

# PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF LGBTQ+ YOUTH



SCHOOLS ARE **UNSAFE** AND UNWELCOMING FOR THE MAJORITY OF LGBTQ STUDENTS.



**HOSTILE** SCHOOL CLIMATES NEGATIVELY AFFECT LGBTQ STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS AND WELL-BEING

Experiencing higher levels of victimization and discrimination leads to **worse outcomes** for LGBTQ students:





# INTRODUCTION

Advocacy and education for mental health has become more popular over the past decade, but mental health issues are still disproportionately impacting certain communities. According to the National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI), members of the Lesbian, Gay, Transsexual and Bisexual (LGTBQ) community are more than twice as likely to experience a mental health condition than heterosexual and cisgender people. These members are also at higher risk to experience suicidal thoughts and attempts.

# THE FACTS

MEMBERS OF THE LGTBQ COMMUNITY ARE MORE THAN TWICE AS LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION AS MEMBERS OF THE HETEROSEXUAL COMMUNITY

MEMBERS OF THE LGTBQ COMMUNITY ARE ALSO AT HIGHER RISK THAN HETEROSEXUAL PEOPLE TO EXPERIENCE SUICIDAL THOUGHTS AND ATTEMPTS

# WHY SHOULD PUBLIC POLICY INTERVENE?

School systems are leaving out a huge portion of the youth population by not reforming the education system to be more inclusive. Policy implementation is needed in order to reduce the suicide rates for LGBTQ+ youth, reduce bullying against this community by normalizing the education and history of this community, and increase healthier relationships and sexuality education within the system. School systems have a very limited curriculum, and with policy changes for this curriculum, schools would be more inclusive for everyone.

This project will be introducing and exploring subtopics that lie within improving mental health for the LGBTQ+ youth community. These include bullying and stigmatization, lack of education on LGBTQ+ history and literature, dating violence, social network supports, and inclusive sex education for the LGBTQ+ community.





# BULLYING AND STIGMATIZATION

(1)



## SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS CAN SEVERELY IMPACT THE MENTAL HEALTH OF LGBTQ STUDENTS...

A 2012 study showed the LGBTQ youth are more than twice as likely to report cyberbullying than heterosexual youth - The Trevor Project

**71%** of LGBTQ youth respondents to a national survey reported discrimination due to their sexual orientation or identity in 2019 - The Trevor Project

Heightened exposure to bullying and harassment by sexual and gender minority youth is associated with increased risk of absenteeism, lower GPAs, school discipline and decreased rates of college or other post-high school plans. - Dowd, 2018

**"IN 2019, 39% OF LGBTQ YOUTH RESPONDENTS OF A NATIONWIDE SURVEY SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED COMMITTING SUICIDE" - THE TREVOR PROJECT, 2019**

## THE DOUBLE STIGMA

Both LGBTQ identities and mental health issues are stigmatized, making members of both communities more sensitive to prejudice, also known as the double stigma - NAMI

## CYBERBULLYING

A 2012 study showed the LGBTQ youth are more than twice as likely to report cyberbullying than heterosexual youth - Wiederhold, 2014

## CURRENT SOLUTIONS

A variety of organizations are dedicated to improving life for LGBTQ youth and teens, including The Trevor Project, Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG), and the Cyberbullying Research Center (Wiederhold, 2014)

LGBTQ inclusive state bullying laws decrease attempted suicide rates among this population (Fitzsimons, 2019)



## FUTURE INTERVENTIONS

Only 20 of the 50 states have mandatory LGBTQ inclusive bullying laws (Fitzsimons, 2019), which should expand to improve mental health in this population

In a 2015 survey, only 10.2% of LGBT students reported that they attended schools with explicit anti-bullying or anti-discrimination protections for sexual orientation and gender identity/expression (Dowd, 2018)

**We need better programs and education initiatives about the LGBTQ community in our public schools**





# LACK OF EDUCATION ON LGBTQ+ HISTORY AND LITERATURE



(2)

