



# The 2005 National School Climate Survey

The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and  
Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools



Executive Summary of a Report  
from the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network

[www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)

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Earlier this year I shared a stage with Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack who publicly called on his state's policy-makers to adopt comprehensive and effective legislation to address the problems of bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

The capacity crowd of more than 500 Iowa high school students and their teachers roared approval as television cameras from across the state captured the moment.

I wish more states were like Iowa, and more elected leaders were like Tom Vilsack.

That day's powerful demonstration of leadership and support was a unique one. More often than not, legislators have blocked bills like the one Governor Vilsack supports. Separate legislation in Arizona, Georgia, Idaho, Missouri, Utah and Virginia this year sought to discourage or ban students from forming school clubs to address harassment, while local school boards nationwide have tried to eliminate lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, history and issues from school libraries and curriculum.

The results of GLSEN's fourth biennial National School Climate Survey (NSCS), the only national survey concerning the school experiences of students who identify as LGBT, should be a guide for every legislator, educator, school board and community leader concerned with ensuring safe and effective schools for ALL students.

The 2005 NSCS contains important results that are distressing and at the same time, reveal seeds of hope. On the positive front, this data shows that schools can and, in some cases are improving the climate so that LGBT students can better access educational opportunities. Inclusive policies, supportive school staff, the presence of student clubs dealing with LGBT issues (commonly known as "Gay-Straight Alliances" or GSAs), and positive inclusion of LGBT issues in school curricula all have a significant positive impact on the experience of LGBT students. The report shows how these resources can benefit LGBT students – lowered rates of name-calling and harassment, decreased absenteeism, an increased sense of school safety and school belonging, and higher grade point averages.

Given that such positive outcomes are what we wish for all students, the fact that these positive interventions are so rarely implemented is dismaying. In short, not enough schools are "doing the right thing."

The findings of the 2005 NSCS beg the question of why more states and districts are not doing what is needed to enable more LGBT students to succeed. While it begs that question, it cannot answer it. For that answer, readers must turn to their state legislators, principals, school boards, and district superintendents and ask them why they aren't doing the right thing.

**Kevin Jennings**

Founder & Executive Director, GLSEN

# The 2005 National School Climate Survey

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name-calling, harassment and violence directed at LGBT students, while offering information about the impact of these experiences on academic performance and the effect of interventions designed to address the underlying problem. In particular, the 2005 survey data allowed us to examine the role that state education legislation has in creating (or not creating) safer schools for all students, including LGBT students. The 2005 NSCS paints a disturbing picture of the school experiences of LGBT students. However, it also provides further insight into the solutions for creating safer schools for all students.

**G** LSEN's National School Climate Survey is the only national survey to document the experiences

of students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) in America's secondary schools. Conducted biennially since 1999, the National School Climate Survey (NSCS) fills a crucial void in our collective understanding of the contemporary high school experience. The results of this survey are intended to inform educators, policymakers and the public at large, as part of GLSEN's on-going effort to ensure that all schools are places where students are free to learn, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

The 2005 NSCS results summarized here continue to track the endemic problem of

## Methods

**I**n order to obtain a more representative sample of LGBT youth, we used two methods to locate possible participants. First, participants were obtained through community-based groups or service organizations serving LGBT youth. Fifty groups/organizations were randomly selected from a list of over 300. Each group was then invited to participate in the survey, and surveys were sent for the youth to complete. Of the 50 groups, 39 were able to have youth complete the survey and a total of 381 surveys were obtained through this method. In addition, we also attempted to have greater representation of LGBT youth from states in the South and Midwest, which have



***Students in schools with a GSA were less likely to feel unsafe, less likely to miss school, and more likely to feel they belonged at their school.***

historically been underrepresented in our past surveys. An additional 14 groups or organizations had youth complete the survey, providing an additional 140 surveys. Thus, a total of 521 paper surveys were collected using this first method. Our second method was to make the National School Climate Survey available online through GLSEN's website. Notices about the survey were posted on listservs and websites oriented to LGBT youth. Notices were also emailed to GLSEN chapters and to youth advocacy organizations such as Advocates for Youth and Youth Guardian Services. To ensure representation of transgender youth and youth of color, special efforts were made to notify groups and organizations that work predominantly with these populations about the on-line survey.

A total of 1,211 surveys were completed online. Data collection through community-based groups and service organizations occurred from April to July 2005. Data collection through the online version occurred from April to August 2005.

