LGBTQ+ Students in Focus: Demographics and Academic Achievement

A joint publication of CSBA and Equality California Institute

This brief is part of CSBA's Students in Focus series, which features briefs and fact sheets related to the educational needs of various student groups enrolled in California's public schools. These briefs are designed to help governance teams have informed discussions to ensure all students have the resources they need to succeed and thrive. This publication is the first of two briefs focusing on LGBTQ+ students.

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This research brief examines the academic experiences of LGBTQ+ students in California schools, sharing key metrics such as enrollment data, chronic absenteeism, and disciplinary data. By recognizing and addressing these indicators, governance teams have the unique opportunity to foster more inclusive and supportive learning environments. With this knowledge, governance teams can better identify disparities and develop focused interventions to support student success.

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* This brief will use the acronym "LGBTQ+" to refer to the broad group of individuals that consider themselves as part of the community that associate with identities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and other identities. Deviations from this acronym will occur in this brief only when citing a specific acronym used within a report.

LGBTQ+ defined

The acronym LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning. The "+" at the end of LGBTQ+ acknowledges that there are other gender and gender identities, such as intersex and asexual, that may not be explicitly represented by the initial letters, and it aims to be inclusive of those identities as well. This acronym is used to describe a diverse group of individuals who do not conform to heteronormative (the idea that heterosexuality is the standard or normal expression of sexuality) gender and sexual orientations.[1] Governance teams should familiarize themselves with these terms to provide clear communication, avoid miscommunication, and develop inclusive policy (particularly when communicating the differences between sexual orientation, sex, and gender). The appendix of this brief provides a glossary of terms based on definitions from the Human Rights Campaign.[2]

Why is this important?

Recognizing diverse LGBTQ+ identities helps youth feel validated, reduces isolation and mental health challenges, and fosters belonging. Pediatric research has shown that inclusive environments allow students to explore and express their identities without fear, supporting emotional development and well-being.[3] A 2019 study on the experiences of LGBTQ students in California found that teaching about gender identity and sexual orientation promotes tolerance, reduces prejudice, and encourages healthier, more respectful relationships.[4] Moreover, the American Psychological Association notes that knowledge about LGBTQ+ communities also dispels harmful stereotypes and encourages youth to become allies through actions, such as advocacy for equality and positive societal change.[5] A review

of research by the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs from Youth.gov confirmed that schools that provide access to information about LGBTQ+ issues enhance student connectedness, reduce stigma, and improve academic and social outcomes for all students.[6] Overall, schools that prioritize addressing the needs of LGBTQ+ students, not only find that those students have greater overall wellness but also experience improved academic achievement and attendance across all grade levels.[7]

Enrollment and demographic data

Information about LGBTQ+ student demographics varies for several reasons. While sex assigned at birth is typically collected during enrollment and on many forms, fewer surveys capture information about a student's sexual orientation and gender identity. LGBTQ+ students may also not feel safe disclosing information related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Additionally, students may not understand questions regarding sexual orientation and gender identity; even students who are LGBTQ+ may not have the language to describe their identity in the way a survey or demographic questionnaire may ask (e.g. "Are you attracted to girls or women?" versus "Do you identify as a lesbian?").

Despite the limitations of current data, there are estimates for the LGBTQ+ student population in California. Of the 3.2 million middle and high school students enrolled in California schools in the 2023–24 school year as estimated by the California Department of Education,[8] the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law estimates there are 244,000 "LGBT" (youth ages 13-17 in California, including an estimated 22,200 transgender youth, based on the "LGBT Youth Population in the United States" fact sheet.)[9] Estimates using data from the California Student Survey indicate that 10 percent of middle and high school youth in California identify as LGBTQ.[10]

While it is estimated that LGBTQ+ students only make up about 7-11 percent of the general population of California middle and high school students, a 2019 study on youth in unstable housing found that LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented among youth in foster care (30 percent) and unstable housing (25 percent).[11]

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) also shows that LGBTQ+ youth in foster care or unstable housing experience increased disparities compared to heterosexual youth and LGBTQ+ youth in stable housing, including:

▸ Poorer school attendance (twice the rate of their heterosexual, housed peers), poorer mental health, and higher substance use for LGBTQ+ youth in unstable housing, and
▸ More fights in school, victimization, and mental health problems for LGBTQ+ youth in foster care.[12]

According to 2019 YRBS data, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning high school students are 2.2 times more likely to experience homelessness than heterosexual high school students, while transgender high school students are 9.2 times more likely to experience homelessness than non-transgender (i.e., cisgender) high school students.[13]

The Trevor Project's "2021 National Survey of LGBTQ Youth Mental Health" sheds light on the potential reasons for the overrepresentation of these youth in experiencing foster care and unstable housing. Of LGBTQ youth reporting that they had slept away from parents or caregivers, 55 percent ran away because of mistreatment, and 40 percent were kicked out because of discrimination based on their LGBTQ identity.[14] LGBTQ+ youth in conflict with their families about their identity are especially vulnerable to experiencing unstable housing.

