California safe schools coalition

UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL SAFETY FOR TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

Research shows that transgender students often face unsafe school environments to a greater extent even than their lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) peers. The fifth National School Climate Survey, supported by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), found that nearly all transgender students experienced verbal harassment at school because of their sexual orientation and gender expression, more than half experienced physical harassment because of their sexual orientation and gender expression, and more than a quarter experienced physical assault because of their sexual orientation and gender expression. These levels of victimization were higher than those faced by the non-transgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual students who participated in the survey (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009). Only 24% of transgender students said they were aware of their school's anti-harassment policy and that it included specific protections based on sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009). In this research brief we report on prior studies and present new data about school safety for transgender students.

> **Transgender:** Transgender is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth or the stereotypes associated with that sex. The term may include transsexuals and others who do not conform to gender stereotypes (Transgender Law Center, 2009).
>
> **Gender non-conforming/Gender variant:** Refers to individuals whose behaviors and/or interests fall outside what is considered normal for their assigned birth gender (The Transgender Child, 2008).

Documenting the Problem

Previous research shows that harassment of students based on gender non-conformity is pervasive. The California Safe Schools Coalition Research Brief 12 showed that students who identify as transgender reported the most harassment at school – including repeated harassment (see Figure 1 from that report). Further, that report showed that many students – especially transgender students – reported that they "sometimes" or "often" hear students make negative comments based on gender non-conformity. And transgender students were more likely to say that they had heard teachers or staff make negative comments as well. In fact, a transgender student was more likely to have heard a teacher or staff member make a negative comment than to have heard a teacher stop another student from making negative comments.

The Assessment of Resources and Needs for Transgender Adolescents Study (McGuire, Russell, & Anderson, 2007) included focus group interviews with transgender adolescents who participated in programs for transgender youth through community-based organizations in several Western states. Among these youth, reports of physical violence were common: transgender and gender non-conforming youth were described as being "pushed around," "getting the crap beat out of them," and "getting their asses kicked" by other students. Verbal harassment, teasing, and peer rejection were also common.

Steps schools can take to improve climates for transgender youth

Prior research has shown that there are concrete steps that schools can take to promote safety for LGBT students (for example, see California Safe Schools Research Brief 3). In the findings on the following pages, we examined these school strategies, focusing specifically on transgender youth from the Preventing School Harassment study.

Step 1: Establish and publicize a school policy that specifically prohibits harassment on the basis of actual and perceived gender, including gender identity, appearance, and behavior.

Figure 1 shows that transgender students report high rates of being bullied – regardless of whether or not they attended a school with an inclusive policy that included gender identity and expression. However, transgender students who attended schools that had inclusive anti-harassment policies reported that the school environment was safer for gender non-conforming boys: transgender students were nearly twice as likely to say that school was safe for "guys who are not as masculine as other guys" in schools that had inclusive policies (61%) compared to those in schools without inclusive policies (only 36% said that school was safe).

It is important to note that all schools in California are required to have inclusive anti-harassment policies. Thus, even though schools may be required to have policies, not all do. Moreover, while school districts are required to prohibit discrimination based on gender, their policies may not always clarify that under California law, gender includes "gender identity and gender-related appearance and behavior." Thus, a transgender student may not realize that they are protected from discrimination and harassment under their district's policy. The important finding is that if a student knows about or believes that there is a policy, she or he is more likely to feel safe.
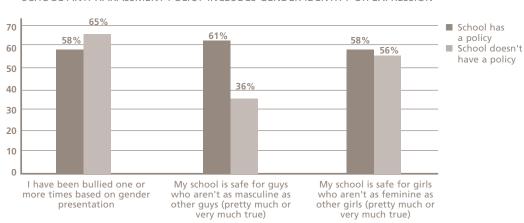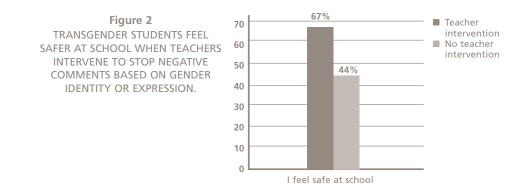
Figure 1
SCHOOL ANTI-HARASSMENT POLICY INCLUDES GENDER IDENTITY OR EXPRESSION

Step 2: Train teachers and staff to intervene when they hear slurs or negative comments based on gender non-conformity.

Transgender students reported feeling safer when teachers would intervene to stop negative comments based on gender identity or expression. Figure 2 shows that when transgender students said that teachers intervened, 67% said they felt safe, compared to 44% who felt safe when teachers did not intervene.

Figure 2
TRANSGENDER STUDENTS FEEL SAFER AT SCHOOL WHEN TEACHERS INTERVENE TO STOP NEGATIVE COMMENTS BASED ON GENDER IDENTITY OR EXPRESSION.

Step 3: Ensure that students know where to go for information and support about gender identity and expression.

