
WHY RELATIONSHIP CENTERED SCHOOLS MATTER

For Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,
Queer / Transgender and
Gender Non-Conforming
Students



**Californians
for Justice**



In 2014, Californians for Justice asked 2000 students and 65 education leaders: “What do students need to be prepared for college, careers, and community life?” **Relationships between students and staff emerged as the key to success.**

In January 2018, we held a focus group with Californians for Justice student leaders who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer (LGBQ) and/or Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC)¹ about their school experiences, needs, and solutions offered by Relationship Centered Schools. This brief highlights their voices in relationship with relevant studies. We found that **Relationship Centered Schools are critical for LGBQ, Trans and Gender Non-Conforming (GNC) students**, who experience hostile school climates that include harassment from peers, lack of staff capacity for support, and discriminatory policies and practices.

In California:

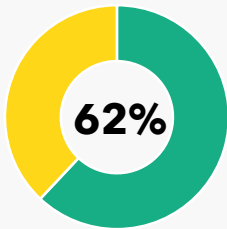
- » **77%** of LGBTQ students regularly heard homophobic comments.²
- » **63%** experienced verbal harassment based on sexual orientation.³
- » **52%** experienced verbal harassment based on gender expression.⁴
- » **77% of LGB** and **82% of trans students** reported “sometimes” or “often” hearing negative comments from students based on gender non-conformity.⁵
- » About **52% of LGB and GNC students** in California disagreed with the idea that their schools were safe for GNC students--especially for “guys who aren’t as masculine as other guys.”⁶



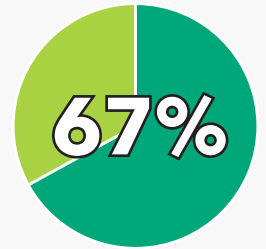
In light of these experiences of hostile school climate, it is especially important for teachers, staff, and administration to offer proactive support and foster welcoming conditions for LGBQ and TGNC students. But teachers and staff are often not equipped to provide such support for students. Some LGBQ and TGNC students may even be directly targeted by school staff. **GSA Network found that LGBQ and TGNC students of color experience multiple layers of challenges based on race, gender, and sexuality.** Many bear the brunt of heightened surveillance and policing by school staff for their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or expression⁷. For example, teachers sometimes perceive gender non-conforming behavior or expression as a challenge to authority and thus grounds for exclusionary discipline. When LGBQ and TGNC students of color attempt to protect themselves from bullying by standing up for themselves, they are often penalized in strict ways.

GSA Network also found that TGNC and LGBTQ youth of color receive harsher punishment than white students or peers who are not perceived as LGBTQ/TGNC for the same infractions. Finally, when these students report bullying and harassment to staff, they are sometimes told that it was their own fault and that they should conform to “typical” behavior (e.g. dressing differently) to avoid mistreatment.

It is unsurprising, then, that nationally:



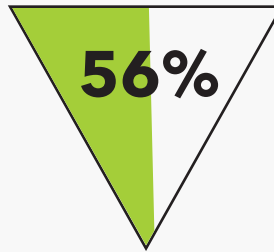
A large proportion of LGBTQ and TGNC students don't report harassment or hostilities to school staff⁸



