

# Towards a More Inclusive Future: Creating Equitable School Environments to Improve Health for K–12 LGBTQ+ Students



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# Acknowledgments

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Authored by: Thomas Dang, consultant to the APHA Center for Public Health Policy

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**Network for Public  
Health Law**  
April Shaw

**District of Columbia  
Public Schools**  
Wesley Thomas

**School District of  
Palm Beach County**  
Pete Stewart

**Education Law Center**  
Paul Socolar

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# Introduction

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**LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND QUEER OR QUESTIONING (LGBTQ+)** individuals have long faced deep-seated discrimination in society. From grassroots university protests and the historic Stonewall riots of the 1960s to the gradual legal recognition of same-sex relationships, the modern-day movement for LGBTQ+ rights has, over time, allowed for greater acceptance and celebration of these identities in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

## Accelerating anti-LGBTQ+ hostilities endanger students

Alongside increased social tolerance and acceptance, the number of LGBTQ+ students in America has steadily risen. About 26% of U.S. high school students identified as LGBTQ+ in April 2023, compared with only 11% in April 2015.<sup>2</sup> But this greater visibility of queer identities has also sparked strong opposition that has mounted over the past several years, with many states and localities enacting laws endangering and diminishing the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. In 2023, more than 500 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced—more than in any preceding year—with 84 of these bills signed into law in 23 states.<sup>3</sup> These malevolent legal attacks threaten public health and attempt to marginalize queer individuals from myriad angles, including outlawing gender-affirming care for youth, censoring school curricula and restricting free speech or artistic expression.<sup>4,5</sup>

These attacks are especially harmful to queer or questioning K–12 students, who more frequently lack safe and inclusive school environments than their cisgender or heterosexual peers. In 2021, nearly 60% of LGBTQ+ students did not feel safe at school as a result of their sexual orientation, and nearly 45% did not feel safe because of their gender expression.<sup>6,7</sup> Only 21 states, along with Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, have anti-bullying laws that specifically protect students of diverse sexual orientations or gender identities, and these laws are often inadequately or unevenly enforced.<sup>8</sup> As of May 2024, 39% of transgender youth lived in states banning gender-affirming care, and nearly 120,000 trans youth nationwide have lost access or are at risk of losing access to gender-affirming care.<sup>9</sup>

## Unsupportive, threatening learning environments jeopardize the success of LGBTQ+ youth

Lack of access to safe, affirming and inclusive school environments results in queer students being less likely to attend school regularly, graduate high school on time (or at all) and fully engage with their coursework. About 40% of LGBTQ+ students have experienced detention, in- or out-of-school suspension or expulsion—disciplinary decisions that can be motivated by anti-LGBTQ+ implicit biases among school staff.<sup>10</sup> In comparison with their cisgender counterparts, trans students are more likely to anticipate not graduating from high school, with the most frequently cited reason being a hostile, unsupportive school climate.<sup>11</sup> LGBTQ+ students who experience elevated harassment or victimization at school tend to have lower grade point averages than their less-victimized peers, while those who feel a greater sense of belonging at school are more likely to earn higher grades.<sup>12,13</sup>

These disparities in attendance and educational achievement that queer youth face can impact their future success. The most direct determinant of long-term health across the life span is educational attainment, and on-time graduation from high school is closely linked to a student's future career options and financial stability.<sup>14</sup> High school completion reduces the risk of poor health and chronic, preventable conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and stroke.<sup>15</sup> And because lower academic attainment can limit health care literacy or earnings potential, adults who do not complete high school are more likely to be uninsured or underinsured and have inconsistent access to preventive health care.<sup>16</sup>

## **LGBTQ+ students exhibit poorer physical and mental health outcomes**

Heightened exposure to microaggressions, bullying, harassment and violence in and outside of school endangers the physical and mental health of LGBTQ+ youth. Queer students report higher frequencies of physical and verbal victimization at school, further jeopardizing their mental health.<sup>17</sup> The Trevor Project's 2023 national mental health survey indicates that 46% of LGBTQ+ youth 13 to 17 years of age seriously considered attempting suicide and 17% attempted suicide at least once that year.<sup>18</sup> In addition, 70% of LGBTQ+ youth younger than 18 years reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety, and more than half showed signs of depression, with trans and nonbinary youth at an even higher risk.<sup>19</sup>

These mental health challenges can diminish students' ability to fully engage at school. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that more than 60% of LGBTQ+ students felt so sad or helpless at school that they stopped participating in their usual activities, as compared with only 26.4% of straight and cisgender students.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, anti-queer political hostilities impose a constant damaging backdrop, with about two thirds of LGBTQ+ students surveyed in 2023 reporting that hearing about already-enacted or potential anti-LGBTQ+ legislation worsened their mental health.<sup>21</sup>

## **An inclusive, equitable school environment is a protective factor for LGBTQ+ health**

Given that only 38% of LGBTQ+ young people find their homes to be affirming spaces, schools can be central drivers of positive, inclusive change for queer students.<sup>22</sup> Schools with LGBTQ-affirming learning environments report fewer student absences and larger improvements in academic achievement across multiple grade levels.<sup>23</sup> Queer students in LGBTQ-supportive schools attempt suicide at lower rates than their peers attending non-affirming schools.<sup>24</sup>

In the absence of effective policies and programs protecting queer students, school environments exacerbate unjust, disparate outcomes for this population. Many LGBTQ+ students may still be discovering and exploring their identities, but school curricula often exclude queer characters and experiences, solidifying the school environment as unrelatable and unwelcoming.<sup>25</sup> In addition, teachers, administrators and support staff can inadvertently worsen the school climate. In a 2020 survey, 52.4% of LGBTQ+ student respondents reported hearing homophobic remarks from school personnel, and 66.7% heard school staff make negative comments about gender expression or identity.<sup>26</sup>

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# **CREATING EQUITABLE, SAFE AND POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR LGBTQ+ STUDENTS MUST BE A PUBLIC HEALTH PRIORITY.**

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## **Structure of this report**

School districts must design, implement, monitor and improve policies, programs and power structures that support LGBTQ+ students. This report outlines three key priorities for advancing equity. Districts should build the capacity of school leaders and staff to affirm and protect LGBTQ+ student identities, expand LGBTQ-inclusive curricula to include authentic representations of the queer experience and codify protections for LGBTQ+ identities while prioritizing student privacy. Since school districts and communities across the country operate in different local environments and political contexts, we provide practical implementation spotlights for each key priority, informed by desk research and conversations with school district leaders nationwide.

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**We hope that this report equips education and public health leaders with the information, models and aspirations needed to implement equity-centered changes at the school district level to guide more students of color toward positive outcomes.**

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WHEN SCHOOL STAFF HAVE ACCESS TO LGBTQ-AFFIRMING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, THEIR QUEER STUDENTS REPORT FEWER INSTANCES OF BULLYING, FEEL SAFER AT SCHOOL, REPORT LESS ABSENTEEISM AND EXPERIENCE LESS IDENTITY-BASED VICTIMIZATION.



## Promising Practice 1:

Build the capacity of educators, administrators and school health personnel to better understand and affirm the identities of LGBTQ+ students—and respond to their unique challenges.

**EDUCATORS AND ADMINISTRATORS PLAY AN ESSENTIAL ROLE** in advocating for and upholding policies that affirm LGBTQ+ youth. Both cisgender and transgender students who recognize actions to reduce gender-based harassment at school report feeling safer and more connected to staff.<sup>27</sup> LGBTQ+ youth who have at least one adult in their life who accepts their identity are 40% less likely to attempt suicide than those without such support.<sup>28</sup>

However, school staff may not always respond positively to their students' LGBTQ+ identities. Queer youth note that educators intervene less frequently when homophobic remarks occur in class than when racist or sexist comments are made.<sup>29</sup> Effective allyship requires both knowledge and intentionality, but many educators have not received the necessary training (or do not feel they have the proper administrative backing) to do this. A 2021 survey revealed that only 26% of teachers felt equipped to support their queer students, with the remaining 74% who did not participate in supportive actions citing lack of administrative support, fear of pushback from parents and limited knowledge about LGBTQ+ issues.<sup>30</sup>

School districts must ensure that teachers, administrators and auxiliary personnel receive the necessary training and support to properly respond to and affirm LGBTQ+ students. When school staff have access to LGBTQ-affirming professional development, their queer students report fewer instances of bullying, feel safer at school, report less absenteeism and experience less identity-based victimization.<sup>31,32</sup> These students also feel a greater sense of belonging in their school communities and exhibit higher grade point averages. This section highlights examples of school districts effectively building staff capacity to more effectively respond to the unique identities and challenges of LGBTQ+ students.

# IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT 1:

## School District of Palm Beach County (FL) Equips Staff with LGBTQ+ Critical Support Guide

### LGBTQ+ critical support guide provides detailed guidance

According to the results of the 2021 administration of the CDC’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey in the School District of Palm Beach County—the fifth-largest district in Florida—more than 25% of Palm Beach students identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.<sup>33,34</sup> To better support this large and growing population, district and school personnel frequently reference the district’s LGBTQ+ critical support guide. Introduced in 2017 and most recently updated in August 2023, this resource is a navigable, user-friendly, all-in-one place where staff, administrators and students can find information on LGBTQ-related topics. The guide includes specific practices and policies recognizing and affirming the gender identities or sexual orientations of queer students and provides guidance to staff and administrators in navigating Florida’s ever-changing political environment.

The district recognizes that the use of homophobic or transphobic language by anyone in schools—unintentionally or otherwise—exerts repercussions on LGBTQ+ students’ academic performance and mental well-being. To equip Palm Beach’s school staff to appropriately respond to anti-LGBTQ+ language and behaviors in the classroom, the district’s support guide advises staff to immediately stop offensive language and educate students on more inclusive behaviors. For example, the guide acknowledges the threat that student-to-student comments such as “That’s so gay!” and “No homo!” pose to queer students, even when these insults are directed to heterosexual or cisgender peers, and suggests that educators deliver direct responses such as “It’s not OK to say ‘That’s so gay’” or “We don’t use gay as a put-down in this class.” The guide also contains examples of challenging scenarios staff may face—such as a student making a homophobic or transphobic remark in passing during a casual conversation—and provides actionable steps for employees to address such remarks while maintaining a positive rapport with the offending student.

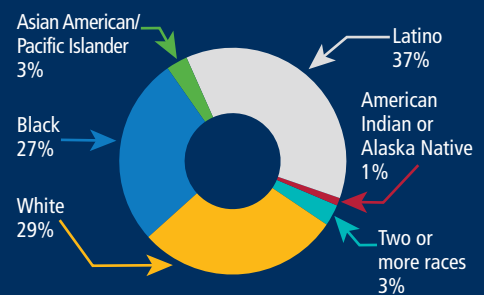


### QUICK FACTS

#### School District of Palm Beach County

Students	188,843
Teachers	11,178
Student to Teacher Ratio	17:1
Type	Large suburb
No. of Schools	234
Graduation Rate	91%

#### Race/Ethnicity of Students



Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022–2023 school year) and Public School Review

### Continuing Efforts in Palm Beach

Palm Beach’s work equipping staff with strategies to create safer environments for LGBTQ+ students is not new. In 2014 this school district, utilizing CDC grant funding, collaborated with two nearby districts (Miami-Dade and Broward) to develop an annual conference, “All Together Now,” uniting administrators and decision makers from Florida’s schools. Through several iterations of this conference, the districts have provided training and resources to smaller districts and helped those without the necessary resources or infrastructure to receive federal grant dollars regarding best practices for LGBTQ+ inclusion. Today, this conference continues in an evolved format, now organized by the Equality Florida organization.



## Training and education help staff navigate evolving current events

The district's lead health education specialist trains teachers, administrators and school counselors on the content within the LGBTQ+ critical support guide. Focused sessions that address specific scenarios, such as how staff members can affirm students who privately signal an LGBTQ+ identity or how to respond to questions about gender-aligned facility use, are also available. Although Florida state law prohibits any mandatory LGBTQ+ inclusion or equity training, Palm Beach's districtwide capacity-building efforts have proven useful in the state's changing legal and political landscape. For instance, the state's 2022 Parental Rights in Education law—more commonly known as the “Don't Say Gay” law—prohibits public schools in Florida from delivering classroom instruction about, or even discussing, gender identity or sexual orientation (and makes public schools responsible for all costs of related lawsuits filed by parents). One Palm Beach leader mentioned that after this law's passage, staff and administrators were uncertain about whether they were legally allowed to address students by their chosen pronouns. In response, district leaders referenced the critical support guide, reiterating that proper pronoun use is not only permissible but remains a best practice for creating inclusive environments.

Palm Beach also equips staff with professional development opportunities related to LGBTQ+ students' mental health challenges, many of which were intensified and underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>35</sup> In early 2024, the district's health educators released new staff video training, developed with the county health department and a local LGBTQ+ resource center, explaining the unique mental health needs of queer students and outlining specific strategies to support these youth. More than 800 staff members have since viewed this training.

### Emerging state-level data collection limitations can obscure LGBTQ+ students' needs

Insufficient and incomplete data on LGBTQ+ youth is already a significant issue, with many key state and national surveys failing to disaggregate findings by sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.<sup>36</sup> State-level actions further cloud our ability to generate a complete picture of queer students' needs and experiences. In April 2022, the Florida Department of Education withdrew from future participation in the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, citing “grave concerns” about the survey's “inflammatory and sexualized” content. Instead, Florida began developing its own youth survey aligned with approved state standards.<sup>37</sup> For the state's six school districts—including the School District of Palm Beach County—receiving CDC grant money for preventive health services, the inability to administer this survey jeopardizes future funding and renders any future grant applications uncompetitive in the national pool.

At the district level, the removal of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey means that Palm Beach administrators have lost a critical tool to inform policy and program development. Years later, district leaders still reference 2021 survey data to guide interventions, unable to accurately capture the evolving needs and demographics of their LGBTQ+ students. Public health professionals must continue advocating for stronger local, state and national standards for precise, LGBTQ-inclusive data collection and monitoring practices.



## IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT 2:

# District of Columbia Public Schools (D.C.) Establishes School-Level LGBTQ+ Liaisons

### LGBTQ+ liaisons are dependable, school-level points of contact

In 2015, D.C. Public Schools passed its first [transgender and nonconforming policy guidance](#), becoming one of the first districts nationwide to codify rights for this student population. Since then, the district has built the capacity of its administrators and staff, ensuring that each school has a core team of adults charged with understanding the needs of LGBTQ+ students and families and establishing an inclusive school culture. D.C. Public Schools places an LGBTQ+ liaison in each of its schools to serve as a point of contact for the immediate community, answering questions from colleagues about how to best support students in specific scenarios, such as when students privately share a concern about their gender identity or sexual orientation. Liaisons typically nominate themselves for the role based on interest and affinity, and previous liaisons have included teachers, social workers, librarians and administrators. By the 2019–2020 academic year, D.C. Public Schools had an LGBTQ+ liaison at all middle and high schools and 50% of its elementary schools.<sup>38</sup>

The district has also formed an LGBTQ+ policy steering committee composed of teachers, administrators and representatives from D.C. community-based organizations. This majority-queer committee provides continual feedback on district LGBTQ+ inclusion efforts, including the liaison program.

### District training programs build and refine staff capacity

D.C. Public Schools offers school site-specific training to staff and teachers, helping them address classroom issues such as hateful, anti-LGBTQ+ language and bullying. Each fall, the district conducts an orientation and training for all LGBTQ+ liaisons. Longer-serving liaisons share their experiences to support new arrivals, creating an intradistrict knowledge network. The district also invites community-based LGBTQ+ support entities, including local health centers, to these meetings to ensure that liaisons can connect queer students to relevant resources and care. And to educate staff members who are not official LGBTQ+ liaisons, D.C. Public Schools allows school administrators to request staffwide training on inclusive language and how all educators can best ally with, and advocate for, queer students.

In September 2023, D.C. Public Schools hosted “LGBTQ+ Back-to-Basics...and Beyond,” a multisession bootcamp for educators and administrators. Through five live and recorded [sessions](#), district leaders highlighted how inclusive curricula and effective data collection and analysis can support queer students. In a session focused on gender identity, the district trainer provided grade level-specific talking points for educators discussing gender with students. Second- to fourth-grade educators were encouraged to explain that gender is complex and not just about the body, while secondary educators can normalize inviting students to share pronouns at the beginning of the school year.