Chronic absenteeism and disciplinary data

LGBTQ+ students often face significant challenges related to absenteeism and disciplinary actions, due in part to their treatment in school. The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, Inc., (GLSEN), a national organization supporting LGBTQ+ students, found in its 2019 National School Climate Survey that approximately one-third (32 percent) of LGBTQ+ students reported missing at least one full day of school in the past month due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable. Additionally, just over 11 percent missed four or more days during the same period.[15] This high rate of absenteeism highlights the impact on students who report experiencing an unsupportive school climate.

For California student respondents in GLSEN's 2021 survey, nearly half (45 percent) of LGBTQ students reported anti-LGBTQ discrimination. This includes facing disciplinary actions for public displays of affection (20 percent of LGBTQ students) and barriers to using bathrooms aligned with their gender (20 percent of LGBTQ students and 40 percent of transgender students).[16] Such discrimination creates a negative school climate that exacerbates issues of absenteeism.

Discriminatory disciplinary practices are particularly concerning. LGBTQ+ students who reported missing school due to feeling unsafe were more likely to face discipline for truancy, compared to students who missed school for other reasons.[17] Further, discriminatory policies, such as gendered dress codes and limiting or excluding LGBTQ+ student from activities, disproportionately affect LGBTQ+ students. Fifty-nine percent of LGBTQ+ students reported that they had experienced at least one discriminatory practice or policy at their school.[18]

The reliance on punitive disciplinary approaches also has broader implications. In a report on LGBTQ+ student involvement in the justice system, GLSEN found that although only a small portion of LGBTQ+ students have encountered the justice system due to school disciplinary actions, this involvement can significantly impact their future educational attainment and opportunities. Two percent of LGBTQ+ students reported contact with the juvenile or criminal justice system as a result of school discipline, which included appearing before a court, being arrested, or serving time in a juvenile or adult detention facility.[19] The same report also found that 4 percent of transgender students and 3 percent of those with other non-cisgender identities reported higher rates of justice system contact as a result of school discipline compared to their cisgender LGBQ peers.[20]

Additionally, school discipline practices can further alienate students struggling with other issues. LGBTQ+ students with less stable housing situations or disabilities face an increased likelihood of involvement in the justice system due to school discipline. For example, 10 percent of homeless LGBTQ+ students experienced such contact compared to 2 percent of those with stable housing and 4 percent of those living with relatives. LGBTQ+ students with disabilities also face higher rates of justice system involvement due to school discipline (4 percent versus 2 percent).[21]

These issues of absenteeism and discriminatory discipline practices not only affect LGBTQ+ students' immediate school experiences but also have long-term implications for their academic achievement and educational attainment. Understanding these challenges provides crucial context for examining how these students' overall academic performance, graduation rates, and pathways to further education are impacted.

Academic achievement and attainment data

The adverse effects of hostile environments and discriminatory disciplinary practices extend beyond absenteeism to significantly impact academic achievement and long-term educational outcomes for LGBTQ+ students. School climates characterized by harassment and discrimination lead to reduced academic performance. LGBTQ+ students who face higher levels of victimization, whether in person or online, report lower grade point averages (GPAs). For example, the 2021 National School Climate Survey found that LGBTQ+ students targeted for their sexual orientation have an average GPA of 2.76, compared to 3.17 for those who reported facing less victimization.[22] Additionally, LGBTQ+ students who experience discrimination related to their sexual orientation or gender identity have lower GPAs compared to their peers who do not face such discrimination (2.92 vs. 3.20).[23]

Anti-LGBTQ harassment and discrimination are also linked to diminished academic aspirations. Many LGBTQ+ students plan to complete high school and pursue post-secondary education, but the barriers they encounter undermine these goals. Direct data related to dropout rates and graduation rates for LGBTQ+ youth are limited, as sexual orientation and gender identity are not demographics frequently tracked by schools. However, estimates suggest high dropout rates are due to the prevalence of LGBTQ+ students reporting hostile school climates, according to the American Psychological Association.[24] GLSEN's report on educational exclusion found that 58 percent of LGBTQ+ students reported a hostile or unsupportive school climate as cause for leaving high school.[25] Discriminatory disciplinary practices, such as unfair suspensions and expulsions, further contribute to academic disengagement and increase the likelihood of dropping out. Further, research from the Williams Institute estimates that half of LGBTQ youth in the United States are "at risk" of being arrested or entering juvenile and criminal justice systems.[26]