## ONLY 4 U.S. STATES REQUIRE THE TEACHING OF LGBTQ+ HISTORY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

These states weave curriculum involving the history of the entire demographic and details on important LGBTQ+ historical figures and events into already existing lessons. No states currently require the inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics in literature. (Leins, 2019)

## BUT 6 STATES STILL EXPLICITLY PROHIBIT TEACHING ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

Alabama, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Texas all have laws "prohibiting the promotion of homosexuality in public classrooms." (Leins, 2019)

### BENEFITS OF SEAMLESSLY INCLUSIVE CURRICULUMS

- Students receive a **more accurate education** on historical events and figures (McGarry, 2013)
- Normalization of literature written about and by LGBTQ+ individuals and the facilitation of discussion around these topics, **destigmatizes queerness for non-LGBTQ+ students.** (McGarry, 2013)
- Representation in history and literature curriculums helps **LGBTQ+ youth to feel seen and heard.** Erasure of LGBTQ+ identities in these areas has the opposite effect (McGarry 2013)
- Seamless weaving of LGBTQ+ history topics and literature, rather than stand-alone lessons, **decreases the chance for further alienation** as **stand-alone lessons suggest** and **draw attention** to an **underlying intolerance** towards queer students by their straight peers (Snapp, 2015)

### WHY DO WE CARE

Aside from the fact that LGBTQ+ youth are humans and deserve representation, History and English curriculums which include the representation of LGBTQ+ figures and events, will help in **lowering rates of bullying for queer youth** and allow for both queer and non-queer students to **question the heteronormative framework.** A decrease in bullying and stigmatization around LGBTQ+ students will result in **positive mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth,** such as lower rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. (Skerrett)

"ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO OVERCOME INTOLERANCE IS THROUGH EDUCATION AND EXPOSURE TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE AND VIEWPOINTS"

~ ILLINOIS STATE SENATOR HEATHER STEANS



## POLICY ALTERNATIVES

- Require the inclusion and weaving of historical figures who identified as LGBTQ+ and important events and movements involving the demographic into public history curriculums via a federal mandate
- Require the inclusion and weaving of literature written about and/or by LGBTQ+ individuals in public english curriculums via a federal mandate

## PREDICTED MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

These policies will **improve** mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth by:

- **Increasing representation** in the classroom and positively psychologically impacting queer students
- Providing **effective methods** of LGBTQ+ inclusion in curriculums so as not to **further alienate and stigmatize** LGBTQ+ students through stand-alone lessons
- **Destigmatizing** LGBTQ+ lifestyles for non-queer youth via exposure

# LGBTQ+ YOUTH ARE 5 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO ATTEMPT SUICIDE



# WE CAN LOWER THAT NUMBER, STARTING IN THE CLASSROOM

We need to include LGBTQ+ history and literature in our public school curriculums.





# DATING VIOLENCE

(3)

## INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV) OR DATING VIOLENCE INCLUDES

SEXUAL VIOLENCE, STALKING, PHYSICAL VIOLENCE, PSYCHOLOGICAL AGGRESSION, AND CONTROL OF REPRODUCTIVE OR SEXUAL HEALTH, AS DEFINED BY THE CDC. (WALTERS, M. 2013)



### OVERVIEW

- LGBTQ people experience dating violence at higher rates than their heterosexual/cisgender counterparts – this is true for youth as well as adults. (Human Rights Campaign)
- Depression, suicidal ideation, family maltreatment and abuse, lack of peer/social acceptance, poor school performance, and substance abuse are all shown to make people more vulnerable to experiencing abuse. (Dank, M. 2013)
- Furthermore, LGBTQ teens are more likely to have these experiences because of the discrimination they face on account of their gender/sexuality. (Dank, M. 2013)
- Experiences of dating violence or IPV have long and short term effects including fear and concern for safety, PTSD, injury, homelessness, need for legal representation, and losing days of school or work. (Walters, M. 2013)
- People who experience dating violence or IPV as teens are more likely to experience it again later in life. (Anater, A.F. 2019)