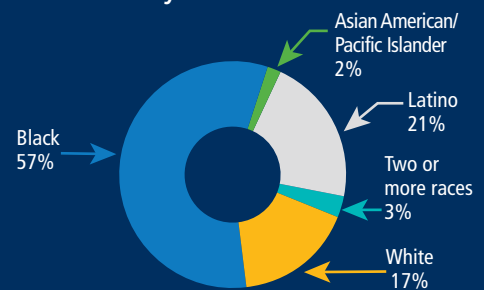


### QUICK FACTS

#### District of Columbia Public Schools

Students	49,687
Teachers	4,389
Student to Teacher Ratio	11:1
Type	Large city
No. of Schools	116
Graduation Rate	72%

#### Race/Ethnicity of Students



Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022–2023 school year) and Public School Review

## Leading with Pride: Empowering Students to Act and Advocate

In addition to its efforts to build the capacity of teachers and administrators, D.C. Public Schools empowers queer students by facilitating an annual youth summit called Leading with Pride. This conference convenes secondary students from all district schools along with students from neighboring school districts and charter schools. Throughout the half-day program, student leaders attend and facilitate workshops focused on supporting their LGBTQ+ peers and creating inclusive environments within student-led clubs. Students also have downtime to meet other student leaders, build connections with those from other schools and share strategies and best practices.

## Key Issue Highlight: Prioritizing the Capacity of School Health Professionals to Understand and Advocate for LGBTQ+ Students' Health Concerns

### School health professionals are uniquely positioned to support LGBTQ+ students

In addition to teachers and administrators, school health professionals—including social workers, school nurses and school-based health center personnel—occupy special positions to address the physical and mental health needs of queer students. In a 2021 study, more than half of LGBTQ+ students stated that they would feel most comfortable discussing LGBTQ+ issues with school-based mental health professionals.<sup>39</sup> Queer youth seek certain school nurse services, including counseling and accurate information about sexual orientation and gender identity, more frequently than their heterosexual, cisgender peers.<sup>40</sup> And although LGBTQ+ youth face also heightened risks of anxiety and depression, 56% of LGBTQ+ young people who wanted mental health care in 2023 were unable to obtain it.<sup>41</sup>

### Insufficient LGBTQ-specific training can hinder school health professionals

School health workers must understand and support the lived experiences and needs of LGBTQ+ students, but these professionals generally receive little formal training on how to do this.<sup>42</sup> A study of U.S. school-based health centers showed that more than half conducted no staff training on providing care for LGBTQ+ youth.<sup>43</sup> In addition, a March 2023 survey of nearly 3,500 health professionals working in K–12 schools revealed that more than 40% have never received any professional development focused on serving LGBTQ+ students.<sup>44</sup> And the lack of formal clinical educational requirements regarding LGBTQ-specific health training, especially for pediatric providers, further exacerbates this gap in LGBTQ+ competency.<sup>45</sup>

School districts and the entities operating school-based health centers—including community health centers, health departments and for-profit organizations—should foster school health professionals' capacity to effectively address the health needs of queer students. Training should include information on the health disparities these students experience; information on local, regional and federal policies affecting LGBTQ+ students' health and rights; and evidence-based strategies and community resources to support and affirm these students.


### Recommendations for school health professionals

Several major national organizations representing school health personnel have issued guidance on serving LGBTQ+ students. While these policies typically broadly address this population's health, they also promulgate specific strategies with which school health professionals can best serve queer youth:

- The [National Association of School Nurses](#) guides nurses to provide LGBTQ+ students with mental health support and, barring the existence of an explicit law, not disclose a student's sexual orientation or gender identity to others, including unsupportive parents.
- The [National Association of School Psychologists](#) states that school psychologists should validate and affirm their LGBTQ+ students' identities by providing affirmative counseling and creating safety plans for those grappling with gender dysphoria.
- The [School Social Work Association of America](#) recommends that school social workers connect students with LGBTQ-affirming community-based organizations and educate school staff on why queer-inclusive curricula and proper pronoun usage are critical.
- The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) urges pediatricians to create welcoming clinic environments by hiring and training LGBTQ-affirming office staff and ensuring that paperwork is inclusive with respect to gender and sexual orientation. The organization also advocates for physician education containing specific strategies to best care for gender-nonconforming patients.

### Additional Resources: Building School Staff Capacity

- GLSEN's 2022 [report](#) offers examples of LGBTQ-inclusive practices for educators.
- In 2023, the State Education Department of the University of the State of New York [published](#) a legal update containing detailed scenarios and best practices helping school district leaders develop and implement LGBTQ-inclusive policies.
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the Health Resources and Services Administration have compiled a [list](#) of professional training curricula to improve the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ students.
- The U.S. Department of Education has published a [resource](#) to help school districts provide professional development for educators on using welcoming, inclusive language and facilitating supportive spaces for LGBTQ+ students.



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AN INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM BENEFITS ALL STUDENTS BY BROADLY PROMOTING DIVERSITY, EMPATHY AND MUTUAL RESPECT. LGBTQ+ STUDENTS WHO ATTEND SCHOOLS WITH INCLUSIVE CURRICULA DISPLAY BETTER ACADEMIC AND MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES, EXPERIENCE FEWER HOSTILITIES AND FEEL MORE CONNECTED TO THEIR SCHOOL COMMUNITY.<sup>46</sup>



## Promising Practice 2:

Implement and improve LGBTQ-inclusive curricula by elevating educational materials that authentically reflect the queer experience and championing comprehensive, medically accurate sex education.

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### LGBTQ-inclusive curricula affirm marginalized student identities

Schools and school districts must ensure that classroom instruction acknowledges and celebrates the unique identities and experiences of their LGBTQ+ students. All students should have access to inclusive instruction—in classrooms, sessions with guidance counselors and library resources—that discusses, respects and elevates their lived experiences, including LGBTQ+ identities. An inclusive curriculum benefits all students by broadly promoting diversity, empathy and mutual respect. LGBTQ+ students who attend schools with inclusive curricula display better academic and mental health outcomes, experience fewer hostilities and feel more connected to their school community.<sup>46</sup>

### State and local policies can limit LGBTQ-inclusive curricula

The diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions is inconsistently and inadequately represented in school curricula nationwide. Fewer than 14% of queer high school students report having encountered LGBTQ+ history in their lessons, units or textbook chapters.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, at least 11 states have enacted “don’t say gay” laws that attempt to censor in-school discussions and instruction about gender or sexual orientation with younger students, with at least two states (Kentucky and Florida) extending these bans through 12th grade.<sup>48</sup>

School districts must design, adopt and improve lesson plans across all grade levels to positively and accurately represent the diversity of the queer community. LGBTQ-inclusive curricula should avoid bias and feature positive representations of queer people, history and events. These themes should be integrated into all subjects, not just language arts and social studies, using textbooks, media and supplemental materials that have some form of queer representation.<sup>49</sup>

### **Comprehensive sex education benefits all students**

All students need access to high-quality, evidence-based and age-appropriate sex education encapsulating the biological, physical and social-emotional aspects of sexuality and gender identity. Such “comprehensive sex education” educates students about sexual behaviors, promotes safer sex practices and helps prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).<sup>50</sup> Cisgender and heterosexual students also benefit, gaining a more robust understanding of gender diversity and showing lower rates of homophobia.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, schools with comprehensive sex education curricula report fewer cases of homophobic bullying.<sup>52</sup>

Comprehensive sex education directly safeguards the health of LGBTQ+ students, who more frequently report negative sexual health outcomes.<sup>53</sup> Queer youth are at higher risk for STIs, HIV and dating or sexual violence than their peers.<sup>54</sup> Lesbian and bisexual youth, including young women, are particularly vulnerable to teen pregnancy, violence and coercion or abuse, leading to harmful downstream effects on their academic success, graduation rates and employment prospects.<sup>55,56</sup>

### **Inadequate sex education policies negatively impact LGBTQ+ students**

The absence of a federal mandate for comprehensive, medically accurate sex education has permitted some states and localities to exclude sexual and reproductive health topics from school curricula, including vital information on LGBTQ+ health.<sup>57</sup> Currently, of the 29 states requiring sex education, only 17 require content to be medically accurate, and only 11 mandate that sex education be affirming and inclusive for LGBTQ+ students.<sup>58,59</sup> Some state policies actively malign queer identities, with at least eight states currently requiring sex education curricula to either ignore LGBTQ+ identities completely or portray these “alternative sexual lifestyles” as unnatural, immoral or even criminal.<sup>60</sup> As a direct consequence of these policy failings, nearly a quarter of LGBTQ+ students have never received sex education at school—and of those who have, only 8.2% find the curriculum to be inclusive of LGBTQ+ topics.<sup>61</sup>

Given the potential for LGBTQ-inclusive education to help rectify these health disparities, we highlight promising ways districts are implementing queer-affirming curricula, including comprehensive sex education.



# IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT 1:

## Neptune Township School District (NJ) Develops an LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum Guide

### Fostering more inclusive classrooms

In response to New Jersey's 2020 LGBTQ and Special Needs Law, which mandated LGBTQ+ inclusion in instructional materials, the Neptune Township School District equips its educators with extensive recommendations for LGBTQ-inclusive and age-appropriate classroom activities.<sup>62</sup> District leaders recognize that inadvertent use of exclusive language by staff or allowance of such language in classroom conversations can create unwelcoming environments for LGBTQ+ students. To counter these effects, the district's curriculum guide emphasizes establishing gender-neutral classrooms and broader school environments. An extensive list of substitutions for gendered vocabulary has been provided, such as swapping *freshman* with *first-year student*, *fireman* with *firefighter* or *guys* with *students* or *people*. When facilitating group work, teachers are encouraged to avoid gender-based grouping and instead use table groups, common clothing colors or shared letters in students' names.

### Guidance is tailored to age and subject area

Neptune Township's curriculum guide offers specific, age-appropriate strategies to enhance existing lesson plans so that they are more inclusive. Elementary classroom teachers are advised to help students identify gender stereotypes in popular culture, picture books or toys and teach them to confront gender-related insults at school.<sup>63</sup> Elementary science teachers are encouraged to use informational texts about animals to illustrate that diverse genders and family structures abound in nature.<sup>64</sup> Similar themes are adapted for older students in middle and high school; for example, teachers can supplement a biology lesson on chromosomes with a discussion on how not all people born with XX chromosomes identify as women.<sup>65</sup> Students are also encouraged to differentiate among sex, gender and gender identity. High school computer science teachers should highlight Alan Turing, a pioneer in digital computing who was openly gay; history teachers should elevate stories of the countless gay individuals persecuted by Nazis and explain how the pink triangle became a proud symbol of the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement; and American studies courses should cover pivotal events such as the Stonewall riots in New York City.<sup>66</sup>

### Gender-inclusive curriculum in high school

Neptune High School offers an elective called "Race, Class and Gender" for 11th- and 12th-grade students that explores the historical origins of gender roles and discrimination. The course covers sexual orientation discrimination, inviting students to analyze films, books, music, primary source materials and popular culture. The district's 74-page course outline provides teachers with a wealth of curricular resources, including documents and lesson plans.<sup>67</sup> Students can study *The Feminine Mystique* to analyze societal expectations for women, discuss the glass ceiling and its economic implications and create an autobiography of an individual who greatly impacted gender roles.<sup>68</sup> The course also contains a progressive treatment of sexual orientation in a three-week unit titled "Gay Rights and Tolerance" that educates students on America's historic gay rights movement, the sexual revolution and landmark judicial and legislative actions altering LGBTQ+ civil rights.<sup>69</sup>

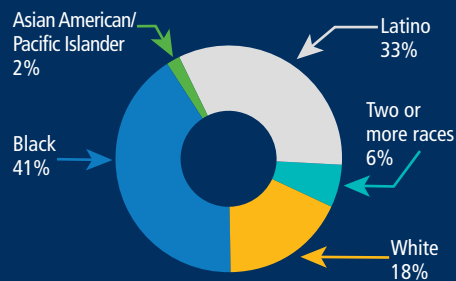


### QUICK FACTS

#### Neptune Township School District

Students	3,514
Teachers	344
Student to Teacher Ratio	10:1
Type	Large city
No. of Schools	7
Graduation Rate	66%

#### Race/Ethnicity of Students



Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022–2023 school year) and Public School Review

# IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT 2:

## Washoe County School District (NV) Navigates State Policies to Provide a Robust Sexual Education Curriculum

Public health data unequivocally demonstrate that abstinence-only education fails to reduce sexual risk behaviors, curb STIs or prevent teen pregnancy.<sup>70</sup> Despite these facts, measures to introduce comprehensive sex education can face significant opposition in states or localities that emphasize or require abstinence-only programs. Alternative, innovative policy options may therefore yield more effective outcomes—as evidenced by Washoe County, Nevada.

### A comprehensive curriculum update

In July 2023, the Washoe County School District approved a new sex education curriculum called SHARE (Sexuality Health And Responsibility Education), marking the district's first comprehensive sex education update in 19 years.<sup>71</sup> Implemented in Washoe schools beginning in August 2023, SHARE lessons are delivered by classroom teachers, health instructors or school counselors.<sup>72</sup>

Nevada does not require all students to receive sex education, nor does it mandate that instruction be medically accurate; however, all sex education curricula in the state must emphasize abstinence as the sole method to prevent pregnancy and STIs.<sup>73,74</sup> Although Washoe adheres to state requirements promoting abstinence, this is not the sole emphasis, as the SHARE curriculum contains comprehensive, medically accurate information where possible.<sup>75,76</sup> In addition to referencing a diverse set of textbooks and publications, the district's curriculum team consulted with key public health-oriented entities such as the Washoe County Health District, Planned Parenthood, the Nevada Public Health Foundation, the Transgender Allies Group and local medical providers.<sup>77</sup> A school board-appointed advisory committee of district parents and teachers, along with experts in medicine, counseling and religion, further informed the lessons.<sup>78</sup>

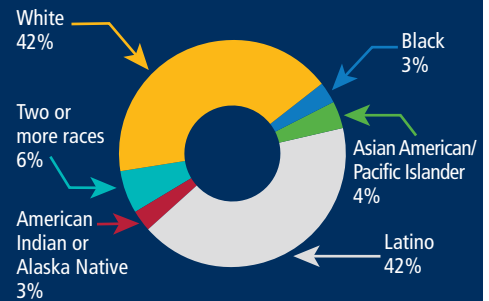


### QUICK FACTS

#### Washoe County School District

Students	64,443
Teachers	3,215
Student to Teacher Ratio	20:1
Type	Large city
No. of Schools	112
Graduation Rate	82%

#### Race/Ethnicity of Students



Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022–2023 school year) and Public School Review





## LGBTQ-inclusive lesson plans

The district has publicly accessible SHARE lessons for the [upper elementary](#), [middle](#) and [high school](#) levels.<sup>79</sup> One high school lesson explains the differences among sexual orientation, behavior and identity, affirming that students have the right to self-identify, even when these three aspects do not coincide or when others may not agree or understand.<sup>80</sup> The curriculum also equips students with the vocabulary surrounding gender identity, reminding them that identity may not always correspond with sex assigned at birth.<sup>81</sup> And because SHARE instruction is delivered by multiple educators at each school, the lesson plans provide detailed teacher notes to ensure accessibility and sensitivity across the district. For example, in the lesson on sexual orientation, the teacher notes acknowledge that some students may use terms such as “queer” in a positive light, eliminating the historically negative connotation.<sup>82</sup>

Washoe’s curriculum also addresses some discriminatory practices and policies affecting many LGBTQ+ people. Teachers are instructed to immediately redirect students who use degrading terms, using these instances as class-wide learning moments. Lessons acknowledge that LGBTQ+ individuals in many states face ongoing discrimination in the workplace, housing market and even medical settings. The curriculum explicitly opposes conversion therapies—practices designed to change or reverse unwanted gender expressions or sexual orientations—highlighting their ineffectiveness and psychological and emotional harm.<sup>83</sup> The curriculum also acknowledges the 2017 passage of SB 201 by the Nevada State Legislature, which banned licensed health care professionals from delivering conversion therapy.<sup>84</sup>

Although some portions of Washoe’s new sex education curriculum promote abstinence, other lessons accurately convey detailed information regarding condom use, preexposure and postexposure prophylaxis and local, school or community resources for sexual health information and support. Washoe County School District thus effectively navigates state-imposed limitations, delivering a curriculum that strives to represent and affirm the identities of its LGBTQ+ students.



