GLSEN® RESEARCH BRIEF

INSIDE MICHIGAN SCHOOLS: THE EXPERIENCES OF LGBT STUDENTS

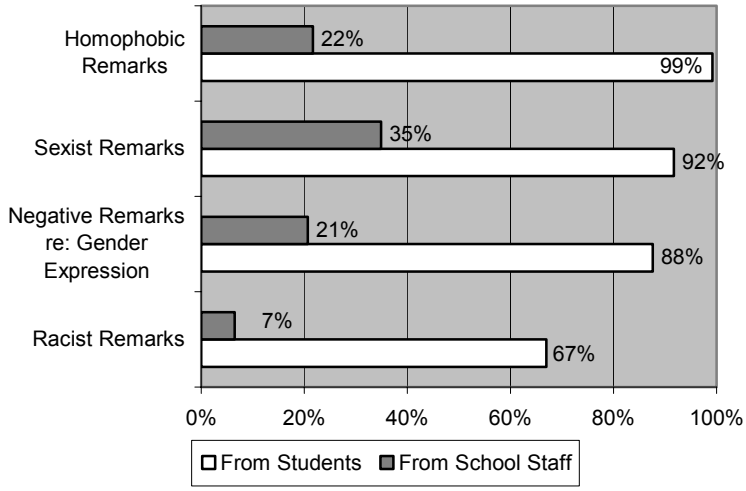
Findings from the 2005 National School Climate Survey demonstrate that Michigan schools were not safe for many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students. Significant percentages of Michigan students experienced bullying and harassment at school, often because of sexual orientation and gender expression. In addition, most LGBT youth in Michigan lacked access to important school resources, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, and were not protected by comprehensive safe schools policies.

MAJOR FINDING 1. The use of biased and derogatory language was a considerable problem in Michigan schools. Michigan students commonly heard various types of biased language in school, and homophobic and sexist remarks were most frequently heard. Furthermore, a significant percentage of Michigan students heard biased remarks from school staff.

Hearing Biased Language in School

- Almost all students (99%) reported hearing high frequencies ("often" or "frequently") of homophobic remarks at school (including remarks like "faggot" or "dyke" or the expression "that's so gay").
- Nine out of ten (88%) students heard negative remarks about gender expression, such as someone not acting "masculine enough" or "feminine enough," at school.
- Students reported that sexist language was the most frequent type of biased language used by school staff – more than a third (35%) heard teachers or other school staff make sexist remarks. About a fifth heard homophobic remarks (22%) and negative comments about someone's gender expression (21%) from school personnel.

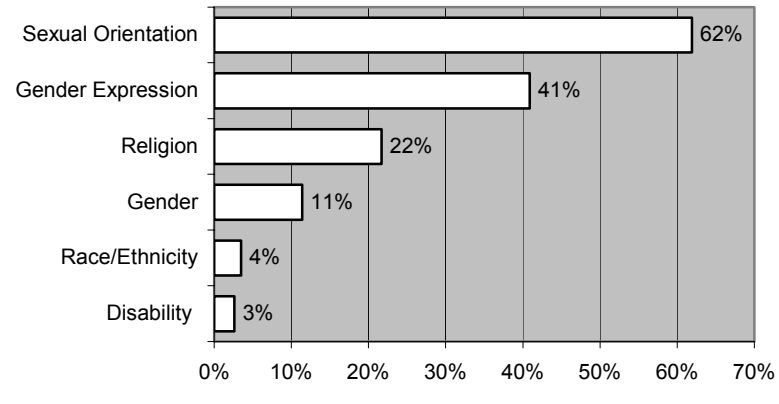
Figure 1. Biased Language in Michigan Schools
(percentage of students who heard remarks "sometimes," "often" or "frequently")



MAJOR FINDING 2. Most LGBT students in Michigan schools did not feel safe in school. Many experienced harassment, both verbal and physical in nature, most often based on their sexual orientation or gender expression. Incidents of harassment and assault were often <u>not</u> reported to adult authorities.

