

2025 Policy Priorities: Safe Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth

Every young person deserves the opportunity to learn, grow, and succeed at school. For 35 years, GLSEN's national network of educators, LGBTQ+ youth, families, and community partners has advocated for safer and more inclusive K-12 school environments. More work is needed to secure this vision, with GLSEN's most recent National School Climate Survey reporting that 83% of LGBTQ+ youth continue to face harassment, bullying, or assault at school and 59% of LGBTQ+ youth face discriminatory school policies or practices that impact their learning experience.¹ Federal and state policymakers - as well as school administrators and officials - should implement these Four Supports to ensure safe schools for LGBTQ+ students.

Comprehensive Policies

Comprehensive policies assuring the safety and inclusion of LGBTQ+ students are necessary to address persistent bullying and harassment while building a culture of accountability. In 2022, 62% of LGBTQ+ youth who had been harassed in school never reported an incident to school staff, a 9% increase since 2019.² 70% of those who did not report harassment expressed a belief that school staff simply wouldn't do anything.³ This belief is borne out of the experience of students who *did* report harassment: 60% of LGBTQ+ youth who reported harassment stated that nothing was done, with 16% of LGBTQ+ youth being told to change their own behavior and 7% being disciplined and therefore blamed for their own harassment.⁴ Stronger policies are associated with increased confidence in school staff response, lower rates of harassment, and improved mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth.⁵

GLSEN recommends:

- ✓ **LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination policies in schools** that specifically enumerate protections on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. Title IX regulations, last updated in August 2024 and implemented in 24 states, clarify that anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination is prohibited by federal law. In addition, 26 states have passed state laws that prohibit anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination and establish state-level remedies for impacted students and educators.
- ✓ **Anti-bullying policies that protect LGBTQ+ students** by specifically enumerating protections on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. Congress should pass the Safe Schools Improvement Act to require school districts to adopt such policies, which 23 states have already done through independent state laws or actions.
- ✓ **Equal access to facilities, programs, and activities consistent with a person's gender identity.** Title IX regulations, last updated in August 2024 and implemented in 24 states, clarify that federal law prohibits schools from denying equal access consistent with a person's gender identity. In addition, 10 states have independent state laws that affirm equal access to bathrooms, whereas an additional 8 states issue guidance on transgender inclusion in schools.
- ✓ **Equal access to interscholastic athletics.** 14 states ensure that transgender, nonbinary, and intersex student athletes can participate on sex-separated teams consistent with their gender identity, either through state law or through statewide athletic association policies.

Several states, school districts, and politicians have advanced proposals that single out LGBTQ+ youth and disproportionately harm transgender and nonbinary students. GLSEN opposes policies that enshrine anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination into law. For more context on individual state landscapes, please review [GLSEN's State Report Cards](#).⁶

- ✗ More than 964,000 LGBTQ+ students live in the 26 states that have blocked LGBTQ-inclusive Title IX protections.
- ✗ More than 53,000 transgender students live in the 14 states with bathroom ban laws.
- ✗ More than 49,000 transgender students live in the 14 states that ban affirming pronouns.
- ✗ More than 111,000 transgender students live in the 26 states that ban inclusive sports teams.

Inclusive Learning

When schools teach about the diversity of the United States, LGBTQ+ students see themselves reflected in what they're learning and all students grow in their understanding and acceptance of others. However, schools across the country have seen a wave of censorship that has silenced educators, pulled books off of school library shelves, and left too many students without a fuller understanding of America's diversity. Only 16% of LGBTQ+ youth have been taught positive depictions of LGBTQ+ topics in the classroom, whereas 72% of LGBTQ+ students have received *no* such instruction.⁷ Even outside the classroom, only 43% of LGBTQ+ students have access to books with LGBTQ+ themes in their school library, although only 7% have access to many books, as opposed to only a few.⁸ Inclusive learning strategies are associated with safer school climates, including a 46% lower rate of harassment based on sexual orientation, a 39% lower rate of harassment based on gender identity, and peer students being twice more likely to intervene when witnessing homophobic or transphobic harassment.⁹

GLSEN recommends:

- ✓ **LGBTQ-inclusive curricular standards across subjects**, ensuring all students learn about the contributions of the LGBTQ+ community. 7 states have adopted inclusive curricular standards in core academic subjects, and 9 states have adopted LGBTQ-inclusive standards for health and human sexuality education.
- ✓ **Standards to ensure inclusive resources in classroom instruction and school libraries**. Only 3 states require inclusive instructional materials, such as textbooks, whereas 5 states have taken direct action to counter discriminatory book bans and removals in school libraries.

Several states, school districts, and politicians have censored or otherwise limited access to LGBTQ-inclusive instruction in schools. GLSEN opposes policies that limit access to inclusive learning strategies.

- ✗ \$3.2 billion was spent by school districts in 2023-2024 to respond to challenges to inclusive learning.
- ✗ More than 616,000 LGBTQ+ students live in the 12 states that censor LGBTQ-inclusive classroom instruction.
- ✗ More than 228,000 LGBTQ+ students live in the 5 states that prohibit LGBTQ-inclusive school textbooks.
- ✗ More than 10,000 books were banned from school library shelves in the 2023-2024 school year.