## Roaring Fork School District (CO) Elevates Community Feedback in Curriculum Adoption Process

Colorado does not require public school districts to teach sexual health education, but districts that do must provide comprehensive sex education.<sup>85</sup> In late May 2023, the Roaring Fork School District—which serves nearly 5,800 students across 14 schools in western Colorado—unanimously approved its first-ever comprehensive, medically accurate and culturally sensitive sex education curriculum.<sup>86</sup> The new lessons, built upon the [Rights, Respect, Responsibility \(3Rs\) curriculum](#), mark the first major overhaul to the district’s sex education strategy in nearly 15 years.<sup>87</sup> The curriculum aims to equip students with the knowledge and skills they need to form healthy friendships (and later relationships), minimize sexual health risks and accurately understand anatomy and reproduction.<sup>88</sup> Notably, the new policy ensures that the curriculum includes relevant information tailored to the experiences and needs of LGBTQ+ students.<sup>89</sup> This emphasis can greatly support Roaring Fork’s queer youth, given that 59% of LGBTQ+ students in the district reported suicidal thoughts according to a 2022 survey.<sup>90</sup>

Adopting any new curriculum, especially one addressing sexual health, gender and LGBTQ+ identities, can be a contentious process. To provide ample opportunities for community feedback, the district’s Family Advisory Council and Wellness Committee organized multiple community and staff input sessions and invited the public to provide comments during school board meetings.<sup>91</sup> Parental input helped the committee select the curriculum and determine which lesson topics to prioritize. In spring 2023, the district committee initially proposed two curriculum programs, but since families could not fully access, review and provide input on the second program, it was removed from consideration.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, the lesson plans receiving the most significant objections during community feedback sessions were excluded from the final selection of essential lessons by the district committee.<sup>93</sup>

Roaring Fork’s leadership recognizes that parents should have the option to play an active, supportive role in their child’s education. After each 3Rs lesson, students receive homework designed for completion with their families, encouraging ongoing discussions and parental guidance beyond the classroom.<sup>94</sup> The district also offers families the option to access its sex education content at home, enabling parents to cover the concepts directly with their child or delve into even greater detail.<sup>95</sup> And while district leaders affirm the necessity of the new curriculum, they have implemented a clear opt-out process for families who do not wish their students to receive this instruction at school.

The curriculum was piloted during the 2023–2024 school year in select district schools and has garnered early positive feedback.<sup>96</sup> However, some parents remain opposed to the new lessons, citing concerns over the appropriateness of the sexual health content.<sup>97</sup> More time is needed to understand this initiative’s long-term effectiveness, particularly its impact on supporting LGBTQ+ students. Nevertheless, Roaring Fork School District’s proactive approach in elevating community feedback stands as a commendable example.



## Defending Diversity: Ensuring LGBTQ+ Curriculum Access for Students


Many school districts trying to include diverse, LGBTQ-inclusive curricula face increasing challenges from community members (alongside state or national organizations) about what content is appropriate for students. These “book bans” and other curriculum restrictions frequently target books and lessons that explore LGBTQ+ themes, identities and histories, thereby erasing vital representation of and support for these students.<sup>98</sup> From July to December 2023, more than 4,300 unique titles were removed from schools in 23 states, although the success and enforcement of these bans vary.<sup>99</sup>

Several entities have taken a stand confronting this wave of book bans, committing to ensure that students can safely and freely access diverse, LGBTQ-inclusive materials:

- In November 2022, the School District of Pittsburgh (PA) passed a [resolution](#) opposing four harmful proposed state bills—two of which directly sought to exclude and marginalize LGBTQ+ people. In its resolution, the district resolves to defend the use of instructional materials representing diverse perspectives, support educators who teach the full scope of America’s history and enforce nondiscriminatory policies protecting marginalized youth, including LGBTQ+ students.
- Maryland’s [Freedom to Read Act](#), which became law in April 2024, helps safeguard LGBTQ-inclusive educational materials, stating that resources cannot be removed or excluded from school libraries due to partisan, ideological or religious disapproval or the background or views of the author.
- The Education Law Center has issued a [policy statement](#) urging school districts and school boards to uphold students’ First Amendment rights, rejecting policies that unlawfully ban school library books.
- The American Library Association’s Rainbow Round Table annually releases its [Rainbow Book List](#) for young readers from birth to age 18, showcasing stories about LGBTQ+ youth identities and representation.

## Additional Resources: Implementing LGBTQ-Inclusive Curricula

- School districts’ abilities to deliver comprehensive, LGBTQ-affirming sex education are constrained by state laws and policies regarding content requirements, cultural or medical appropriateness and parent/guardian notification. State laws and policies are compiled by both the [Guttmacher Institute](#) and the [Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States](#).
- GLSEN has published a [resource guide](#) to help educators develop LGBTQ-inclusive lessons and classroom resources.
- The Human Rights Campaign’s Welcoming Schools program has developed [adaptable lesson plans](#) to create gender-expansive classrooms and support gender-nonconforming students.



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MORE SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS MUST DEVELOP AND EXPAND POLICIES AND PROGRAMS THAT AFFIRM AND SECURE THE IDENTITIES OF LGBTQ+ STUDENTS WHILE REMAINING COGNIZANT OF THESE STUDENTS' UNIQUE PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY CONCERNS WHEN DOING SO IS CONDUCIVE TO THEIR HEALTH.



## Promising Practice 3:

Develop and implement policies recognizing, codifying and protecting the rights of gender-nonconforming students while prioritizing these students' unique privacy concerns.

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**MANY K–12 STUDENTS WHO IDENTIFY AS LGBTQ+** do not have safe spaces at home. In 2021, 55% of students surveyed reported feeling uncomfortable expressing their true sexual orientation or gender identity to their parent(s) or guardian(s).<sup>100</sup> That same year, the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey showed that LGBTQ+ students are more likely to be bullied or cyberbullied and are more likely to consider or attempt suicide.<sup>101</sup> On the contrary, empowering transgender teens to use their chosen name at school, work or home significantly reduces their self-reported severe depressive symptoms by 71%, suicidal attempts by 65% and suicidal ideation by 34%.<sup>102</sup>

Schools and school districts thus have the responsibility and positionality to create safe spaces for queer students outside the home. While many schools and districts have made commendable progress in creating inclusive environments that nurture marginalized students, LGBTQ+ students often do not experience these benefits and continue to face discrimination through school policies or practices. The 2021 National School Climate Survey reported a rise in policies restricting students' use of names and pronouns that align with their desired gender identity or expression, with nearly 30% of surveyed LGBTQ+ students unable to use their chosen name or pronouns at school.<sup>103</sup> In addition, 58% of LGBTQ+ students reported hearing school staff use transphobic or homophobic language.<sup>104</sup> Without the appropriate policy guardrails, school systems can insidiously replicate and even exacerbate institutional discrimination against queer youth. More schools and school districts must develop and expand policies and programs that affirm and secure the identities of LGBTQ+ students while remaining cognizant of these students' unique privacy and confidentiality concerns when doing so is conducive to their health.

# IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT 1:

## Los Angeles Unified School District Issues Resolutions Affirming and Protecting LGBTQ+ Student Identities

In September 2018, data on the LGBTQ+ students in Los Angeles Unified School District—the nation’s second-largest district—caught the attention of the district’s school board. According to the district’s 2017 Youth Risk and Behavior Survey data, 56% of L.A. Unified’s self-identified LGBTQ+ high school students reported having been bullied at school, and 60% reported having seriously considered suicide.<sup>105</sup> LGBTQ+ youth comprised a substantial portion the district’s student body: 7.2% of L.A. Unified higher schoolers were lesbian, gay or bisexual; 1% identified as transgender; 4.5% stated that they were questioning; and 3.7% were gender nonconforming.<sup>106</sup> With these alarming statistics in mind, Los Angeles Unified leaders needed to better support, affirm and advocate for LGBTQ+ students.

### Landmark resolution to support LGBTQ+ students

In response, the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education developed and, in June 2018, unanimously passed a resolution casting renewed focus on supporting and affirming the queer community.<sup>107</sup> The resolution, titled “Increasing Supports for LGBTQ+ Students, Their Families and Schools,” was co-developed by a school board member and community-based organizations such as the Latino Equality Alliance, the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, One Archives and Out for Safe Schools.<sup>108</sup> This landmark resolution increased competency training on LGBTQ+ issues for educators, staff, students, parents and community partners; recognized October as LGBTQ+ History Month; and established a centralized online district website to publicize resources and information about the queer experience.<sup>109</sup> The district also recognized that to develop supportive policies for queer students, it needed more information regarding this population’s needs and challenges, including the issue of equitable facility access. To this end, in 2018, the school board initiated a review process of the availability and visibility of all-gender restrooms across district schools.<sup>110</sup>

### Building on the first resolution

In 2019, the district unanimously passed a second declaration—“All Means All: Enhancing Supports and Resources for Our LGBTQ+ Students”—reaffirming its commitment to the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>111</sup> This updated document reinforced the previous resolution and introduced new commitments to recognize, codify and protect the rights of LGBTQ+ students. The district recognized additional landmark dates (including March 31 as Transgender Day of Visibility and October as LGBTQ+ History Month) and directed district leaders to publicize an LGBTQ+ focused safe schools campaign, supplying inclusive materials and posters to all staff. The board encouraged all district schools to develop and deliver lessons on the LGBTQ+ community, implement programming from the district’s [Queer All Year calendar](#) and hold commemorative campus activities to honor LGBTQ+ history and contributions.