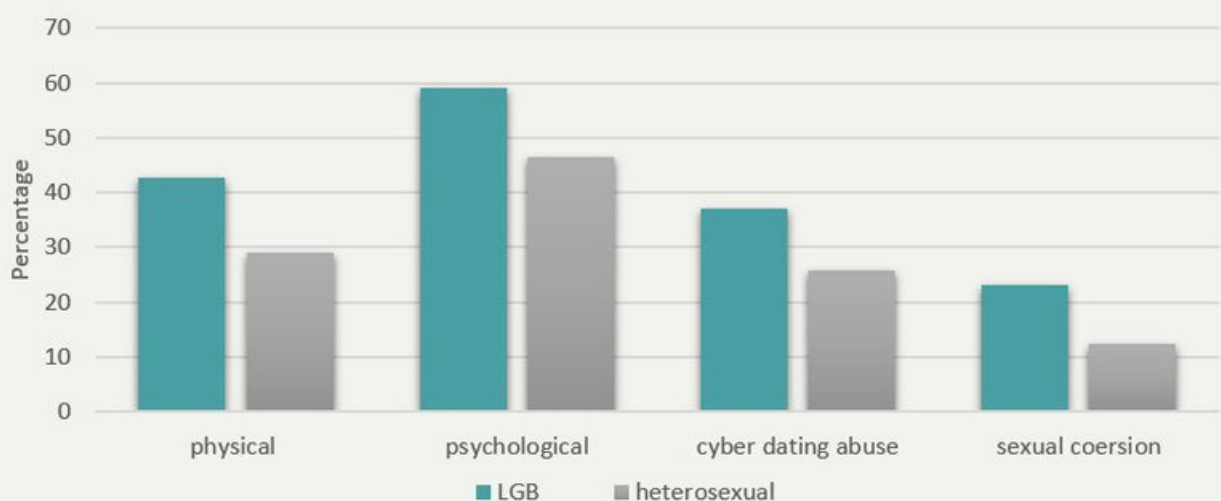
### LGBTQ PEOPLE EXPERIENCE EXTRA BARRIERS IN ACCESSING SUPPORT AROUND DATING VIOLENCE.

(NCADV)

#### MYTHS ABOUT DATING VIOLENCE AND BARRIERS TO REPORTING

LGBTQ people may experience more barriers to support including shame or embarrassment about their gender or sexuality, **fear of not being believed** especially due to myths about gender and sexuality, **fear of being “outed”** and retaliation about gender or sexuality, **fewer legal protections**, loss of community, and **fear of reflecting poorly on the LGBTQ community.** (Love is Respect). Some myths around gender and sexuality include that men aren't victims because they can defend themselves, that women don't really hurt each other, and that dating violence and IPV don't happen in the LGBTQ community. (The Women of Color Network, Inc.)

Comparing Rates of Dating Violence Between LGB Youth and Heterosexual Youth



Dank, M., Lachman, P., Zweig, J., & Yahner, J. (2013). Dating Violence Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth. Urban Institute.

### What can be done to reduce teen dating violence?

There are two kinds of protective factors that can reduce the risk of intimate partner violence: general protective factors, and protection against childhood exposure to domestic violence. (Anater, A. F. 2019) One general protective strategy is comprehensive sex education including teaching that healthy relationships involve mutual respect for romantic partners, effective communication skills, and healthy and realistic boundaries and expectations for the relationship. (Anater, A. F. 2019) School programs to reduce bullying and harassment, also serve as a protective strategy especially since lgbtq youth are more likely to experience bullying and harassment and these experiences can make them more vulnerable to dating violence. (Anater, A. F. 2019)

Comprehensive, inclusive sex education is violence prevention.





# SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

(4)

## What's the deal?

Recent studies are suggesting that this type of gender abuse influences both physical health through drug and alcohol abuse, and increased risky sexual behavior, as well as psychological health (Wright and Perry, 2008). There is a clearly established importance between social support for at risk LGBTQ youth and reducing additional victimization related effects such as suicide, self-harm, and drug use (Button, 2012).

While state enforced policies would be beneficial at forcing schools to enact inclusive policies for LGBTQ youths, it really is up to the school staff to ensure that GSA organizations, faculty, and counselors are providing safe spaces where students feel comfortable sharing their experiences.



"MANY RESEARCHERS HAVE PARTICULARLY FOCUSED ON THE LACK OF SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR LESBIAN AND GAY YOUTH WITHIN OUR SCHOOLS, IDENTIFYING THE CLASSROOM AS THE MOST HOMOPHOBIC OF ALL SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS" (MUÑOZ-PLAZA ET AL., 2002)



### LITTLE TO NO ACCESS TO SUPPORT

70% of LGBTQ students reported being harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Birkett et al., 2009). Of these, 59% report that school personnel were both present during this harassment and did not assist them (Birkett et al., 2009)

### THE FACTS

"Approximately one-tenth of LGBTQ students reported that their school had official policies or guidelines to support transgender and gender nonconforming students"

In a survey by the GLSEN, 53.3% of students surveyed indicated that they do have a GSA club, 36.3% of these students are saying that they never have any meetings (Kosciw et al., 2018).

### SOLUTIONS

The best ways to increase social support for LGBTQ youths include forms of **structured** and **inclusive** school sponsored groups or clubs for students to create a network of people they can trust to be open with.

### WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

"Supportive teachers, principals, and other school staff serve as another important resource for LGBTQ students.

Being able to speak with a caring adult in school may have a significant positive impact on the school experiences for students, particularly those who feel marginalized or experience harassment." (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Figure 2.3 LGBTQ Students' Reports on the Number of Teachers and Other School Staff who are Supportive of LGBTQ Students

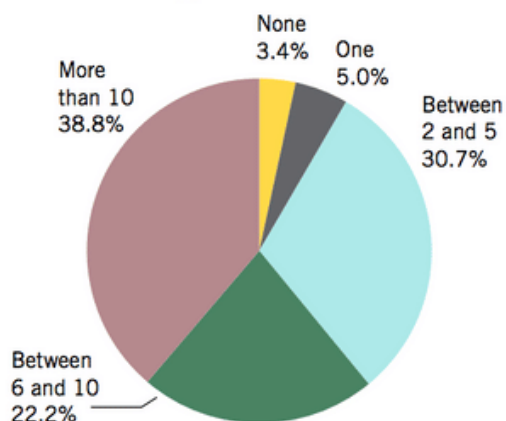
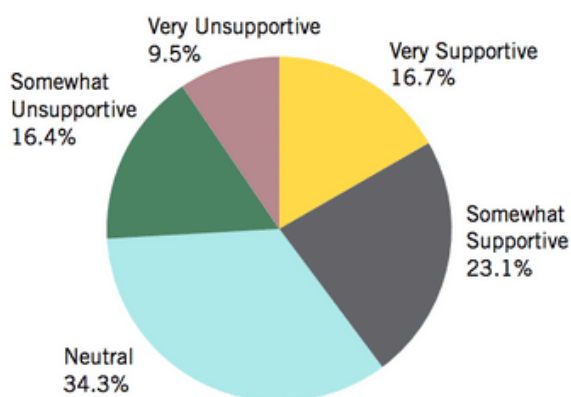


Figure 2.4 LGBTQ Students' Reports on How Supportive Their School Administration is of LGBTQ Students



(Kosciw et al., 2018).

The 2017 National School Climate survey found that "most students did not have access to information about LGBTQ-related topics in their school library, through the internet on school computers, or in their textbooks or other assigned readings" (Kosciw et al., 2018). By increasing information available to students on these topics, schools can not only teach LGBTQ youths how to deal with their confused sexuality and harassment, but teach their peers how to be supportive to their LGBTQ friends.