believe that staff would not do anything to address their incident



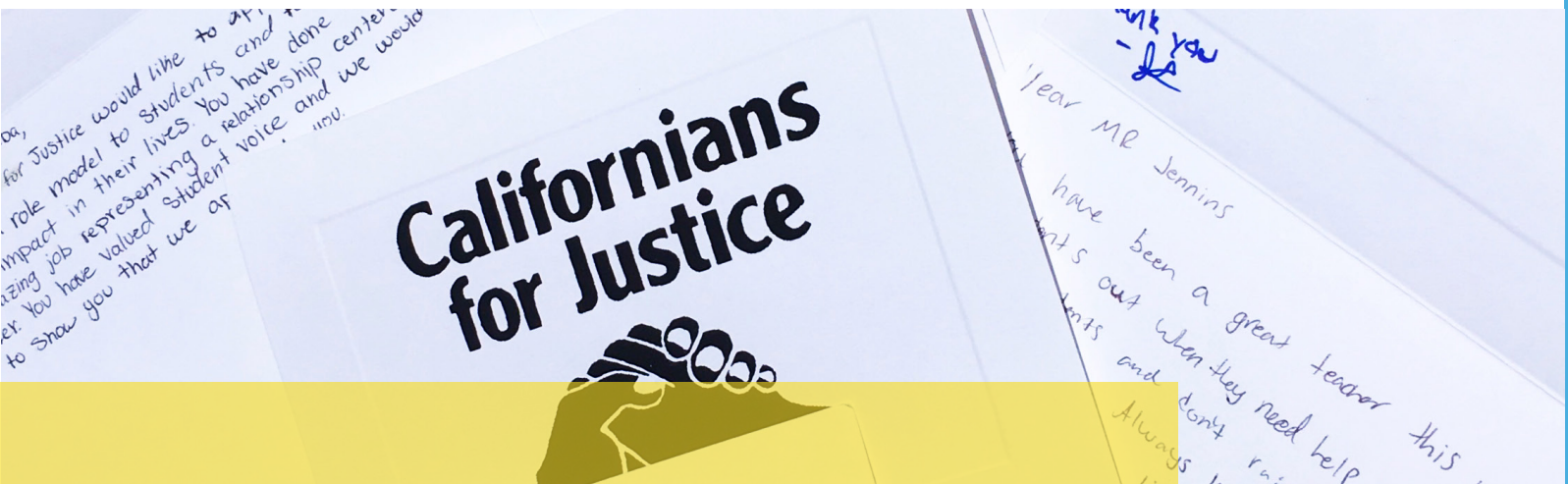
64% reported hearing negative comments on gender expression from teachers or other school staff⁹



reported hearing homophobic remarks from teachers/school staff

41%

thought they would be blamed by staff or disciplined



LGBQ and TGNC Student Experiences

Californians for Justice student leaders interviewed report that teachers often have good intentions and want to support students, but do not always know how. The alienation that many LGBQ/TGNC students experience is compounded by a lack of strong relationships with teachers. Students feel fear or anxiety about informing teachers of their pronouns or otherwise asking for support. Spencer, who identifies as genderfluid, noted:



“When I dress masculine, I’m scared of my teachers judging me. I’m scared to tell them my pronouns, but I want them to know.”

Other students echoed the sentiment that TGNC students are often afraid to tell teachers their gender pronouns. Teachers may then inadvertently mis-gender students in class, causing considerable distress.

Californians for Justice leaders also observed that teachers “enforce a lot of heteronormativity” (Janice): such as constantly using examples of gender normative roles or assuming that students are, or want to be, in heterosexual relationships. Several students pointed out that teachers enforce gender binaries: “In PE, it’s always ‘boys here and girls on that side.’ Where do the gender non-conforming people go?” (Spencer). Spencer also noted that they asked to be in the boys section for PE, but the teacher repeatedly refused.

Californians for Justice leaders want their teachers to intervene when they see or overhear harassment and derogatory words from students. **Yet in California, only 39% of LGB students, and 25% of transgender students hear teachers or staff stop negative comments based on gender non-conformity.**¹⁰ Some pointed out that teachers will discipline students for using slurs as an infraction against school rules—but will not acknowledge that these slurs are specifically harmful for LGBQ & TGNC students. CFJ leaders also acknowledge that it can be difficult for teachers to intervene because denigrating comments are often made between friends, rather than directly to students’ faces or in front of teachers.

Broader school practices and policies can contribute to hostile climates for LGBQ and TGNC students. For example, a lack of gender neutral bathrooms and lockers create unsafe school environments for gender non-conforming students.