Supportive School Staff

Teachers, principals, and other school staff have a profound impact on LGBTQ+ students' perceptions of safety, and consistent affirmation from trusted adults at school can improve academic achievement and students' mental health outcomes. LGBTQ+ youth are 26% less likely to skip school if an educator regularly intervenes to address anti-LGBTQ+ remarks from other students.¹⁰ Even so, state legislation and timid school administrators have chilled efforts to express inclusion in the classroom. In 2022, only 37% of LGBTQ+ students identified their school administration (e.g., principals) as supportive and only 52% of LGBTQ+ students identified visible signs of support in the classroom, such as a rainbow flag or a Safe Space sticker.¹¹ These efforts to build safer spaces are undermined by overly broad "Don't Say LGBTQ+" policies that stifle free expression, ban visible signs of support, and censor LGBTQ+ educators from expressing themselves in the classroom. LGBTQ+ students instead benefit when school districts take steps to bolster understanding among their staff through trainings and professional development opportunities, as well as through increased investment in supportive staff through pipeline programs to diversify the educator workforce and the hiring of more school-based mental health staff.

GLSEN recommends:

- ✓ **LGBTQ-inclusive standards in educator prep programs and professional development**, including standards that build LGBTQ-related cultural competency and support for inclusive curriculum development. 6 states require that either educator prep programs or staff training encompasses LGBTQ+ inclusion, whereas an additional 7 states develop resources to support trainings that address LGBTQ+ inclusion.
- ✓ **Increased hiring of school-based mental health professionals**, who can support LGBTQ+ students. In 2022, President Biden signed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which delivered nearly \$1 billion in new funding to support school districts in hiring additional counselors. 16 states now ensure greater access to school-based mental health services through Medicaid.

Several states, school districts, and politicians have deprived educators of information and strategies that support safer school environments for LGBTQ+ students. GLSEN opposes policies that limit educators from supporting LGBTQ+ students.

- ✗ More than 497,000 public school teachers live in 8 states with "Don't Say LGBTQ+" laws that chill free expression.
- ✗ More than 1,110,000 public school teachers live in 16 states that restrict LGBTQ+ topics in educator prep or trainings.

Student-Led Clubs (GSAs)

Student clubs and extracurriculars play a vital role in fostering belonging in the school community. Affirming clubs like Gay-Straight Alliances and Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) play a particular role in creating a safe space and building an inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ students. GSAs ensure that LGBTQ+ youth have a place to be affirmed and process hostility in their learning environments, while also growing understanding across the broader school community. When a school has a GSA club, LGBTQ+ students are 71% more likely to rate their peers as accepting.¹² GLSEN has fought efforts to censor or limit GSAs since the 1990s, and the federal Equal Access Act prohibits content-based restrictions on student clubs. Still, only 35% of LGBTQ+ students had access to a GSA in 2022.¹³ GSAs also create some leadership opportunities for LGBTQ+ youth, though only 9% of LGBTQ+ youth reported having experience as a leader or officer in a GSA.¹⁴ Sustained, and even expanded, access to GSAs and other leadership opportunities can empower youth to engage more deeply in their school community, foster understanding among their peers, and build safer school environments for all.

GLSEN recommends:

- ✓ **Supporting access and capacity for GSAs**, including through dedicated funding streams that strengthen GSA capacity, such as through statewide convenings. Only 2 states establish funding streams that directly support GSAs.
- ✓ **Additional youth leadership opportunities**, including commissions or task forces that seek LGBTQ+ youth input in statewide decisionmaking on education policy. 4 states have youth advisory councils that include LGBTQ+ youth.

GLSEN opposes state or local actions that censor, deter participation in, or otherwise restrict access to GSAs.

- ✗ More than 158,000 LGBTQ+ students live in 3 states that restrict GSAs.

Endnotes

¹ GLSEN. The 2021 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of LGBTQ+ Youth in Our Nation's Schools, at 19, 32 (2022). <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/NSCS-2021-Full-Report.pdf> ("GLSEN NSCS").

² Compare *id.*, with GLSEN. The 2019 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth in Our Nation's Schools, at 32 (2020). https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NSCS19-FullReport-032421-Web_0.pdf.

³ GLSEN NSCS at 27.

⁴ GLSEN NSCS at 29.

⁵ GLSEN NSCS at 70-74.

⁶ See GLSEN Navigator. GLSEN State Report Card (2024). <https://maps.glsen.org/state-report-card>.

⁷ GLSEN NSCS at 49.

⁸ GLSEN NSCS at 50.

⁹ GLSEN NSCS at 65.

¹⁰ GLSEN NSCS at 68.

¹¹ GLSEN NSCS at 51-54.

¹² GLSEN NSCS at 61-62.

¹³ GLSEN NSCS at 48.

¹⁴ GLSEN NSCS at 48.