For LGBTQ+ youth of color, the challenges are exacerbated by additional forms of discrimination. Research from the LGBTQ+ student leadership organization GSA Network found that LGBTQ+ youth of color often face more severe disciplinary actions and increased criminalization, contributing to "school push-out," where students leave traditional schools for alternative settings or GED programs.[27] This exclusionary practice negatively impacts their academic success and increases their likelihood of involvement with the juvenile justice system. A report from Movement Advancement Project, Center for American Progress, and Youth First found that LGBTQ+ youth of color are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system, making up 85 percent of the population of LGBT and gender non-conforming youth.[28]

Addressing these disparities requires a concerted effort to create more inclusive, supportive school environments and developing6 targeted interventions that address the specific needs of LGBTQ+ students. By fostering an environment that values and supports all students, schools can mitigate the negative impacts of discrimination and improve educational outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth.

Resources

Los Angeles LGBT Center Out for Safe Schools program

The Los Angeles LGBT Center's OUT for Safe Schools® program transforms school campuses into communities of support and safety for LGBTQ+ students. By implementing OUT for Safe Schools, your LEA can help LGBTQ+ students feel comfortable in and thrive at school. schools.lalgbtcenter.org/out-for-safe-schools

Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN)

GLSEN works to ensure that LGBTQ students can learn and grow in a school environment free from bullying and harassment and provide a safe and affirming environment all youth deserve. www.glsen.org

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)

Founded in 1973, PFLAG is the first and largest organization dedicated to supporting, educating, and advocating for LGBTQ+ people and their families. pflag.org

The Trevor Project

The Trevor Project is the leading suicide prevention and crisis intervention nonprofit organization for LGBTQ+ young people. The organization provides information and support to LGBTQ+ young people 24/7, all year round. www.thetrevorproject.org

Human Rights Campaign

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Welcoming Schools provides comprehensive bullying prevention and LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive professional development training, lesson plans, booklists, and resources specifically designed for educators and youth-serving professionals. welcomingschools.org

Equality California: Safe and Supportive Schools Resource Center

Safe and Supportive Schools Resource Center fosters inclusive and affirming learning environments for all students, especially LGBTQ+ youth. It serves as a central hub for Equality California's Safe and Supportive Schools Report Card, educator resources, and its efforts in combating policies that make schools less safe for LGBTQ+ and all students. schools.eqca.org

GSA Network

GSA Network is a LGBTQ racial and gender justice organization that empowers and trains queer, transgender and allied youth leaders to advocate, organize, and mobilize an intersectional movement for safer schools and healthier communities. gsanetwork.org

▶ How does our LEA ensure that our policies consider the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals who also belong to other marginalized groups?

▶ What steps does our LEA take to ensure access to support and resources for LGBTQ+ students?

Policy, practices, and disciplinary measures

▶ How can our LEA implement alternative disciplinary measures, such as restorative practices (practices designed to build community in schools, teach interpersonal skills, repair harm when conflict occurs, and proactively meet students' needs to reduce misbehavior) to address disparities in the treatment of LGBTQ+ students?

▶ What review mechanisms are in place to ensure our disciplinary practices don't disproportionately affect LGBTQ+ students?

Staff training

▶ What professional development is provided to teachers and staff to ensure LGBTQ+ inclusivity and sensitivity?

▶ How can our LEA expand training programs to cover both overt and subtle forms of discrimination?

▶ Are there specific training modules addressing the experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color and other marginalized groups?

SDUSD Office of Youth Advocacy/LGBTQIA Resources

The San Diego Unified School District offers resources such as fact sheets, slide decks, and community resource centers to support LGBTQ+ students, families, and community members. bit.ly/3YoLWUU

GAMUT Board Policies and Administrative Regulations

CSBA GAMUT Policy and Policy *Plus* subscribers have access to the most up-to-date CSBA sample policy language. The following are sample board policies (BP), administrative regulations (AR), and exhibits (E) that have been developed for LEAs to use as starting points for adopting policies to address bullying, harassment, and discrimination.

Please be advised that sample policies are current only as of their most recently revised/reviewed date.