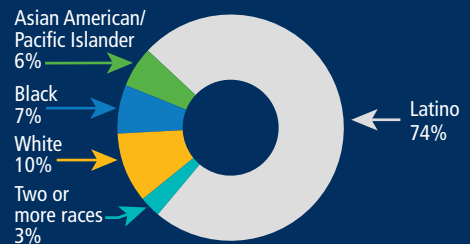
To better affirm gender-diverse student identities on some school records, enrollment forms and student identification cards were updated to include a “nonbinary” option alongside male and female.<sup>112</sup> And drawing on findings from the preceding year’s restrooms study, the district committed to updating its [Gender Identity and Students – Ensuring Equity and Nondiscrimination policy bulletin](#), increasing accessibility of existing all-gender restrooms and ensuring that gender-affirming restrooms will be prioritized in future construction or renovation projects.<sup>113</sup>



### QUICK FACTS

<b>Los Angeles Unified School District</b>	
Students .....	427,795
Teachers .....	21,760
Student to Teacher Ratio .....	20:1
Type .....	Large city
No. of Schools .....	785
Graduation Rate .....	81%

### Race/Ethnicity of Students



Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022–2023 school year) and Public School Review

Los Angeles Unified's resolutions, in addition to symbolizing the district's commitment to equity, have helped set the trajectory of programs and initiatives affirming, supporting and protecting the rights and identities of LGBTQ+ students. While such documents may be a nonstarter in other school districts or regions, they are a demonstrated mechanism to effectively rally community and district support for creating inclusive learning environments for all LGBTQ+ students.

## LGBTQ-Affirming Resolutions in Other Districts

Los Angeles is not the only district using resolutions as formal mechanisms to outline future actions. In April 2023, the [Maplewood Richmond Heights School District](#) (MO) passed a resolution supporting its LGBTQ+ students and staff.<sup>114</sup> In addition to reaffirming its antidiscrimination policy for all individuals on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, the district committed to allowing students to use chosen names and pronouns without requiring legal name changes or medical diagnoses. Students are also empowered to partake in all extracurricular activities, including athletics and physical education classes, as aligned with their gender identity with no requirement that gender-nonconforming students supply legal or medical documentation. District officials also committed to respecting the privacy of all staff and students in the gender transition process.

Resolutions affirming and protecting the identities and rights of LGBTQ+ students can also help guide future district responses to political or ideological challenges. Two months after the Maplewood Richmond Heights resolution was passed, a new Missouri state law was enacted requiring athletes to play on sports teams corresponding with the sex on their birth certificate. In response, school board officials sent a message to all district families, calling the new law discriminatory. The district reaffirmed that it will work with any affected students and their parents or guardians to consider all necessary options, legal or otherwise, to enable students' full participation in sports and other desired extracurricular activities.<sup>115</sup>

Other notable school districts that have passed resolutions affirming LGBTQ+ student rights include:

- [Bainbridge Island School District No. 303](#) (WA)
- [Stonington School District](#) (CT)
- [Sioux City Community School District](#) (IA)
- [Hayward Unified School District](#) (CA)

## Key Issue Highlight: Respecting the Privacy of Gender-Nonconforming Students Safeguards Their Health and Safety

### Familial acceptance and support benefit LGBTQ+ youth

LGBTQ+ students should feel supported and safe in their identities at school and at home. In 2022, more than 63% of LGBTQ+ youth reported that they had at least some form of parental support, and a 2023 national study indicates that acceptance of LGBTQ+ people and youth in the United States has reached record highs.<sup>116,117</sup> Concordant support from both schools and families can be transformative for queer students, as LGBTQ+ young people with high levels of family social support are much less likely to attempt suicide than those with low or moderate support levels.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, when transgender young people's preferred name is used consistently at school, home and beyond, they experience lower rates of depression and suicidal thoughts.<sup>119</sup>

### Not all LGBTQ+ youth have supportive homes

Despite this general increase in social and familial acceptance, many queer or questioning young people still do not feel comfortable or safe in fully expressing their gender identity or sexual orientation at home. A 2022 national survey revealed that only 37% of LGBTQ+ youth—and 32% of transgender and nonbinary youth—consider home an affirming space.<sup>120</sup> Trans youth facing high levels of family rejection are more than three times as likely to report a suicide attempt.<sup>121</sup> High rates of family intolerance or abuse lead to an overrepresentation of trans youth in homeless shelters or foster care, further elevating their risks of suicidality, depression and substance abuse.<sup>122</sup>

While some adults may harbor deep-seated prejudices against LGBTQ+ individuals, many parents who initially struggle with accepting their child may simply lack understanding or familiarity with LGBTQ+ identities.<sup>123</sup> This highlights the ongoing need for parents to actively seek out LGBTQ+-oriented educational and support resources and for public health and LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations to ensure that these resources remain widely accessible.

### Mandatory parental notification policies compromise student safety

Despite many queer youth lacking supportive homes, numerous school districts nationwide have adopted policies compelling school staff to notify parents or guardians when students request to use a name, pronouns or gender identity different from their official school records—even without students' express consent. These policies can also mandate parental notification when students ask to participate in sports or school activities or use facilities or bathrooms that do not match their sex assigned at birth.<sup>124</sup> To date, eight states (Alabama, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Carolina and Tennessee) have enacted mandatory parental notification laws, with an additional five states promoting but not requiring forced outing.<sup>125</sup>

Although these laws claim to protect parents' rights, forced outing policies endanger the health of queer or questioning students. A 2024 study conveys that 70% of teenagers whose sexual orientation or gender identity is involuntarily disclosed report extreme stress, and trans and nonbinary youth outed to their parents exhibit the highest levels of depression symptoms and the lowest amount of family support of any group.<sup>126</sup>

### The unique privacy concerns of LGBTQ+ students should be prioritized while balancing parent involvement

Given the clear health repercussions of forced outings, the decision to disclose sensitive information regarding sexual orientation or gender identity—and how much to share—should lie squarely with the student. Queer and questioning students should not have their private information disclosed without their consent, and public schools should not "out" students to their families. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) [argues](#) that it is unlawful for public schools to do so, and GLSEN [maintains](#) that students have a fundamental right to privacy regarding their LGBTQ+ identities.<sup>127,128</sup> Hundreds of school districts nationwide have implemented policies stating that employees can or should maintain the confidentiality of a gender-nonconforming student's status unless otherwise indicated by the student.<sup>129</sup>

Parents should play a key role in fostering a safe, supportive home environment for LGBTQ+ youth—but students must have chief input over when and how their identities are shared. **To this end, school districts must outlaw mandatory forced outing rules and create more equitable policies that prioritize LGBTQ+ students' unique privacy needs.** Effective policies should identify ways to ensure that a student has a supportive home environment and, when safe, actively partner with parents to support the student, such as by helping students initiate conversations with their families or providing counseling and mental health support.





## **Student Privacy and Parental Rights: Ongoing Legal Battles**

Striking the appropriate balance between student privacy and parental involvement is a complex challenge for school districts.<sup>130</sup> These issues are being actively debated and litigated in courts, with advocacy groups supporting parents' rights sometimes citing federal laws such as the 1974 Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and Fourteenth Amendment case law.<sup>131</sup> In contrast, major national organizations such as GLSEN and the ACLU defend students' rights to privacy, arguing that these same legal sources either lack clarity or even explicitly protect student privacy. Amidst these legal battles and the lack of a definitive, up-to-date national directive, the public health imperative remains clear: protect the health and safety of LGBTQ+ students and prioritize their privacy.

# IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT 2:

## Champlain Valley and South Burlington School Districts (VT) Develop and Enact Transgender and Nonbinary Student Support Policies

In late October 2023, leaders of Champlain Valley School District—the largest in Vermont—unanimously voted to codify extensive protections for queer students, outlining the district’s first-ever transgender and nonbinary student [policy](#).<sup>132</sup> In December 2023, nearby South Burlington School District followed suit, unanimously approving a similar but [expanded policy](#).<sup>133</sup> Both policies (referred to as Code F38 in Champlain Valley and F16 in South Burlington) affirm LGBTQ+ student identities—specifically gender identity, pronouns, name choices and sexual orientations—and ensure that students can openly express and discuss diverse gender identities at school.