# LACK OF INCLUSIVE SEX EDUCATION FOR LGBT YOUTH

(5)



The **GLSEN** 2013 survey found that fewer than **5%** of LGBT students had health classes that included positive representations of LGBT-related topics, meaning education of sexual orientation and safe sex for the LGBT community. Only **12%** said their sex education classes covered same-sex relationships. This ultimately excludes this community, does not allow for a safe place for the LGBT community to discuss sexual health, and will inevitably continue to harm the mental health of this community.

## GLSEN HAS SHOWN THAT WELL DESIGNED AND IMPLEMENTED SEX EDUCATION PROGRAMS CAN...

- Delay the age of first sexual intercourse
- Reduce an overall number of partners
- Reduce unprotected sex with increasing use of condoms and contraception
- Reduce teen pregnancy, and
- Reduce HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

## PARENTS OF STUDENTS ARE BEGINNING TO ADVOCATE FOR LGBT FRIENDLY SEX EDUCATION

93% of parents of juniors in high school and 91% of parents of seniors in high school believe that sex education is important to teach in schools. Of these, 80% of junior parents and 73% of senior parents believe sexual orientation is an appropriate topic for inclusion for the LGBT youth community

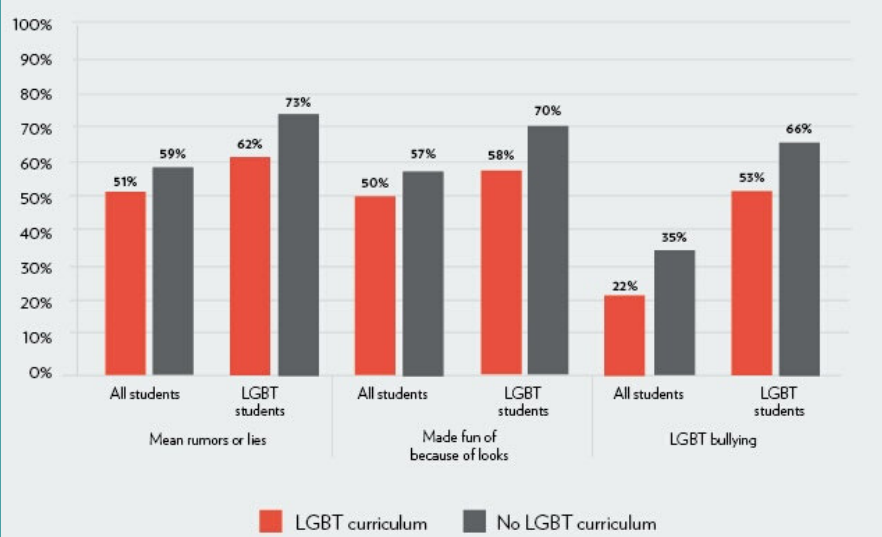
**“BECAUSE MY SCHOOL’S HEALTH PROGRAM IGNORES THE LGBT STUDENTS, I HAVE BEEN PRETTY CLUELESS ABOUT SAFE SEX. I HAD TO FIND INFORMATION ON MY OWN ON THE INTERNET BECAUSE NON-STRAIGHT STUDENTS ARE IGNORED.”**



## PROGRESS

CALIFORNIA PASSED THE FAIR EDUCATION ACT WHICH REQUIRES SCHOOLS TO TEACH SOME ASPECTS OF LGBT HISTORY. BOTH LGBT AND NON-LGBT STUDENTS REPORTED FEELING SAFER IN THE CLASSROOM ONCE THIS WAS INCLUDED.

FIGURE 1. STUDENTS WHO LEARN ABOUT LGBT ISSUES IN THE CURRICULUM REPORT LESS HARASSMENT



## POLICY SOLUTIONS

Educators and policymakers who wish to create a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ youth could consider passing and strengthening anti-bullying laws, adopting a curriculum that discusses contributions of LGBTQ individuals, supporting GSAs, reducing discriminatory behaviors that inhibit sports participation, and providing training to staff on creating welcoming environments for all youth.