General Safety in School: The majority of LGBT students in Michigan felt unsafe in their schools (72%). Students were most likely to feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and because of how they expressed their gender (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Reasons for Feeling Unsafe in Michigan Schools



Experiences of Verbal Harassment: Sexual orientation and gender expression were the most common reasons that LGBT students reported being verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) at school. In the past year, two out of three LGBT students in Michigan schools had been verbally harassed at least sometimes in school because they were lesbian, gay or bisexual. In addition, almost half (48%) had been verbally harassed because of how they expressed their gender (see Figure 3).

Experiences of Physical Harassment and Assault: Many LGBT students in Michigan also experienced more severe forms of harassment in school, such as being physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) and assaulted (e.g., punched or kicked). Sexual orientation and gender expression were, again, the characteristics that were most often targeted (see Figure 4). In the past year, more than a third (35%) of LGBT students in Michigan schools had been physically harassed based on their sexual orientation, and nearly a fifth (16%) had been assaulted for this reason. Almost a quarter (23%) had been physically harassed because of how they expressed their gender, and about one in ten students had been physically assaulted at school for this reason.

Reporting Harassment and Assault: More than half (56%) of all students who experienced harassment or assault at school in the past year ***never*** reported the incident to school staff, a parent or guardian (55%), or to another family member (63%). Among students who did report incidents to school authorities, only 40% said that reporting resulted in effective intervention by school staff.

Figure 3. Verbal Harassment in Michigan Schools
(percentage of students who were verbally harassed "sometimes," "often" or "frequently")

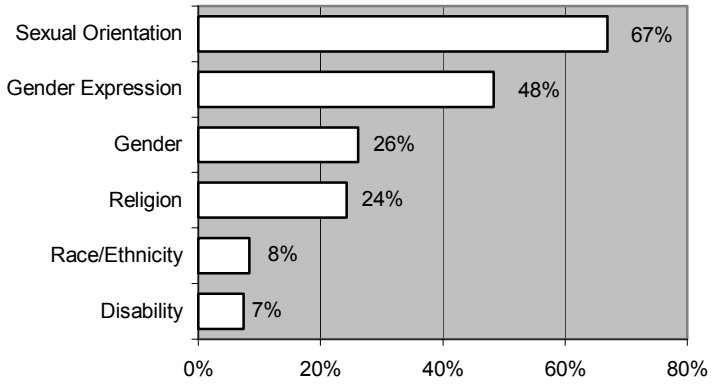
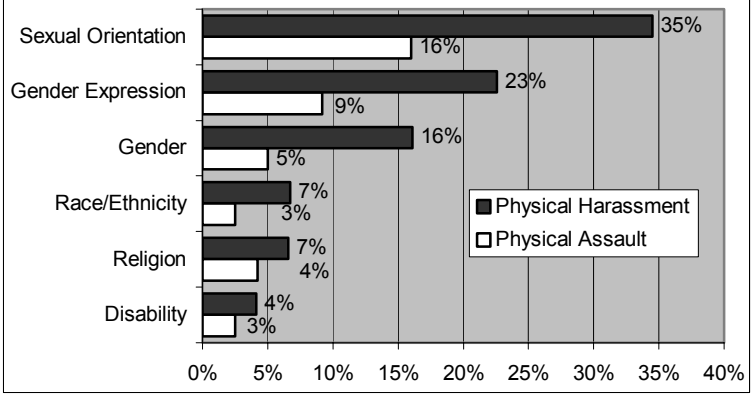


Figure 4. Physical Harassment and Assault in Michigan Schools
(percentage of students who were ever harassed or assaulted in the past year)



MAJOR FINDING 3. Negative school climate for Michigan LGBT students was related to poorer academic outcomes.

- More than a third of students had skipped at least one class (36%) or missed at least one entire day of school (39%) in the past month because they felt unsafe. These percentages were much higher than for the general population of Michigan students. A recent study of Michigan secondary school students demonstrated that less than a tenth of the general student population reported missing a class (4%) or day of school (5%) because they felt unsafe.[1]
- Michigan students were three times more likely to have skipped classes if they reported high levels of verbal harassment (sometimes, often or frequently) in school because of their sexual orientation (47% vs. 15% of students who were rarely or never harassed).
- Michigan students who experienced high levels of verbally harassed in school because of their sexual orientation reported lower grade point averages than other students (2.98 v. 3.51).