### Genesis of the policies

Both policies were developed by district counseling staff, trained data professionals and [Outright Vermont](#), a community-based advocacy organization. District leaders understood that policy development must center on the experiences, needs and feedback of trans, nonbinary and gender-nonconforming students. In South Burlington, the draft policy was initially vetted by both the district high school’s Gender and Sexuality Alliance and the middle school’s Queer Straight Alliance before being returned to counseling staff and administration for further development. The two district policies were modeled after existing 2017 [guidelines](#) from the Vermont Agency of Education but use stronger, more affirming language—particularly in the sections concerning students’ use of gender-aligned facilities. For example, while state guidelines express that trans students “should not have to” use a locker room or bathroom conflicting with their gender identity, the districts’ policies assert that students “must be permitted to” use facilities matching their gender.<sup>134</sup>

### Upholding student confidentiality

Each policy includes a section dedicated to students’ right to privacy in deciding when, with whom and how much of their private information to disclose. Both districts recognize that school records and other official documentation can perpetuate the exclusion of gender-nonconforming students; thus, Champlain Valley and South Burlington students can modify their name, gender or pronouns on school records, generally without needing a court order. In instances when a court order is required to modify a file, schools will maintain the file in strict confidentiality and use an amended version with the student’s requested changes where possible. Students needing increased privacy will receive reasonable accommodation; this extends to school facilities and bathrooms, allowing students to change in a separate area, in a single-occupant stall or at a separate time.

Both policies instruct school personnel to respect students’ requests to use names and pronouns corresponding to their gender identity, irrespective of the gender listed on their records. The districts recognize that in certain instances, for example health encounters or efforts to comply with federally mandated reporting, the student’s legal name or gender must be used. In such cases, school and district staff will work closely with students and their caregivers, when appropriate, to collaboratively develop a supportive information-sharing plan.

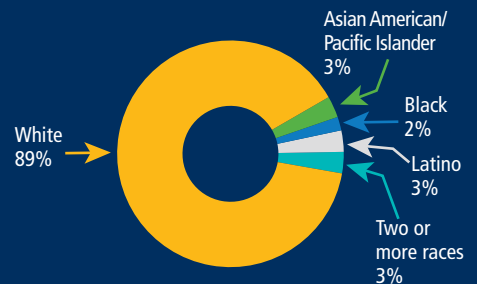


### QUICK FACTS

#### *Champlain Valley Unified Union School District #56*

Students . . . . .	4,235
Teachers . . . . .	300
Student to Teacher Ratio . . . . .	14:1
Type . . . . .	Distant rural
No. of Schools . . . . .	5
Graduation Rate . . . . .	Not found

### Race/Ethnicity of Students



*Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022–2023 school year) and Public School Review*

## Additional commitments supporting queer students

It is worth noting that South Burlington School District's policies on student privacy extend beyond those of Champlain Valley, stating that transgender students may not always desire their parents or caregivers to know about their identity. These situations should be addressed on a case-by-case basis, considering parent involvement but prioritizing students' health and safety and ensuring that their gender identity is affirmed in a manner maintaining privacy and confidentiality.

South Burlington's policy also includes the following three sections of note:

- **Curriculum implementation.** The school board resolves to support the inclusion of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula and content through all grade levels and commits to implementing anti-bias education. The district also prohibits teachings or curricula that purposely exclude the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals or use shame-based, stigmatizing language. Given the tumultuous broader political environment surrounding this issue, these enumerated protections lend district support to South Burlington teachers when delivering instruction about LGBTQ+ topics.
- **Annual monitoring.** The school board directs district administrators to, on at least an annual basis, report data on student metrics that are disaggregated by LGBTQ+ identity. These metrics should include student academic achievement, engagement and incidents of bullying or harassment. The superintendent is also instructed to address any emergent disparities in student performance or well-being based on this information.
- **Staff professional development.** The district commits to training all current and future teachers, administrators, counselors, social workers, health staff and support staff on this policy. The district is directed to implement ongoing staff training on developmentally appropriate communication strategies about gender identity and expression; district, state and national policies on harassment and discrimination; and actionable classroom practices to foster an inclusive environment.

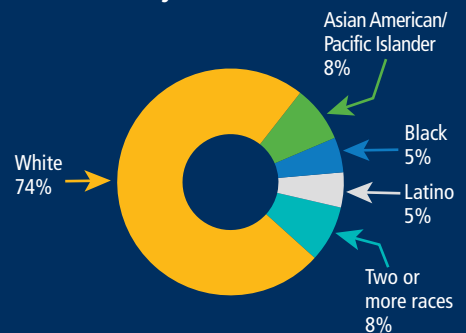


### QUICK FACTS

#### South Burlington School District

Students	2,711
Teachers	219
Student to Teacher Ratio	12:1
Type	Small city
No. of Schools	5
Graduation Rate	91%

### Race/Ethnicity of Students



Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022–2023 school year) and Public School Review

## IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT 3:

# Montgomery County Public Schools (MD) Develops Proactive Gender Support Plan

Since 2019, Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland’s largest school district, has published comprehensive guidelines on student gender identity to clarify district and school board policies for students, staff and community members. These guidelines encapsulate LGBTQ+ terminology, name and pronoun preferences, dress codes, anti-bullying strategies and protocols for gender-specific activity areas such as locker rooms.<sup>135</sup> Importantly, the policy enumerates substantial protections to maintain the confidentiality of LGBTQ+ students’ identities when appropriate, with significant additions focused on this aspect made in the August 2021 update to the guidelines. The [most recent guidelines](#) are for the 2023–2024 school year.

### Proactive development of gender support plans

To best support transgender, transitioning or gender-nonconforming students across all grade levels, the district guides school officials—administrators, counselors, school psychologists or clinicians—to work alongside the student to co-develop a personalized gender transition plan. This process begins with the “[Supporting Student Gender Identity](#)” intake form, first designed in 2019 by the district’s director of student welfare and compliance in collaboration with community organizations such as MoCo Pride Youth and the local PFLAG chapter.<sup>136</sup> The form allows students to specify their chosen name, pronouns and gender identity; in addition to male, female and unspecified/nonbinary, students can select “other” and provide further details.

### Intake form helps safeguard student confidentiality

Recognizing that trans and gender-nonconforming students may lack acceptance or face conflict at home, the district prioritizes creating a welcoming environment with built-in privacy protections. In a section dedicated to student support and safety, the form asks students whether their parent or guardian is aware of their gender identity, and students rate their level of parental support from 1 to 10. If parental support is low, school officials outline specific considerations for implementing the gender support plan, including strategies for balancing parental involvement, family communication and student privacy. And in a section surrounding privacy and disclosure of information, the intake form allows students to designate which school and district staff members can access this sensitive information. The district directs school staff to keep documents regarding student gender identities in a secure location separate from other confidential or academic school records.

### Prioritizing student safety and well-being

The district’s gender identity guidelines instruct administrators and staff to, before contacting the student’s parent or guardian about the gender support plan, first speak with the student to understand the level of support the student either receives, or anticipates receiving, at home. The guidelines do not authorize the proactive, involuntary disclosure of a student’s gender identity to others, including parents or guardians, unless authorized by the student or required by law. Parents are invited to be involved in the development of their students’ gender support plan if the students indicate that their parent is aware and supportive of their chosen gender identity.

The district emphasizes student well-being by urging school officials to collaborate with the student welfare and compliance team when matters of gender identity may incite familial conflict. Gender support plans should be student led, and district staff will work toward inclusion of the family, if possible, taking safety concerns into consideration as well as student privacy. Even when

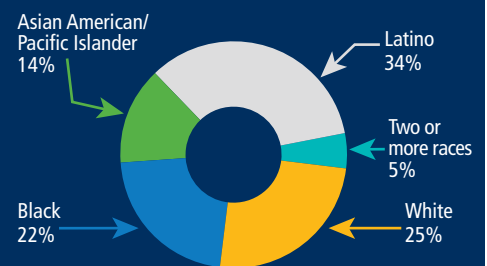


### QUICK FACTS

#### Montgomery County Public Schools

Students	160,554
Teachers	11,578
Student to Teacher Ratio	14:1
Type	Large suburb
No. of Schools	210
Graduation Rate	91%

#### Race/Ethnicity of Students



Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022–2023 school year) and Public School Review

family support is lacking, the district instructs employees to use students' preferred name and pronouns at school and maintain confidentiality of their identities.