- BP 0410 – Nondiscrimination in District Programs and Activities
- BP 0415 – Equity
- BP/AR 0450 – Comprehensive Safety Plan
- BP/AR/E(1)/E(2) 1312.3 – Uniform Complaint Procedures
- BP/E 4119.12, 4219.12, & 4319.12 – Title IX Sexual Harassment Complaint Procedures
- BP 4131 – Staff Development
- BP/AR 5131.2 – Bullying
- BP 5137 – Positive School Climate
- BP/AR 5145.2 – Freedom of Speech/Expression
- BP/AR 5145.3 – Nondiscrimination/Harassment
- BP/AR 5145.7 – Sexual Harassment
- AR 5145.71 - Title IX Sexual Harassment Complaint Procedures
- BP 5145.9 – Hate Motivated Behavior
- BP/AR 6145.5 – Student Organizations and Equal Access

Appendix

Glossary of Terms

This glossary, based on definitions provided by the Human Rights Campaign, provides definitions of key terms related to LGBTQ+ identities. Individuals may interpret or apply these terms differently based on their personal experiences, backgrounds, cultures, and identities. Language around gender and sexual orientation is deeply personal and evolving, so respect for how people define and express their own identities creates supportive and respectful environments.

L: Lesbian — A woman who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to other women.

G: Gay — Often used to describe men who are emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to other men. It can also be used more broadly to refer to anyone who is attracted to people of the same gender.

B: Bisexual — A person who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to individuals of both their own gender and other genders.

T: Transgender — Someone whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. For example, a person assigned male at birth who identifies as a woman is transgender.

Q: The letter "Q" denotes both "Queer" and "Questioning" which are defined as follows:

- **Queer —** An umbrella term that encompasses a variety of non-heteronormative sexual orientations and gender identities. Many individuals also will specifically use the term as "queer" to describe an identity that may or may not fit or conform to one of the other non-heteronormative identity terms. Note, for some, queer may hold a pejorative meaning as well.

- **Questioning —** Refers to individuals who are still exploring their own gender or gender identity.

I: Intersex — People born with physical, genetic, or hormonal variations that do not fit typical definitions of male or female. Intersex individuals may have a combination of male and female characteristics.

A: Asexual — People who experience little or no sexual attraction to others, regardless of their gender. Asexual individuals may still form romantic or emotional connections.

Gender identity — Gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct aspects of a person's identity, and it's important to understand the differences between them. Gender identity refers to an individual's deeply held sense of their own gender, which may be different from the sex assigned to them at birth. It is a personal and internal understanding of whether one identifies as a man, a woman, both, neither, or somewhere along the gender spectrum.

Gender identity is about how an individual identifies themselves. For example, a person assigned male at birth may identify as a transgender woman if she identifies as a woman, or as non-binary if they don't exclusively identify as a man or woman. Gender identity is not related to who an individual is attracted to romantically or sexually. It is solely about one's sense of self in terms of gender.[29]

Sexual orientation — Sexual orientation refers to an individual's romantic, emotional, and sexual attraction to others. It is about who the individual is attracted to and the nature of that attraction.

There are several sexual orientations, including:

- **Heterosexual:** Attraction to individuals of a different gender.
- **Homosexual:** Attraction to individuals of the same gender.
- **Bisexual:** Attraction to individuals of both one's own gender and other genders.
- **Pansexual:** Attraction to individuals regardless of their gender or gender identity.
- **Asexual:** Little to no sexual attraction to others, regardless of gender.
- **Queer:** A term some people use to describe a non-heteronormative sexual orientation.

Note: Sexual orientation is not determined by a person's gender identity. For example, a transgender woman who is attracted to other women can identify as a lesbian. Her gender identity is "woman," and her sexual orientation is "lesbian" because she is attracted to women.

To reiterate, gender identity pertains to a person's sense of their own gender, while sexual orientation pertains to who a person is attracted to romantically, emotionally, and sexually. Understanding these distinctions helps create a more inclusive and respectful environment for all individuals, including those who are transgender or have diverse sexual orientations.

Sex assigned at birth — A label given at birth based on medical factors, including hormones, chromosomes, and genitals. This is generally assigned by a doctor as male, female, or intersex.

Cisgender — Someone whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Heteronormativity — The notion that heterosexuality is the preferred or normal sexual orientation, coupled with a belief in the gender binary, distinct gender roles, and a social hierarchy that idealizes cisgender, heterosexual relationships.

Non-binary — An umbrella term for a gender identity that falls outside the male-female gender binary.

For 26 years, Equality California has led the Golden State's fight for LGBTQ+ civil rights and social justice. Originally founded in 1999 as the California Alliance for Pride and Equality (CAPE), the organization became Equality California in 2003, the nation's largest statewide LGBTQ+ civil rights organization.

Equality California brings the voices of LGBTQ+ people and allies to institutions of power in California and across the United States, striving to create a world that is healthy, just, and fully equal for all LGBTQ+ people. We advance civil rights and social justice by inspiring, advocating, and mobilizing through an inclusive movement that works tirelessly on behalf of those we serve.

Endnotes

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