CFJ leader Spencer, who identifies as genderfluid, stated: *“The bathrooms are a big issue. On days when I look more masculine, I’m scared to go in the girls’ bathroom. What if they kick me out because they think I’m a boy? Or just give me looks like, ‘Does she really have to dress like that?’ And if I go into the boys’ bathroom I’m afraid I’m going to get beat up. So where do I go?”* Gender non-conforming students also do not have appropriate locker rooms to change for physical education classes. Although some schools accommodate GNC students by allowing them to change elsewhere, like the nurse’s office, this can cause students to be late to class, or further marked as non-normative.



Nationwide, 82% of LGBTQ students reported LGBT- related discriminatory policies or practices at their schools. 74% said students experienced these at schools.¹¹



41% of trans students in California couldn’t use the appropriate bathrooms.¹²



In California, 36% of trans students could not use the gender pronouns and names that corresponded with their gender identity in school.¹³



Many CFJ leaders pointed out that school curriculum never or rarely reflects queer and trans GNC history, issues, and communities. When school content does involve LGBTQ+/TGNC issues, it may do so in tokenistic ways or can otherwise create classroom dynamics and discussions that are damaging to LGBTQ+/TGNC students. For example, Jordyn discussed a project where students had to argue a court case about the constitutionality of making trans students use the bathroom of their assigned sex. In a class environment where TGNC students did not feel seen or safe, this assignment heightened fear and discomfort as TGNC students listened to passionate arguments supporting the proposed legislation.

» In California, only 33% of LGBTQ students were taught positive things about LGBT people.¹⁴

Hostile school climates are detrimental to LGBTQ and TGNC students' well-being and can jeopardize their academic achievement and increase their isolation from schools. Students may skip classes, school functions, and curricular activities because of experiences of hostility and discrimination.¹⁵

» Nationally, 61% of LGBTQ students reported that a "hostile school climate" was a factor in deciding to drop out or led to doubts about whether they would finish school.¹⁶



UPLIFTING STUDENT VOICE - EAST SAN JOSE:

Since coming out publicly as a lesbian two years ago, Sierra has seen how her school's treatment of trans and gender non-conforming and LGBTQ students, while better than most schools, could be vastly improved through better representation and resources for students.

"When I first came out my freshmen year, I went to [a few trusted] teachers and I asked them 'How do I go about this? What if I get the dirty looks?' and they reassured me, and said you are who you are."

That advice from trusted adults on campus helped Sierra feel more comfortable being her authentic self, but resources and support for LGBTQ and TGNC students is still the exception rather than the rule.

Until recently, Sierra said trans and gender non-conforming students had to weigh their physical safety against their gender identity nearly every time they used school locker rooms.

"I had a friend who identified as the opposite [gender] and he was just kind of shut out until we talked to the office people and the teachers and they made a point of opening the locker room early for him so he could go in and change when no one was in there."

There are no openly gay teachers or staff on-campus, but Sierra said there are several allies who she and fellow students can turn to when they need to bring an issue to administrations' attention. These relationships have been key for LGBTQ and TGNC student-led victories on campus.

Without the close relationships and trust Sierra and fellow LGBTQ and TGNC students have built with allied teachers, it would be much harder for students to feel safe on campus. Staff are not always prepared or trained on how to respond to the specific needs of LGBTQ and TGNC students. Having an administrative culture that is receptive to student voice and feedback is essential to developing a safe and healthy environment.



Relationship Centered Schools & LGBTQ+ and TGNC Students

RELATIONSHIP CENTERED SCHOOLS:

- » Unite social emotional learning and academics
- » Ensure all students reach their full potential regardless of race or zip code
- » Provide staff with the capacity and conditions to connect with students
- » Address trauma, build resilience, and confront bias to create healthy relationships
- » Lead together with students, parents and staff working towards a shared vision

Relationship Centered Schools build upon existing efforts to integrate social emotional learning into school life. By addressing bias and racism, Relationship Centered Schools value student voice, invest in staff, and create space for relationship building.