The sample consisted of a total of 1,732 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students between the ages of 13 and 20. Students were from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Excluded from the final total were youth who were not in a K-12 school during the 2004-2005 school year, youth who were not in school in the United States, and heterosexual youth (except for those who were also transgender). A majority of the sample (69.2%) was white and a little more than half (52.2%) was female. About two-thirds of the sample (62.4%) specifically identified as gay or lesbian and more than half (59.5%) were in the 11th or 12th grades.

# Key Findings

## *The Scope of the Problem*

**B** **iased Remarks in School.** The results of the 2005 survey indicate that anti-LGBT language, as well as bullying and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, remain common in America's schools. Respondents to the 2005 NSCS reported that homophobic remarks were the most common type of biased language heard at school, with three-quarters of the students (75.4%) hearing remarks such as "faggot" or "dyke" frequently or often at school. Even more pervasive was the use of the expression "that's so gay" or "you're so gay," often used to indicate that something or someone is stupid or worthless. Nearly nine out of ten (89.2%) students reported hearing these comments frequently or often at school. Although less pervasive than homophobic remarks, other forms of biased language, including sexist and racist remarks and negative remarks about students' gender expression, were also commonly heard at school.



***Nearly two-thirds (64.3%) reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation.***

Students most often reported that homophobic remarks were made in school when faculty or other school staff were not present. Yet when present, faculty and other school staff often failed to act. Only 16.5% reported that staff who were present when homophobic remarks were made intervened frequently when they heard such language. In fact, students reported that school staff were less likely to intervene regarding homophobic remarks or remarks about gender expression than racist or sexist remarks.

The problem goes beyond the failure of faculty and school staff to address homophobic language in school. Some school staff contributed to this problem by making homophobic remarks themselves – nearly a fifth (18.6%) of the survey respondents reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff.

**Harassment and Assault.** Unfortunately, anti-LGBT behavior is not confined to the use of biased language. Overall, three-quarters (74.2%) of students in the survey reported feeling unsafe in school because of personal characteristics, such as their sexual orientation, gender or religion. Nearly two-thirds (64.3%) reported feeling



unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation specifically, and 40.7% felt unsafe because of how they expressed their gender. The majority of students in our survey also experienced harassment and violence at school – nearly two-thirds (64.1%) reported that they had been verbally harassed at least some of the time in school in the past year because of their sexual orientation and about half (45.5%) because of their gender expression. Over a third (37.8%) of students had also experienced physical harassment at school on the basis of sexual orientation and a quarter (26.1%) on the basis of their gender expression. Although incidents of physical assault were less common, nearly a fifth (17.6%) of students had been physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation and over a tenth (11.8%) because of their gender expression. About two-thirds of LGBT students reported having ever been sexually harassed (e.g., sexual remarks made, being touched inappropriately) in school in the past year.



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population conducted by GLSEN and Harris Interactive, 62.5% of students reported that other students were called names or harassed at their school on the basis of their actual or perceived sexual orientation, which was quite similar to the 64.1% of LGBT students surveyed in the 2005 NSCS who reported experiencing such harassment.

In addition to these forms of harassment and assault, most of the LGBT students in our survey reported relational aggression (such as being the target of mean rumors or lies), and having their property damaged or stolen. More than a third (41.2%) of students also reported some instance in the past year of “cyberbullying” – receiving threatening or harassing e-mails or text messages from other students.

It is important to note that these reports from LGBT students about their experiences with harassment are corroborated by reports from the general population of students. In a recent national study of the general secondary school student

### **Reporting Harassment/Assault to School Personnel and Family Members.**

Unfortunately, many LGBT students who experienced harassment or assault in school may feel that they have nowhere to turn. A majority of students in our 2005 survey who had been harassed or assaulted in school never reported the incidents to school authorities (58.6%), parents or guardians (55.1%), or other family members (62.6%). For some students, reporting the harassment did not necessarily effect any positive changes in their school experience. With regard to reporting to family members, more than a third (43.6%) of the students reported that their parent



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or guardian took no action after being informed of the harassment and over 70% (71.1%) reported that other family members never intervened. Less than half (43.8%) of students who reported incidents of victimization to school staff said that the actions taken by school authorities to address the situation were effective.

**Changes in Harassment/Assault Over Time.** There have been some small but significant decreases in rates of harassment and assault since our 2001 survey. Students in 2003 and 2005 reported a lower incidence of physical harassment and assault related to sexual orientation than in 2001, although there was no change from 2003 to the present. Rates of verbal harassment related to sexual orientation have unfortunately remained unchanged since 2001, as was the case with any type of harassment or assault related to gender expression.