**For Example...** Vermont Agency of Education has created a sex education checklist that involves definitions and provides examples of language that is exclusionary versus inclusive language in order to better help sex education programs include everyone.

For More Information or Resources...



Our mission is to ensure that every member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.



# CONCLUSION



## Summary:

This report has sought to illustrate the disproportionately negative mental health outcomes faced by LGBTQ+ students, by investigating subtopics and factors in public schools which contribute to these outcomes.

- Due to **(1) bullying and stigmatization** regarding their sexual orientation, LGBTQ students are 2x more likely to be cyberbullied and in 2019 nearly 40 percent contemplated suicide. Being bullied substantially increases the risk of mental illness, like Major Depressive Disorder and Generalized Anxiety Disorder. (Stop Bullying(
- These students also experience an erasure of their identities through the **(2) lack of inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics in public History and English curriculums.** This lack of representation results in a subsequent lack of understanding for their own sexuality and a feeling of alienation, which can negatively impact their mental health.
- Additionally, LGBTQ+ students are more likely to experience **(3) dating violence,** largely due to lack of education regarding safe relationships and sex for same-sex partners. Family maltreatment and lack of peer/social support are also major factors which lead to higher rates of dating violence for LGBTQ+ youth.

This fear, physical harm, and lack of support often results in higher rates of mental illness. Barriers to help and treatment, such as lack of legal protections, fear of being "outed," PTSD, etc. can often result in an LGBTQ+ individual not reporting IPV and continuing to endure the physical, emotional, and mental distress.

- **(4) Support systems** are incredibly important for any individual's wellbeing. However, LGBTQ+ students often lack parent, teacher, and peer support. There is a lack of productive GSA's and other queer-inclusive organizations in U.S. public schools, as well as a lack of administrators who will stand up for LGBTQ+ students. These feelings of isolation, loneliness, and expendability contribute to negative mental health outcomes.
- Lastly, LGBTQ+ students' mental healths are negatively impacted by a **(5) general lack of sex education.** Only 22 states require Sex-Ed to be taught in public schools, and many of those teach primarily abstinence until marriage. Less than 5 percent of queer students reported any sort of positive representation of gay sex, and less than 12 percent reported being taught about same-sex relationships. This results in confusion, lack of understanding, and/or resentment for their sexuality, as well as less healthy relationships for LGBTQ+ students.

## Policy Recommendations:

To begin to solve the drastic rates of mental health issues in LGBTQ youths, we must turn to effective, and inclusive policy solutions.

The federal government must start this movement by:

- **Requiring all states to have LGBTQ inclusive anti-bullying within both public and private schools at all education levels.**

Students need to feel that everyone regardless of gender or sexual orientation is protected at school. To help students un-stigmatize LGBTQ+ students, the government should also require:

- **The inclusion and weaving of historical figures who identify as LGBTQ+ into school curriculums.**

This could include using literature written by LGBTQ+ individuals within English classes, or teaching important events and movements involving this demographic into their history classes.

To continue this de-stigmatization:

- **LGBTQ+ representation also need to be included in sex and safe relationship education.**
- **Teach that healthy relationships involve mutual respect for romantic partners, effective communication skills, and healthy and realistic boundaries and expectations for the relationships, whether that relationship is between a heterosexual, homosexual or queer couple**

The best ways to increase social support for LGBTQ youths throughout hard times include:

- **Forms of structured and inclusive school sponsored groups or clubs for students to create a network of people they can trust to be open with.**
- **Trainings/teaching teachers and faculty how to be supportive, and monitoring GSA's to ensure they're active and inclusive.**

To conclude, educators and policymakers who wish to create a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ youth must begin passing and strengthening anti-bullying laws, adopting a curriculum that discusses contributions of LGBTQ individuals, supporting GSAs, reducing discriminatory behaviors that inhibit sports participation, and providing training to staff on creating welcoming environments for all youth.





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