VALUE STUDENT VOICE

When LGBTQ and TGNC student voices are heard, valued, and reflected¹⁷, they can lead the way by shaping more inclusive policies that help improve school climate and school safety¹⁸ for all students.¹⁹

Gay-Straight Alliances, Queer Student, Gender and Sexuality Alliances (or other school-based clubs led by LGBTQ/TGNC students) provide safe spaces, leadership opportunities, and ways for students to create positive change in their schools. GSA's and other school clubs advised by supportive staff can enable students to create stronger connections with school staff, increase teachers' proactive interventions upon overhearing or witnessing harassment, and lead to activities and policies that foster a more inclusive and positive school climate.²⁰ For example, Santee High School's Gay Straight Alliance, supported by GSA Network, advocated for and won a 15-stall gender neutral bathroom. They obtained 700 petition signatures and met with students and school administration to garner support and awareness.

Nationally:

- » 51% of students in schools with a GSA reported hearing homophobic remarks such as "fag" or "dyke" often or frequently, compared to 68% of students in schools without a GSA.
- » 21% of staff in schools with GSAs intervened in homophobic remarks most of the time or always, compared to 12% of staff in schools without GSAs.²¹

LGBTQ/TGNC-Inclusive Curriculum is another way for students' voices to be heard and reflected. Many students pointed out that LGBTQ and TGNC inclusive curriculum could uplift LGBTQ/TGNC students' experiences, affirm their voices in the classroom, and contribute to an environment that humanizes LGBTQ/TGNC people.



Stephanie suggested:

"It normalizes talking about and being gay or being bi, or being trans, queer, anything -- it makes it not so always [about] heterosexual relationships."



Spencer pointed out:

"There's a long history, we've been around forever. So learning about the history of queer people would bring up that it's not something new and it would make it normal, like people can't be like they don't exist because we talked about it in history."

However, students also pointed out the importance of not including LGBTQ+/TGNC content in tokenizing or negative ways. This may require teacher training in tandem with textbooks and updated materials. Spencer expressed concern: *“If the teacher isn't queer or doesn't know much about the queer community, they might just not do it.”* GSA Network's research has found that professional development and instructional materials, district-level support, supportive school administration, cross community collaboration, and institutionalization of LGBTQ+ and TGNC-inclusive curriculum are key to successful implementation.²²

Research finds that LGBTQ+/TGNC-inclusive curriculum is strongly associated with students' feelings of safety, belonging, and inclusion at school.²³ LGBTQ+/TGNC students who go to schools with LGBTQ+/TGNC-inclusive curriculum are less likely to miss school and hear less negative comments about gender expression and LGBTQ+/TGNC people.²⁴

- » **Nationally:** 67% of students in schools that didn't have LGBTQ+/TGNC-inclusive curriculum felt unsafe due to sexual orientation, compared to 43% of students in schools that have inclusive curriculum.
- » **In California:** 61% of trans students who learned about LGBTQ+/TGNC issues in their curriculum stated that they feel safe at school, compared to 43% of trans students who did not.²⁵

TRANS AND GNC PROTECTIONS AND RIGHTS IN CA SCHOOLS (ACLU-NC):

- » The right to keep gender identity private
- » The right to participate in PE classes/ supports consistent with gender identity
- » The right to be addressed by names/ pronouns corresponding with gender identity (which schools should use on ID's, rosters, yearbooks, etc.)
- » The right to wear clothing that expresses gender identity
- » The right to use restrooms and locker rooms that align with gender identity

INVEST IN STAFF

Strong relationships with supportive adults at school are critical for the well-being and academic attainment of LGBTQ+ and TGNC students. Studies find that supportive, caring adults are related with lower absenteeism, higher GPA's, school engagement, connectedness, and higher feelings of safety.²⁶ Trans students reported feeling safer when teachers intervene around negative comments about gender identity or expression.²⁷ In California, 55% of trans students who said they knew where to go for information about LGBTQ+/TGNC issues reported feeling safe at school, compared to 36% of students who didn't know where to go for information.²⁸