## Academic Engagement, Aspirations and Achievement

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**T**he prevalence of various forms of anti-LGBT behavior in schools has a detrimental impact on LGBT students’ school experiences and can affect academic achievement. For example, over a quarter (28.9%) of students had skipped a day of school in the past month because of feeling unsafe, and an equal number had skipped a class at least once in the past month for the same reason.

Students who had experienced more serious harassment or assault were even more likely to skip school or classes. For example, students who had been physically



harassed because of their sexual orientation or physically harassed or assaulted because of their gender expression were about three times as likely to have skipped a day of school in the past month. Comparing the LGBT students in the 2005 NSCS with students from the study of the general secondary school student population conducted by GLSEN and Harris Interactive, LGBT students were more than five times more likely to report having skipped a day of school in the past month than the general population of students.



***The average GPA for students who were frequently physically harassed because of their sexual orientation was half a grade lower than that of other students (2.6 versus 3.1).***

This pervasive sense of jeopardy in school may contribute to disparities in educational aspirations between LGBT students and their peers. Comparing 2005 NSCS data with a study of the general secondary school population conducted in 2004 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), LGBT students were twice as likely as the NCES national sample to say that they were not planning on completing high school or going on to college. Within the 2005 NSCS sample, LGBT students who experienced more frequent verbal or physical harassment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender expression were more likely to report that they did not plan to go on to college than those LGBT students who were not subject to such harassment.

The severity of students' experiences of harassment directly correlates with lower academic achievement. Students who reported more frequent harassment on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender expression also reported significantly lower grade point averages (GPAs) than students who experienced less frequent harassment. The disparity was particularly striking in the case of physical harassment: the average GPA for students who were frequently physically harassed because of their sexual orientation was half a grade lower than that of other students (2.6 versus 3.1).

## Intervention and Support

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**A**nother dimension of school climate for LGBT youth is the availability of positive resources about LGBT-related issues and of supportive faculty or staff. In the 2005 NSCS, we included several questions designed to provide data on the availability of such interventions and their impact on school climate for LGBT students.

**School Policies for Reporting Harassment.** Having a policy or procedure for reporting incidents of harassment in school is an important tool for making schools safer for all students. While a majority of the students surveyed (68.3%) reported that their school had a policy for reporting incidents of harassment and assault, less than a quarter of all respondents (22.2%) attended a school with a



***Less than half (43.8%) of students who reported incidents of victimization to school staff said that the actions taken by school authorities to address the situation were effective.***

policy that specifically mentioned sexual orientation, and only a tenth (10%) were at a school with a policy that mentioned gender identity/expression.

When such policies or procedures exist and are enforced, schools are sending a message to the student population that victimizing behaviors will not be tolerated. Having a comprehensive school policy – one that specifically mentioned sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression – was related to a lower incidence of hearing homophobic remarks, and to lower rates of verbal harassment. Students at schools with comprehensive policies also reported higher rates of intervention by school staff when homophobic remarks were made. They were also much more likely to report harassment to school authorities who, in turn, were more likely to respond effectively.

**Supportive School Personnel.** Supportive school staff can make a tremendous difference in the experience of LGBT students. Nine out of ten students surveyed knew at least one member of their school's staff who was supportive of LGBT students. The presence of supportive staff contributed to a range of positive indicators, including greater sense of safety, fewer reports of missing days of

school, a greater sense of belonging at school, and higher incidence of planning to attend college. The results further indicated that having a “critical mass” of supportive staff, more than simply one or two, is what may produce the best outcomes for LGBT students. For example, with regard to feeling unsafe at school, students who knew of many supportive staff at their school were much less likely to report feeling unsafe than their peers who did not have any supportive staff, yet there was no difference between those students who had no supportive staff and those who only had one or two.

**Student Clubs.** For many LGBT students and their allies, clubs that address LGBT student issues, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), may offer critical support. Nearly half (47.2%) of the students surveyed reported that their school had a GSA. The presence of these clubs did indeed have a positive relationship to student experiences. Students in schools with a GSA were less likely to feel unsafe, less likely to miss school, and more likely to feel that they belonged at their school than students in schools with no such clubs.

**Resources and Curriculum.** An inclusive curriculum – one that provides positive representations of LGBT history, people and events – may promote a more positive learning environment for LGBT students. Yet the vast majority (81.7%) of students reported that they had never been taught about LGBT people, history or events in school. Furthermore, the majority of those who had learned something about these issues in school reported that representations of LGBT issues were somewhat or very positive, and those students exposed to such positive representations were much less likely than their peers to miss school because of feeling unsafe. In addition, they demonstrated a greater sense of school belonging.