For transgender students, having information and support about LGBT issues appears to be one of the most important school safety steps. When transgender students knew where to get information and support about sexual orientation and gender identity, they reported more school safety and less bullying than students who did not have access to the same resources. Figure 3 shows that nearly 9 out of 10 (86%) of the transgender students who did not know where to go for information and support also said that they were bullied one or

more times; by comparison, only half (52%) who had information and support reported being bullied one or more times. Over half of transgender students who knew where to get information agreed that their school was safe for gender non-conforming students, and that they themselves felt safe, compared with about one third of students who did not know where to get information.
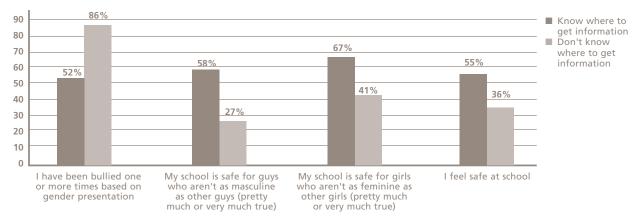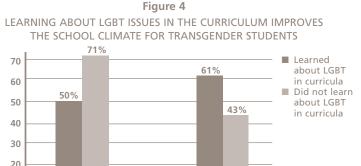
Figure 3
HAVING INFORMATION AND SUPPORT ABOUT LGBT ISSUES IMPROVES THE SCHOOL CLIMATE FOR TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

Step 4: Introduce curriculum that includes LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity.

The survey included a question about whether students had learned about LGBT people, history, or had received information about sexual orientation and gender identity in class at school. Figure 4 shows that transgender students who learned about LGBT issues in the curriculum reported feeling safer than transgender students who did not learn about LGBT issues in the curriculum. Transgender students who had learned about LGBT issues at school were less likely to report having been bullied than those who had not learned about LGBT issues.

Figure 4
LEARNING ABOUT LGBT ISSUES IN THE CURRICULUM IMPROVES THE SCHOOL CLIMATE FOR TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

Step 5: Support the establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance or similar student club.

Most of the transgender students who were surveyed reported belonging to a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club, therefore the experiences of transgender students without GSA clubs cannot be documented. However, the role of GSAs in promoting school safety has been documented elsewhere. Participants in the *Assessment of Resources and Needs for Transgender Adolescents Study* reported that the presence of GSAs at schools improved school climates. Some participants who went to schools that did not have GSAs actively wished that there had been a GSA when they were in school.

School safety strategies and supportive adults: Connections to adults at school are particularly important for transgender students.

For transgender students, connection to an adult can make the difference between feeling safe and unsafe at school. In additional analyses of the PSH survey data, we found that transgender students who reported more of the school safety strategies outlined above (ranging from none to all five) reported stronger connections to adults at school. In turn, feeling connected to an adult at school was strongly linked with feeling safe. Thus, for transgender students, the steps to create a safer school are strongly tied to quality relationships with adults at school, and it is these supportive relationships that make a difference for school safety.

The focus group participants eloquently explained the value of connections to adults in describing the actions of principals, teachers, and nurses who offered refuge and safe spaces in the form of access to single-stall bathrooms, privacy about students' legal names, accommodations for gym locker rooms, and advising on other academic matters. These sorts of supports are especially important for transgender youth who face considerable safety concerns if forced into vulnerable situations.

Recommendations for teachers and administrators

- Work with your school district to adopt the model policy regarding transgender and gender non-conforming youth published by the California Safe Schools Coalition on its website.

- Request training on preventing harassment and discrimination, including bias-motivated harassment due to gender identity and gender non-conformity. Ask to help publicize school policies on prohibiting harassment based on gender identity and gender-related appearance and behavior.

- Identify and recognize the unique needs of transgender youth. Make special efforts with the transgender and gender non-conforming youth at your school to ensure that their unique safety needs are met.

- Intervene if you hear biased comments and slurs related to gender non-conformity. Use each comment as an opportunity to provide education and reaffirm school policy.

- Learn about and provide resources about gender identity and expression that are specific to transgender youth needs and experiences.

- Set the climate in classrooms early and as often as necessary; let students know that bias-related harassment and slurs towards transgender and gender non-conforming students are not acceptable.

- Treat all forms of bias-related harassment and slurs as serious and preventable.

Recommendations for students

- Speak out when you hear slurs or negative comments related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and gender non-conformity.

- Find out if your school harassment policy covers harassment based on gender (including gender identity and gender-related appearance, and behavior or "gender identity and expression") and advocate for changing the policy if it doesn't.

- Find out how to make a complaint when bias-motivated harassment towards a transgender or gender non-conforming individual occurs. You can make a complaint about harassment even if you aren't the target of it.

- Speak out in support of actions school districts and schools can take:

  - publicizing and enforcing anti-harassment policies,
  - providing resources, information, and support to students,
  - training teachers and other staff about bullying based on gender identity and gender non-conformity and how to intervene in harassment,
  - measuring and monitoring bias-related harassment in their local school district, and
  - including LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity in the curriculum.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Data are from the 2003, 2004 and 2005 Preventing School Harassment (PSH) survey, and focus groups with transgender youth in Western states. The PSH survey was designed to study the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning high school students and their straight allies, and the steps schools can take to make schools safer. The PSH survey was developed by the California Safe Schools Coalition, and administered by the Gay-Straight Alliance Network. Data from over 2,400 students were collected in schools and on the internet. Students were asked about their experiences of safety at school and about the steps schools can take to make schools safer. A total of 68 students who participated in the survey identified as transgender.

The *Assessment of Resources and Needs for Transgender Adolescents Study* (McGuire, Russell, & Anderson, 2009) included focus group interviews with transgender adolescents who participated in programs for transgender youth through community-based organizations in several Western states. The study included 36 youth, ages 12-23, at 4 community organizations.

References:

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