LGBTQ+/TGNC Support Liaisons: In districts such as San Francisco and DC Unified, staff members receive an additional stipend to serve as LGBTQ+/TGNC support liaisons. These staff members regularly attend professional development around topics such as health and programs that specifically serve LGBTQ+/TGNC youth. Liaisons are also responsible for planning, promoting, and implementing events and activities such as GSA's, conferences, and health affairs. They may also hold drop-in/ office hours and promote inclusive curriculum and policies.²⁹

CFJ leaders expressed support for designated LGBTQ+/TGNC support liaisons: *"Queer students should have someone they can go to, who can for sure understand."* (Janice) Several leaders, like Janice, expressed a desire for *"more out, queer teachers... You would feel less lost. There'd be someone to help you."* GSA advisors at schools often take on this critical role, serving as role models and providing *"advice on queer related things."* In doing so, teachers can help educate other staff and cultivate positive changes in school climate. Stephanie described a teacher who advises the GSA club: *"She explained pronouns... I feel like because of that all the staff are on board with it and they understand LGBT (issues) and that some students do have different pronouns [than are on the roster]."*

Staff Trainings: Trainings on LGBTQ+ and TGNC communities and issues could equip all staff to contribute to a safe school climate. For example, Palo Alto Unified partnered with Outlet and Gender Spectrum to support teacher training. All new teachers were trained on LGBTQ+ issues, and 25 were trained on gender diversity to then provide trainings to over 250 staff on gender inclusivity. CFJ leaders pointed out that professional development could help teachers develop awareness of comments or practices that negatively impact young people. Training could empower teachers to more proactively intervene when they overhear slurs, negative comments, or witness harassment.





Stephanie stated:

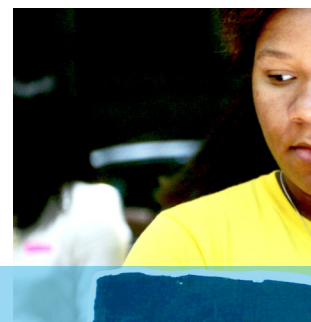
“I feel like when they see it [harassment or slurs] teachers should educate students, instead of just saying, you’re in trouble now and letting it go by. That student [will] keep doing it because they don’t get educated about it.”

Trainings could also provide capacity for more teachers to support LGBTQ and TGNC students: *“If teachers see a student who’s out and queer, they don’t really approach them about it or anything because they don’t know how to. And the student probably wishes there’s someone they can talk to like a teacher. But teachers, if they’re not queer, they don’t know. So training them [would help] so they could know how to talk about it.”* (Spencer)

CREATING SPACE FOR RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

CFJ leaders recognize that the structure of many high schools can impede staff’s intentions to build strong relationships with students and to create inclusive, welcoming environments. Large schools can make it difficult for students to connect with teachers and thus feel safe enough to discuss their gender pronouns. Master schedules without time for relationship building between staff and students, or time for staff collaboration and learning also contribute to the isolation and fear felt by LGBTQ/TGNC students. As such, **solutions that create time and space for meaningful relationship building can be especially beneficial for LGBTQ and TGNC students.**

» **Advisories** can provide spaces for students to develop meaningful relationships with an adult at school, build connections with peers, and receive personalized social, emotional, and academic support—all especially critical, given the specific challenges experienced by LGBTQ/TGNC students. *“Freshmen are coming in all confused and don’t know what they are [feeling], or if it’s okay to be the way they are. And they have nobody to turn to”* (Stephanie). With an established curriculum, teachers can use circles and other practices to better understand students’ educational and life experiences and keep track of their academics and well-being. In particular, advisories could provide safer spaces for students to share experiences and issues in their life—including gender identity and expression—and build community with peers in ways that could stave off and ultimately prevent harassment and negative comments.



- » **Small learning communities, houses, academies:** Small learning communities, houses, or communities within schools can similarly enable members (including staff and students) to get to know each other well and to allow teachers to identify students' specific needs and strengths. It can also help staff learn and honor pronouns. Smaller learning communities could foster relationships in ways that discourage harassment between students and encourage LGBTQ+/TGNC students to develop meaningful relationships with staff. *"So even if [staff] are not queer, students can still go to that teacher and get help"* (Stephanie).
- » **Restorative practices/ restorative justice** are ways to repair harm and resolve conflict—such as instances of verbal or physical harassment—in ways that hold individuals accountable but are alternatives to punitive strategies. Because LGBTQ and TGNC students of color are particularly vulnerable to school pushout, these practices can be especially important to improve school climate while getting to the root of conflicts and addressing students' multiple needs.

