

# Addressing the Needs of LGBTQ Students in Public Education

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## THE PROBLEM

Research shows that LGBTQ students face higher rates of discrimination and harassment than their non-LGBTQ peers and that despite significant changes towards more acceptance and legal protections in California, research continues to report the ongoing mental health disparities, harassment, and homophobia that remain present in public education (Kosciw et al., 2020). Research from GLSEN (2019), an organization dedicated to ensuring safe and affirming schools for LGBTQ students found that 83% of LGBTQ students experienced verbal harassment and 59% reported experiencing discriminatory school policies and practices (GLSEN, 2019). As a result, LGBTQ students miss school more frequently, perform worse academically and experience poorer educational outcomes and psychological well-being than non-LGBTQ students. Additionally, over half of the 16,713 students in this study reported hearing homophobic remarks from teachers and school staff, and 66% of students reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers (GLSEN, 2019). Teachers play a crucial role in supporting LGBTQ students and can be a part of the solution when it comes to eliminating the discrimination of LGBTQ students in schools. Why then does this issue remain in public education and what are the problems or challenges teachers face when addressing the needs of LGBTQ students in public education?

## RESULTS

Results show that there are risks associated with addressing LGBTQ topics in the classroom and that teachers take into consideration the political landscape and community reactions when implementing inclusive LGBTQ practices. The most common challenge they reported was a lack of training which contributes to the lack of supportive and inclusive practices for LGBTQ students. Other challenges reported were a lack of LGBTQ representation in curriculums and the use of inclusive language that was non-gendered. Navigating name changes and student pronouns was a challenge.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is understand the challenges and barriers teachers come up against as they address the needs of LGBTQ students in public education. This research focuses on how LGBTQ teacher allies and advocates are navigating these challenges, and takes a closer look at the barriers that persist within education that are preventing teachers from actively addressing LGBTQ topics in the classroom and supporting LGBTQ students.

## METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes a qualitative approach to understand the systemic barriers and holistic experiences of LGBTQ teacher allies and advocates as they address LGBTQ issues and topics in public education. Three semi-Standardized interviews were conducted at a single school site in a southern California middle school. Interview data was collected and coded to reveal the most common problems and themes that answered the following research question: What are the challenges and barriers educators navigate when attempting to address the needs of LGBTQ students?

## IMPLICATIONS

Research shows that LGBTQ students who feel safe and supported by teachers have better educational outcomes and are less likely to miss school. Teachers can make a difference and should be actively supporting and affirming LGBTQ students. However, the broader implications of this research suggest that there are systemic issues present in schools that are impacting the amount of support LGBTQ students receive. In order to combat them, teachers need the support of the school district, administration, parents, and the community. A holistic approach is needed to eliminate the disparities this population experiences. This research showed that there are specific ways to change the system, some of which include; positive representations of LGBTQ figures in the curriculum, training on gender identities and inclusive language with LGBTQ students and a concerted effort from administration taking an active role in promoting an inclusive school climate.

