

INSIDE COLORADO SCHOOLS: THE EXPERIENCES OF LGBT STUDENTS

Findings from the 2007 National School Climate Survey demonstrate that Colorado schools were not safe for many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students in secondary schools. Significant percentages of Colorado students experienced harassment at school, often because of their sexual orientation and how they expressed their gender. In addition, many LGBT students in this state did not have access to important school resources, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, and were not protected by comprehensive safe school policies.

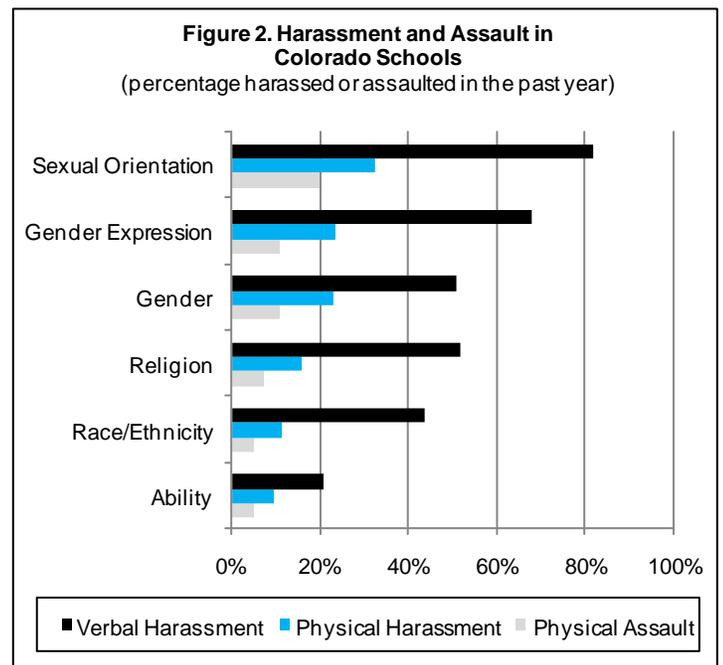
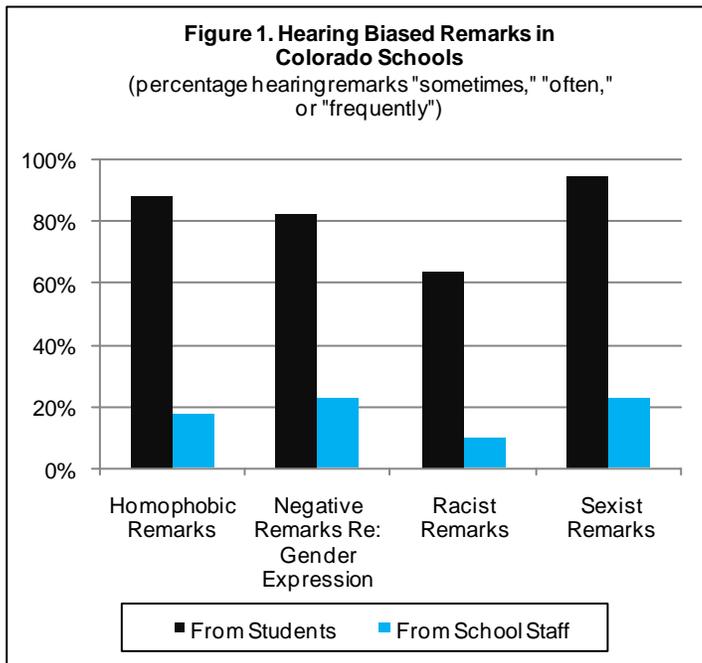
LGBT students in Colorado schools regularly heard various types of biased language in school. Homophobic and sexist remarks were the most commonly heard.

- 99% of LGBT students in Colorado regularly (sometimes, often, or frequently) heard the word “gay” used in a negative way in school, such as in the expressions “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay.”
- 88% of students regularly heard homophobic remarks, such as “dyke” or “faggot,” from other students in school (see Figure 1).
- 83% regularly heard other students in their school make negative remarks about someone’s gender expression, such as comments about someone not acting “feminine” or “masculine” enough (see Figure 1).

- LGBT students also heard biased remarks from teachers and other school staff: 23% reported regularly hearing school staff make negative remarks about someone’s gender expression, and 17% regularly heard homophobic remarks from school staff (see Figure 1).