Stephanie stated:



"The teacher needs to understand that the student is a whole person, gay, straight, whatever they are. [So they might be going through things] as a queer teenager. So [teachers can] learn and find out about the different issues that a student could be going through. It should be something that a teacher should know."

Other examples include: peer juries, circles, conflict resolution programs, and peer mediation.³⁰

We all have a role to play in centering LGBTQ and TGNC students in our education system. The roots of systemic heterosexism, transphobia, and racism run deep in our schools and communities, and California's young people are counting on us. Together we can create the schools our young people dream of and deserve.



JOIN US

Join us in creating Relationship Centered Schools that invest in staff so that all students can have the support and conditions to succeed.

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At Californians for Justice, we believe that young people are the leaders we need to create the healthy, just, and thriving schools that all our communities deserve.



End Notes

¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer. Here, we use the acronym LGBTQ+ to recognize the specific experiences, challenges, and conditions of folks who are GNC or trans. GNC, or gender nonconformity, is defined by GSA Network as a “term used to describe a person’s identity or expression of gender. A GNC person may express their gender through the clothes they wear, the activities they engage in, the pronouns they use, and/or their mannerisms. This expression may embrace masculinity, femininity, neither, or both. Gender nonconformity is also an umbrella term used to describe various gender identities such as genderqueer, gender fluid, boi, gender neutral, and/or transgender.” From Burdge, Hilary, Zami Hyemingway, and Adela Licona. 2014. Gender Nonconforming Youth: Discipline Disparities, School Push-Out, and the School to Prison Pipeline. San Francisco, CA and Tucson, Arizona: GSA Network and Crossroads Collaborative at the University of Arizona. Retrieved February 12, 2018 (https://gsanetwork.org/files/aboutus/GSA_GNC_FINAL-web.pdf).

Transgender: “a term for designating those who transcend or transgress gender by not looking, acting, being, or identifying as traditionally male or female; can include crossdressers, transsexuals, intersex people, and other gender nonconformists.” https://gsanetwork.org/files/resources/gender_orientationterms.pdf

² GLSEN. 2017. School Climate in California (State Snapshot). New York: GLSEN. Retrieved March 1, 2018 (<https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/California%20State%20Snapshot%20-%20NSCS.pdf>).

³ GLSEN. 2017. School Climate in California (State Snapshot). New York: GLSEN. Retrieved March 1, 2018 (<https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/California%20State%20Snapshot%20-%20NSCS.pdf>).

⁴ GLSEN. 2017. School Climate in California (State Snapshot). New York: GLSEN. Retrieved March 1, 2018 (<https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/California%20State%20Snapshot%20-%20NSCS.pdf>).

⁵ Russell, S. T., J. K. McGuire, R. Toomey, and C. R. Anderson. 2010. Gender Non-Conformity and School Safety: Documenting the Problem and Steps Schools Can Take. San Francisco, CA: California Safe Schools Coalition. Retrieved February 12, 2018 (https://gsanetwork.org/files/aboutus/CSSC_Research_Brief_12.pdf).

⁶ Russell et al. 2010.

⁷ Burdge, Hilary, Zami Hyemingway, and Adela Licona. 2014. Gender Nonconforming Youth: Discipline Disparities, School Push-Out, and the School to Prison Pipeline. San Francisco, CA and Tucson, Arizona: GSA Network and Crossroads Collaborative at the University of Arizona. Retrieved February 12, 2018 (https://gsanetwork.org/files/aboutus/GSA_GNC_FINAL-web.pdf).

