

Safe Schools Improvement Act (SSIA) of 2021

The Safe Schools Improvement Act (SSIA) protects every student from bullying and harassment in K-12 learning communities. SSIA requires states that receive federal funds under Title IV of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) ensure that local education agencies (LEAs) adopt evidence-based best practices to prevent and effectively respond to bullying and harassment. 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 improves school climate and supports positive educational 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.
- Creating policies at the local level that address the unique needs of communities while ensuring students, parents/guardians, and educators are informed of their schools' policy and procedures for handling bullying and harassment.
- Requiring restorative approaches to school discipline that minimize removal of students from learning communities and prevent student push-out or diversion to the school-to-prison pipeline, which disproportionately impacts LGBTQ+ youth, particularly those who are girls, transgender, nonbinary, Black, Indigenous, people of color, and people with disabilities.
- Collecting, evaluating, and reporting data on bullying and harassment to increase transparency and identify more effective ways to make schools safer and affirming for all young people, who should be able to thrive and reach their full potential.

LGBTQ+ youth, particularly those who are transgender, experience bullying and harassment at disproportionate rates and these patterns of victimization have serious consequences. Two decades of research makes it clear that efforts to advance full inclusion and equity for LGBTQ+ students still have a long way to go.

According to GLSEN's 2019 National School Climate Survey:

- The vast majority (86.3%) of LGBTQ+ students experienced harassment or assault in the past year based on personal characteristics, such as their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.
 - 82.0% of Native American, American Indian, or Alaska Native LGBTQ+ (or Two Spirit) middle and high school students experienced bullying based on their sexual orientation;
 - 58.6% Black LGBTQ+ middle and high school students experienced bullying based on their sexual orientation;
 - Three in five (59.5%) Latinx LGBTQ+ middle and high school students experienced bullying based on their gender expression;
 - 62.3% of multiracial LGBTQ+ middle and high school students have been bullied in school based on the way they express their gender;
 - More than one-third (36.5%) of LGBTQ+ students reported being victimized at school based on their actual or perceived disability; and
 - 44.9% of LGBTQ+ students experienced cyberbullying.

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- Most (56.6%) LGBTQ+ students who were harassed or assaulted in school did not report the incident to school staff, most often because they doubted an effective response. Among those who did report, 3 in 5 (60.5%) said that school staff did nothing or told them to ignore it, 1 in 5 (20.8%) were told to change their behavior (e.g., by changing how they dressed), and 7.3% were disciplined after reporting their victimization.
- One-third of LGBTQ+ students (32.7 %) missed at least one day of school in the last month because they felt unsafe and 17.1% changed schools because they felt unsafe.
- Bullying negatively affects LGBTQ+ youth's educational outcomes and mental health.
 - Being bullied is associated with lower GPAs, increased absences, decreased likelihood of pursuing post-secondary education, lower self-esteem, and higher levels of depression.
 - LGBTQ+ youth of color who experience both racist and anti-LGBTQ+ victimization are most likely to skip school due to feeling unsafe and experience the highest levels of depression, compared to those who experience one or neither form of victimization.

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, more likely to face bullying. Based on findings from GLSEN's National School Climate Survey, LGBTQ+ students who reported having an enumerated policy at their school experienced less anti-LGBTQ+ victimization than those who reported having a generic policy or no anti-bullying policy. LGBTQ+ students who reported having an enumerated anti-bullying policy were more likely to report bullying and were also far more likely to say that staff responses were effective than those in schools with only generic 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 incidents in every state that receives ESEA Title IV-A funds. This new source of standardized information will better measure incidents of bullying and harassment in every school. It will also help educators determine which programs and services are most effective.
- **What about the process of implementing SSIA?**
SSIA provides discretion to states and LEAs 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 existing data collection efforts that schools already manage under the ESEA in order to minimize the burden on staff.
- **Do states and localities already have bullying and harassment prevention laws that protect students?**
In 2021, 21 states, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico have passed enumerated anti-bullying laws that protect all students. SSIA provides protections for all students regardless of the state where they live. Additionally, SSIA ensures all states are using evidence-based and restorative approaches that minimize exclusionary discipline and interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

View current maps of state level policies at <https://www.glsen.org/policy-maps>.

GLSEN's 2019 School Climate Survey is available at <https://www.glsen.org/research/2019-national-school-climate-survey>.

For additional information, contact the GLSEN Public Policy Office at 202-621-5815 or policy@glsen.org, located at 1015 15th Street NW, 6th floor, Washington, DC 20005.