Many LGBT students in Colorado schools experienced verbal harassment (e.g., called names or threatened), physical harassment (e.g., shoved or pushed), or physical assault (e.g., punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon), most often related to their sexual orientation or gender expression. Incidents of harassment and assault were often not reported to adult authorities.

- 82% of LGBT students were verbally harassed in the past year because of their sexual orientation. About



two-thirds (68%) were verbally harassed because of how they expressed their gender (see Figure 2).

- 32% of LGBT students were physically harassed in school in the past year because of their sexual orientation, and 23% because of how they expressed their gender (see Figure 2).
- 20% of LGBT students were physically assaulted in school in the past year because of their sexual orientation, and 11% because of their gender expression (see Figure 2).
- 57% of students who were harassed or assaulted in school *never* reported it to school staff, and 51% *never* told a family member about the incident. Among students who did report incidents to school authorities, only 33% said that reporting resulted in effective intervention by school staff.

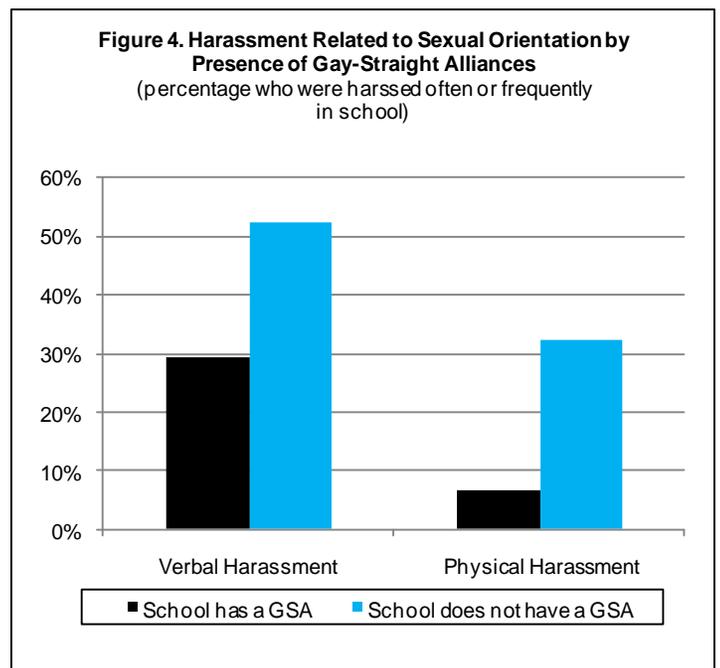
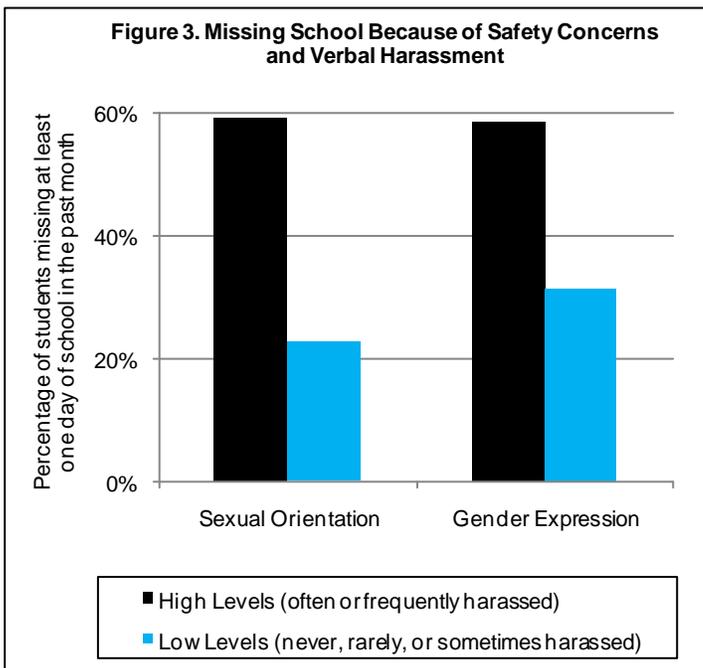
Harassment in school was related to restricted access to education and lower academic achievement for Colorado LGBT students.

- 39% of LGBT students had skipped class at least once in the past month because they felt unsafe, and 37% had missed at least one entire day of school for safety reasons.