Burdge, Hilary, Zami Hyemingway, and Adela Licona. 2014. LGBTQ Youth of Color: Discipline Disparities, School Push-Out, and the School to Prison Pipeline. San Francisco, CA and Tucson, Arizona: GSA Network and Crossroads Collaborative at the University of Arizona. Retrieved February 12, 2018

⁸ Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number for the purposes of visual representation. For more exact percentages, please see reports cited. Kosciw, Joseph, Emily Greytak, Noreen Giga, Christian Villenas, and David Danischewski. 2016. 2015 National GLSEN 2015 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth in Our Nation’s Schools. New York: GLSEN. Retrieved February 12, 2018 (https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2015%20National%20GLSEN%202015%20National%20School%20Climate%20Survey%20%28NSCS%29%20-%20Full%20Report_0.pdf).

⁹ GLSEN 2016. (Kosciw et. al 2016)

¹⁰ CSSC 2010.

¹¹ GLSEN 2016. (Kosciw et. al 2016)

¹² GLSEN 2017.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ GLSEN 2017.

¹⁵ Murdock, Tamera B. and Megan B. Bolch. 2005. “Risk and Protective Factors for Poor School Adjustment in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) High School Youth: Variable and Person-Centered Analyses.” *Psychology in the Schools* 42(2):159-72.

¹⁶ GLSEN 2016

¹⁷ More broadly, participation in extracurricular activities are associated with positive outcomes, such as academic achievement, for all students. Farb, Amy Feldman and Jennifer L. Matjasko. 2012. “Recent Advances in Research on School-Based Extracurricular Activities and Adolescent Development.” *Developmental Review* 32(1):1-48.

¹⁸ Burdge, Hilary, Shannon Snapp, Carolyn Laub, Stephen Russell, and Raymond Moody. 2014. Implementing Lessons That Matter: The Impact of LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum on Student Safety, Well-Being, and Achievement. San Francisco, CA and Tucson, Arizona: GSA Network and Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families at the University of Arizona. Retrieved February 12, 2018 (https://gsanetwork.org/files/aboutus/ImplementingLessons_fullreport.pdf).

¹⁹ Burdge, Hilary, K. Sinclair, Carolyn Laub, and S. T. Russell. 2012. Lessons That Matter: LGBTQ Inclusivity and School Safety. San Francisco, CA: GSA Network and California Safe Schools Coalition. Retrieved February 14, 2018 (https://gsanetwork.org/files/aboutus/PSH%20Report%206_2012.pdf)

²⁰ GLSEN 2016.

²¹ GLSEN 2016.

²² Burge et. Al 2014

²³ Burdge, Hilary, Shannon Snapp, Carolyn Laub, Stephen Russell, and Raymond Moody. 2014. Implementing Lessons That Matter: The Impact of LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum on Student Safety, Well-Being, and Achievement. San Francisco, CA and Tucson, Arizona: GSA Network and Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families at the University of Arizona. Retrieved February 12, 2018 (https://gsanetwork.org/files/aboutus/ImplementingLessons_fullreport.pdf).

²⁴ GLSEN 2016

²⁵ McGuire et. Al 2010

²⁶ Chesir-Teran, Daniel and Diane Hughes. 2009. “Heterosexism in High School and Victimization among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning Students.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 38(7):963-75.

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Walls, N. Eugene, Sarah B. Kane, and Hope Wisneski. 2010. “Gay–Straight Alliances and School Experiences of Sexual Minority Youth.” *Youth & Society* 41(3):307-32.

²⁷ McGuire, J. K., T. J. Clarke, C. R. Anderson, and S. T. Russell. 2010. Understanding School Safety for Transgender Students. San Francisco, CA: California Safe Schools Coalition. Retrieved February 12, 2018 (https://gsanetwork.org/files/aboutus/CSSC_Research_Brief_12.pdf).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ <https://dcps.dc.gov/page/lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-and-questioning-student-engagement>
<http://www.healthiersf.org/LGBTQ/Act/positions.html>

³⁰ <http://schottfoundation.org/sites/default/files/restorative-practices-guide.pdf>



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