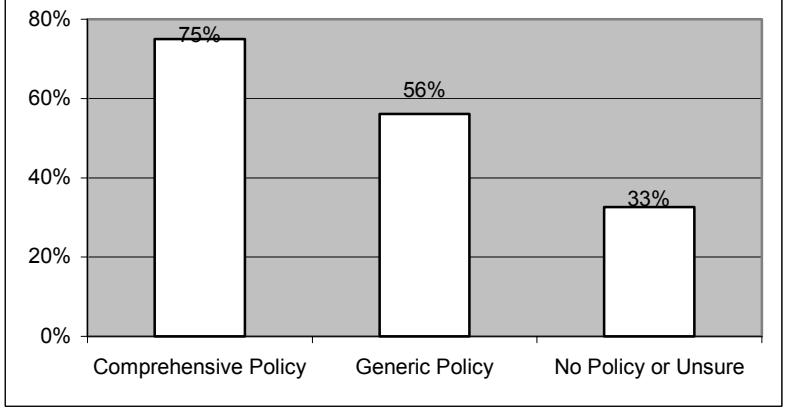
[1] GLSEN (2005). *From teasing to torment: A report on school climate in Michigan.* New York: GLSEN.

MAJOR FINDING 4. The majority of LGBT students in Michigan lacked access to LGBT-related resources and supports in their schools – supports that may mitigate the negative effects of harassment on achievement.

Safe School Policies: About two-thirds (64%) of students believed that their school had some type of safe schools policy for reporting incidents of in-school harassment and assault. However, less than a fifth (17%) of all Michigan respondents reported that their school had a comprehensive safe schools policy, one that included specific protections based on sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

Michigan students who had a comprehensive safe schools policy were much more likely to feel a part of their school: the percentage of students who reported feeling a high sense of belonging at school was significantly larger for those at schools with comprehensive safe schools policies (75%) than for those at schools with only generic policies (56%), or those who said their school had no type of policy or who were unsure (33%) (see Figure 5). Furthermore, students who expressed a high degree of school belonging had higher grade point averages (GPAs) than their peers (3.34 v. 2.97). Thus, the presence of comprehensive safe schools policy may have a positive impact on LGBT students' sense of belonging, which in turn may positively impact their ability to succeed in school.

Figure 5. Safe Schools Policies and Sense of Belonging
(percentage of students who reported feeling a high sense of belonging in school)

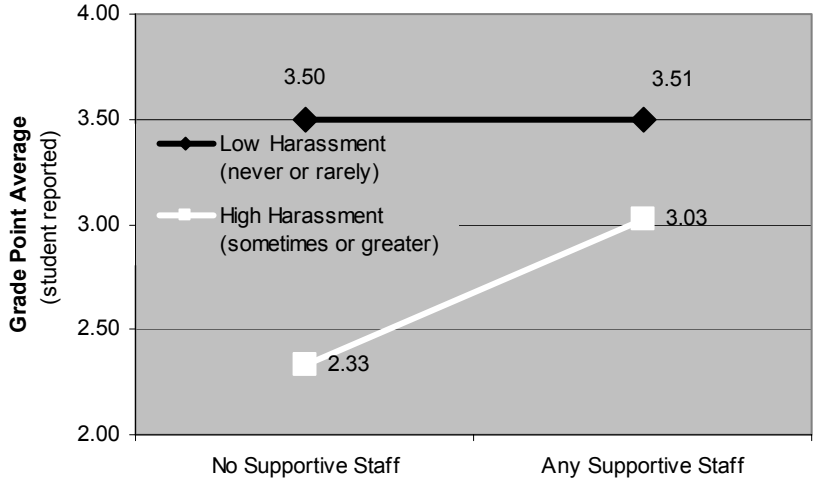


Supportive Student Clubs: Less than half (40%) of Michigan students reported that their school had a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) or another type of student club that addressed the issues of LGBT students.