## Early positive effects

In the four years following the 2019 launch of the gender identity intake form, more than 500 forms detailing student names, pronouns and gender identities have been submitted to school officials. Approximately 45% of respondents indicate that they identify as nonbinary, and the district is actively promoting awareness of gender support plans among students and staff. The nearly sevenfold increase in form submissions—from 35 in the 2019–2020 school year to 239 in 2021–2022—suggests that a growing number of gender-nonconforming students in Montgomery County are comfortable disclosing their identity to school staff. Positive feedback from some trans students indicates significant improvements: prior to completing their gender support plan, they frequently experienced being called by their legal name instead of their chosen name by teachers and substitutes consulting official class rosters, which led to forced outings to their peers or other teachers. Today, proper usage of students' chosen names by all staff, including substitute teachers, prevents students from being dead-named. Montgomery County's policies therefore help diminish uncomfortable situations for LGBTQ+ students, fostering a more welcoming and inclusive environment.

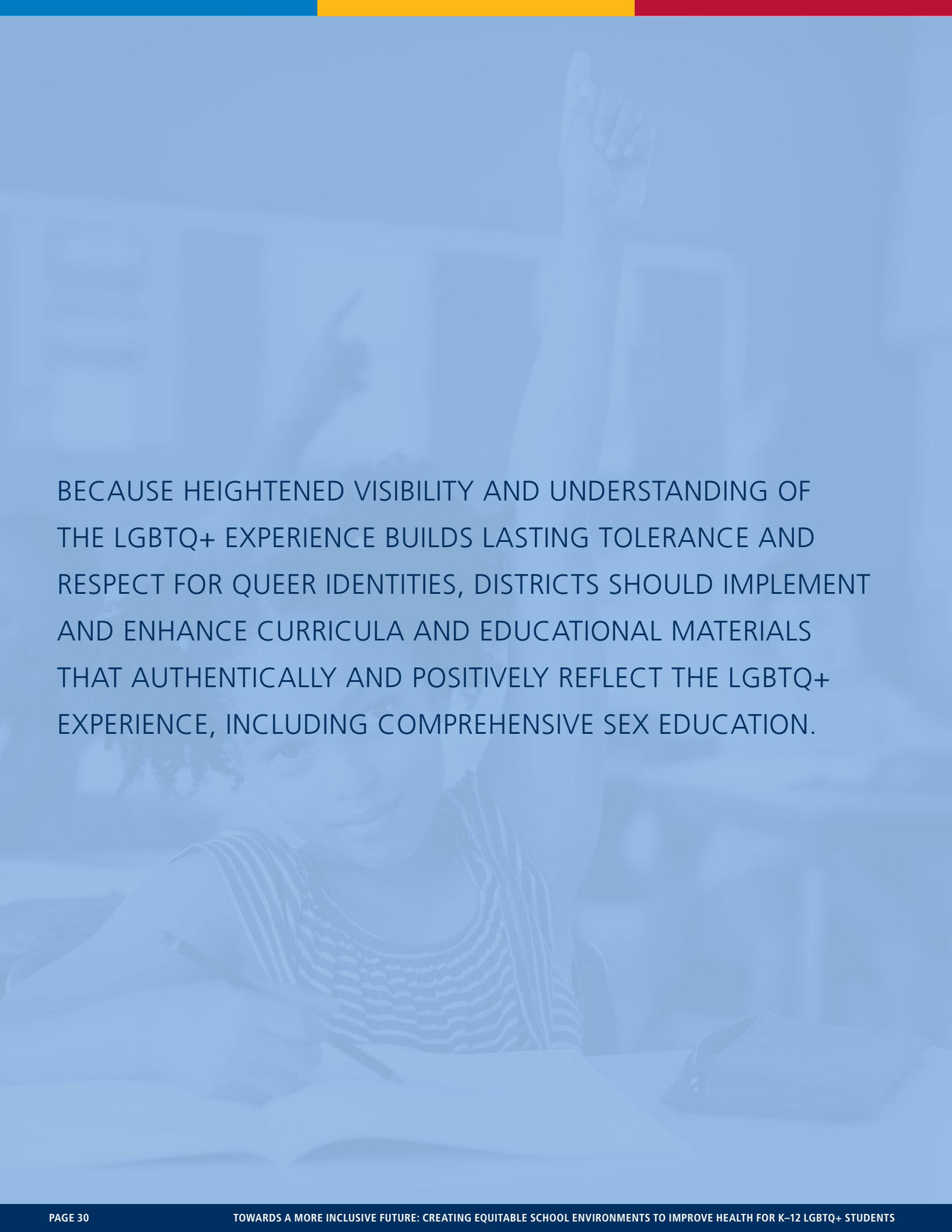
## Local Opposition to Gender Identity Guidelines

District policies addressing student gender identity, particularly concerning parental awareness and involvement, have faced significant opposition from certain groups in recent years. In Montgomery County, some parents argued that the school district's guidelines infringed upon their Fourteenth Amendment rights and their authority to care for their children, leading them to escalate the case to the Supreme Court of the United States. In May 2024, however, the Supreme Court declined to hear the case, thereby affirming the district's ability to maintain a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ students.



## Additional Resources: Affirming and Protecting Student Identities

- GLSEN's April 2024 [report](#) offers model language for local educational policies to implement federal nondiscrimination protections such as Title IX for LGBTQ+ students, emphasizing protections for student privacy.
- The National Education Association provides a [sample school board resolution](#) that school districts and boards can adapt to support LGBTQ-affirming policies.
- While this report focuses on actions school districts can take, states can play a pivotal role in providing clear guidance and robust policy frameworks to school districts. New Jersey's Department of Education, for instance, has issued [guidance](#) to school districts after it thoroughly reviewed policy examples from other states, organizations and experts.



BECAUSE HEIGHTENED VISIBILITY AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE LGBTQ+ EXPERIENCE BUILDS LASTING TOLERANCE AND RESPECT FOR QUEER IDENTITIES, DISTRICTS SHOULD IMPLEMENT AND ENHANCE CURRICULA AND EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS THAT AUTHENTICALLY AND POSITIVELY REFLECT THE LGBTQ+ EXPERIENCE, INCLUDING COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION.



## In Closing

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**ACCESS TO A SAFE, POSITIVE AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT** is a prerequisite to student attendance, engagement and achievement—key factors that, in turn, drive short- and long-term health effects for students. Despite gradual civil rights gains, LGBTQ+ individuals still face significant challenges. K–12 LGBTQ+ students are a particularly marginalized population deserving of support, experiencing higher risks of bullying, harassment, discrimination and violence than their cisgender or heterosexual peers. And since many of these students lack a home environment that supports, affirms and protects their sexual orientation or gender identity, schools and school districts have a responsibility to create, implement and enhance policies, programs and practices fostering more inclusive and equitable school settings for LGBTQ+ youth.

Safeguarding the physical and mental health of queer youth must be a public health priority, and school personnel are instrumental in advancing this mission. School districts must empower their educators, administrators and staff with the knowledge, resources and institutional backing needed to understand and affirm queer students' identities. Because heightened visibility and understanding of the LGBTQ+ experience builds lasting tolerance and respect for queer identities, districts should implement and enhance curricula and educational materials that authentically and positively reflect the LGBTQ+ experience, including comprehensive sex education. And districts must also establish and codify policies that affirm and protect gender-nonconforming students while simultaneously acknowledging these students' unique needs for privacy.

Advancing these priorities, many of which align with prevailing evidence-based guidance and research from leading national organizations, is highly complex in today's hyperpolarized environment. The continual, accelerating onslaught of anti-LGBTQ+ policies, legal battles and hostile dialogues from the local to the national level threatens to unwind the hard-won progress for queer rights (and, in some regions, already has). School districts alone cannot accomplish these goals, and a broader, all-sector commitment is required to advance equity for LGBTQ+ students. Public health professionals can support schools and school districts by providing targeted health education on best practices supporting queer students, collecting and publicizing data on the impacts of inclusive environments on student health and achievement and delivering training on and technical assistance with equitable policy and program development. Local, state and national educational agencies must unlock, and equitably distribute, funding for LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum implementation and build school and district leaders' capacity to champion these efforts. All levels of government should continue to uphold, pass and strengthen anti-bullying and harassment policies specifying gender and sexual orientation as protected classes, including upholding Title IX antidiscrimination practices. Higher education institutions, including teacher and medical provider training programs, must introduce and emphasize LGBTQ-inclusive education and best practices to their future teachers and health professionals. Policy leaders must closely collaborate with public health experts to provide actionable solutions to school administrators and staff and implement these solutions.

A one-size-fits-all policy solution to advance equity for LGBTQ+ students is not possible, as practices that garner success in one locality may fail in another. We hope this report offers concrete examples of promising policy interventions and practices adopted by school districts that span various geographical regions, sizes, student demographics and histories. Each highlighted district has made significant strides—often in the face of major obstacles and an ever-changing political landscape—to create more inclusive, just and equitable environments for LGBTQ+ students.





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