriers and internal barriers were significant at $p < .05$ and $p < .01$, respectively.
- ¹³ Wright, T. E., & Smith, N. J. (2015). A safer place? LGBTQ educators, school climate, and implications for administrators. *The Educational Forum, 79*(4), 394–407.
- ¹⁴ Kahn, M., & Gorski, P. C. (2016). The gendered and heterosexist evolution of the teacher exemplar in the United States: Equity implications for LGBTQ and gender nonconforming teachers. *International Journal of Multicultural Education, 18*(2), 15-38.
- ¹⁵ Esseks, J. (2020, June 15). *Supreme Court says firing workers because they are LGBTQ is unlawful discrimination*. ACLU.org. <https://www.aclu.org/news/lgbt-rights/supreme-court-says-firing-workers-because-they-are-lgbtq-is-unlawful-discrimination/>
- ¹⁶ GLSEN. (2018). Laws prohibiting “promotion of homosexuality” in schools: Impacts and implications (Research Brief). New York: GLSEN.
- ¹⁷ GLSEN. (2018). Laws prohibiting “promotion of homosexuality” in schools: Impacts and implications (Research Brief). New York: GLSEN.
- ¹⁸ California: [CA Education Code Section 51204.5](#); Colorado: [C.R.S. 22-1-104](#); Illinois: [105 ILCS 5/27-21](#); New Jersey: [New Jersey Statutes 18A:35-4.36](#); Oregon: [ORS 329.045](#)
- ¹⁹ Kuruvulla, C. (2018, June 18). *The Supreme Court’s landmark LGBTQ rights decision didn’t address one crucial thing*. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/religious-liberty-lgbtq-rights-supreme-court_n_5ee7ae6ac5b69e598c702154
- ²⁰ Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Zongrone, A. D., Clark, C. M., & Truong, N. L. (2018). The 2017 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation’s schools. New York: GLSEN

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