- Students who were more frequently verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation were more than twice as likely to miss days of school because they felt unsafe than students who were less frequently harassed (59% vs. 23%) (see Figure 3).
- Students who were more frequently verbally harassed because of their gender expression were almost twice as likely to miss school because they felt unsafe (59% vs. 31% of students who were less frequently harassed) (see Figure 3).
- The grade point average (GPA) of LGBT students who were more frequently physically harassed because of their sexual orientation was significantly lower than the GPA of students who were less frequently harassed (2.3 vs. 2.8).

Many Colorado LGBT students did not have access to LGBT-related school resources that may improve school climate and lessen the negative effects of harassment and assault.

- 57% of LGBT students in Colorado reported that their school had a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) or other student club that provided support for LGBT students. Students in schools with GSAs were less likely to miss school because they felt unsafe (23% missed



a day of school due to safety reasons vs. 54% of those without a GSA). Students in schools with a GSA were also less likely to be verbally or physically harassed because of their sexual orientation than those in schools without a GSA (see Figure 4).

- Having adults in school who provide support to LGBT students can offset the negative implications of hostile school climate for these students. About 9 out of 10 (88%) LGBT students in Colorado could identify at least one teacher or other school staff person who they felt was supportive of LGBT students in their school.
- Students who had many supportive staff (6 or more) were less likely to report missing days of school because of feeling unsafe than those who did not have a lot of staff (24% vs. 48%). They also reported a higher GPA than those with few supportive staff (2.8 vs. 2.4). Unfortunately, less than half (46%) of these students said that they had many supportive adults in their school.
- 54% of Colorado LGBT students believed that their school had some type of policy for reporting incidents of in-school harassment and assault. Yet, only about 21% reported that the policy was comprehensive and specifically mentioned sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Colorado schools were not a safe place for many LGBT secondary school students. Biased language, especially homophobic and sexist language, was very common in Colorado schools. Students heard biased remarks not only from their peers but school personnel as well. LGBT students also faced harassment in school, both verbal and physical in nature, with sexual orientation and gender expression being the characteristics most commonly targeted. These experiences led many students to miss classes and entire days of school because they felt unsafe, and LGBT students experiencing high levels of harassment were particularly at risk of absenteeism due to safety concerns. Students who were frequently harassed reported lower grade point averages than other students, suggesting that a negative school climate may hinder students' ability to succeed academically. Unfortunately, incidents of harassment and assault often went unreported to school authorities and students' families.

It is clear that there is a need for action to create safe school environments for Colorado students. Colorado

schools should establish clear policies that address the use of homophobic and other biased language by school personnel, and train educators and other school staff to ensure that they appropriately respond to incidents of bias and harassment. Findings from GLSEN's National School Climate Survey show that having comprehensive safe school policies may be key to creating safe and inclusive schools – LGBT students in schools with comprehensive anti-harassment policies reported lower incidence of negative events, such as harassment, and were more likely to report incidence to school authorities than those in schools without such policies. Yet, few LGBT students in Colorado reported that they were protected by a comprehensive policy in school. Thus, it is imperative for Colorado policymakers to pass protective safe schools legislation that includes explicit protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity and that requires such safe school policies at the district level. Results here show that having GSAs can also improve school climate for students, specifically with experiences related to safety and harassment. However, only a little more than half of Colorado students reported that their school had a GSA. All Colorado schools should implement safe school policies that offer explicit protection to students who are most often the targets of bullying and harassment based on personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Colorado schools should also support student clubs that address LGBT students' issues.

About the Research

In 2007, GLSEN conducted the fifth National School Climate Survey (NSCS), a biennial survey of LGBT secondary school students. The NSCS examines the experiences of LGBT youth in U.S. middle and high schools, documenting anti-LGBT bias and behaviors that make schools unsafe for many of these youth. The national sample consisted of 6,209 LGBT students, who were from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. A total of 138 respondents were attending schools in Colorado at the time of the survey. Two-thirds of this sample was White (64%), 15% was Latino, and less than 10% was African American, Native American, or Asian/Pacific Islander. About two-thirds identified as female (62%), 31% as male, and less than 5% as transgender. Almost all (94%) attended public schools, and 89% were in urban or suburban communities. The results reported in this Research Brief have a margin of error of +/- 9%. For the national NSCS report or for any other GLSEN research, go to www.glsen.org/research.

About GLSEN

GLSEN, or the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, is a national education organization working to ensure that each member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

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