Results from the 2005 survey showed a significant negative impact from another



***Students in states with comprehensive anti-bullying and harassment laws experienced significantly lower rates of verbal harassment. Nine states and the District of Columbia prohibit discrimination or harassment on the basis of sexual orientation, and four of those states also include protections on the basis of gender identity.***

element of school curriculum that has become more common over the past few years – abstinence-only health education, i.e. health or sex education programs that promote sexual abstinence until marriage. Nearly half (44.6%) of the students surveyed reported that their school followed an abstinence-only health curriculum, and these students were more likely to have experienced verbal harassment on the basis of sexual orientation, and were more likely to have missed school in the past year because they felt unsafe. Students at schools that followed an abstinence-only curriculum also reported having fewer supportive faculty/school staff.

Students responding to the 2005 NSCS reported few changes in access to resources and support compared to the 2003 NSCS respondents. Whereas in the 2003 NSCS, we saw substantial gains from 2001 in the number of students who had GSAs at their schools, there was a small decrease from 2003 to 2005. Nevertheless, the number of students in 2005 who had GSAs in their schools continued to be higher than in 2001. Similarly, the percentage of students who could identify supportive teachers or who would feel comfortable discussing LGBT issues with a teacher, principals and/or school counselors increased from 2001 to 2003 but dropped slightly in 2005. The availability of LGBT-related information in school, either in the library or via the school Internet, decreased from 2001 to 2003 and remained unchanged from 2003 to 2005.

**State Legislation about LGBT Issues in Education.** State legislation regarding LGBT issues in education also shapes school climate. Seven states currently have legislation in place that prohibits the positive portrayal of homosexuality in schools. Students from these states were more likely to report higher incidences of homophobic remarks and experiences of verbal harassment in school than students from other states. Not surprisingly, students in these states were also less likely to have access to supportive resources, such as a GSA or LGBT resources in the library or via the school Internet.

In contrast, nine states and the District of Columbia prohibit discrimination or harassment on the basis of sexual orientation, and four of those states also include protections on the basis of gender identity. Students in those states experienced significantly lower rates of verbal harassment than their peers. Nine other states have generic “anti-bullying” laws that do not specifically define “bullying” or list the categories of prohibited behaviors. The rates of verbal harassment in those states were no different than the rates in states with no law at all, and both were significantly higher than the rates in states with specific legislative language.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

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**T**he results of the 2005 National School Climate Survey demonstrate that school continues to be a dangerous place for many LGBT students. The majority of the students whom we surveyed heard homophobic remarks frequently, felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and had experienced verbal harassment at school. Many also reported experiencing physical harassment, physical assault and sexual harassment at school.

It is particularly discouraging to note that there has not been consistent progress on the issue of LGBT students' safety in school since our 2003 survey. In fact, the most widespread indicators of a hostile climate for LGBT students – hearing the expression “that’s so gay” used in school and direct verbal harassment because of one’s sexual orientation – remain unchanged since 2001. And in a climate where many states have increasingly sought to ban GSAs specifically, student reports of having a GSA in their school have dropped slightly since 2003, and fewer students have access to information about LGBT issues via the Internet.

There are indications that students in specific schools (or even states) where positive steps have been taken have experienced concrete improvements to school climate. However, those students remain in the minority. While some states, districts and individual schools have made progress in implementing supportive policies or providing in-school support, the majority of our nation’s students are not covered by comprehensive legislation or policy, nor do they have access to school resources supportive of LGBT students.

It is clear that there is an urgent need for action to create a safer school climate for all students. The 2005 NSCS illustrates the ways in which the presence of effective legislation or policy and in-school resources and supports can have beneficial effects on school climate, students' sense of safety, and, ultimately, on students' academic achievement and educational aspirations. There are steps that all concerned stakeholders can take to remedy the situation:

- **Advocate** for comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-discrimination legislation at the state and federal level that specifically enumerate sexual orientation and gender identity/expression as protected categories alongside others such as race, faith and age;
- **Adopt and implement** comprehensive anti-bullying policies in individual schools and districts, with clear and effective systems for reporting and addressing incidents that students experience;
- **Support** student clubs, such as GSAs, that address LGBT issues in education;
- **Provide training** for school staff to improve rates of intervention and increase the number of supportive faculty and staff available to students; and
- **Increase** student access to appropriate and accurate information regarding LGBT people, history and events.

Taken together, such measures can move us towards a future in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.



## **About GLSEN**

GLSEN, or the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, is the leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students. Established nationally in 1995, GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. For more information on our educator resources, research, public policy agenda, student organizing programs or development initiatives, visit [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)

## **GLSEN's Vision**

GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.



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