Having a GSA may help LGBT students identify which teachers or other school staff they can talk to about their experiences with harassment. Students at schools with a GSA were:

- Twice as likely to report incidents of victimization to school staff than students without a GSA (35% v. 18%), and
- More than twice as likely to report that the school staff effectively resolved the problem (56% v. 22%).

Figure 6. Buffering Effects of Supportive School Personnel and the Relationship Between Harassment and Achievement



Supportive School Staff: About nine out of ten (92%) students knew of at least one teacher or other staff person who was supportive of LGBT students at their school. Having a supportive adult at school can offset the negative implications of hostile school climate for LGBT students in Michigan. As shown in Figure 6, students who reported high levels of harassment reported lower GPAs, in general, than other students. However, for those students who were frequently harassed, students who had at least one supportive teacher or staff person at school reported far higher grades than students with no supportive teachers or staff.

LGBT-Related Resources and Curricula: Only 12% of Michigan respondents were taught about LGBT people, history or events in any of their classes. Among those who were taught about LGBT-related issues, less than half (43%) said that the representations were very positive. Less than half (40%) of students said that they could find information about LGBT people, history or events in their school library. Only about half (49%) said they could access such information through their school's Internet.

Students in Michigan who were reported positive representations of LGBT issues in school curriculum reported a greater number of supportive faculty or staff: 79% of students who reported an inclusive curriculum said they had six or more teachers or staff persons in their school who were supportive of LGBT students compared to 36% of those who reported either no representation of LGBT-related material or negative representations of LGBT people. Thus, school staff's use of LGBT-inclusive curricula may indicate that they would be supportive of LGBT students.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Michigan schools were not a safe place for many LGBT youth. Biased and derogatory language, especially homophobic and sexist language, was very common in Michigan schools. Students reported hearing biased language not only from their peers but from teachers and other school staff as well. Two-thirds of students reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and almost half because of how they expressed their gender, leading many to miss classes or entire days of school due to concerns for their own safety. Michigan students had experiences of verbal harassment and physical harassment and assault, with sexual orientation and gender expression being the characteristics most commonly targeted for harassment. Furthermore, LGBT students who experienced frequent harassment 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.

In general, LGBT youth in Michigan schools lacked access to school resources that were related to a more positive school climate. Less than a fifth of students said that their school had a comprehensive safe schools policy and less than half said there was a Gay-Straight Alliance or other student club that addressed LGBT students' issues. In addition, most students did not have access to LGBT-related resources in their schools' libraries and few students said that positive representations of LGBT people, history and events were included in their textbooks or classroom curricula. Findings presented in this report suggest that having school staff who are supportive of LGBT students may mitigate some of the negative consequences of a hostile school climate, such as low academic achievement, particularly for students who experience high levels of victimization. In addition, student clubs may play an important role in helping students to identify staff who they can turn to for support if they are victimized at school.

In Michigan schools comprehensive safe schools policies may be key to creating safe and inclusive school environments in which students are able to succeed academically. Thus, it is imperative that Michigan lawmakers and school administrators take steps to improve the climate of their schools. All Michigan schools should have safe schools 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. Michigan schools should establish clear and comprehensive policies with regard to biased language use by teachers and other school personnel.

Findings from this report suggest that Gay-Staight Alliances, supportive school staff and LGBT-inclusive resources may help to create a more positive school environment. As such, Michigan schools should support student clubs that address LGBT students' issues, provide trainings for educators and ensure that there are resources in their schools that provide positive representations of LGBT-related topics.

About the Research

In 2005, GLSEN conducted the fourth 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, in particular documenting anti-LGBT bias and behaviors that make schools unsafe for many of these youth. The national sample consisted of 1,732 LGBT students, who were from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. A total of 121 respondents were attending schools in Michigan at the time of the survey. Three-quarters of the sample were white (73%) and about a tenth were African American (12%). A little more than half were female (55%), more than a third were male and less than 10% identified as transgender. Almost all (93%) attended public schools, and the vast majority were in urban or suburban areas (78%) and were in high school (86%), primarily grades 11 and 12. For the national NSCS report or for any other GLSEN research, go to www.glsen.org/research.