

## SCHOOL SAFETY FOR STUDENTS WITH LGBT PARENTS

Are California’s schools safe for students whose parents are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (LGBT)? What steps can schools take to improve the climate for students with LGBT parents?

We use data from the 2003, 2004, and 2005 Preventing School Harassment (PSH) Survey to answer these questions. The PSH did not ask students whether they had LGBT parents; however, it did ask all students whether their schools were safe for students whose parents are LGBT.

### Overall Finding:

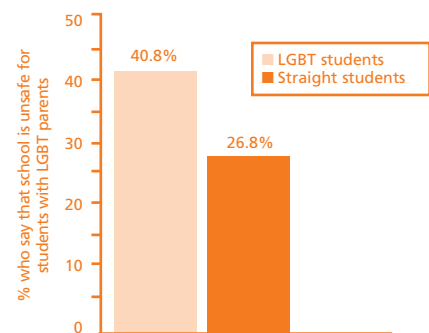
**Students with LGBT parents are not safe at school, according to most students.**

One-third (32%) of over 2,400 7th-12th grade students in California disagree or strongly disagree that their school is safe for students with LGBT parents. Based on the responses to the PSH survey, school safety is clearly an important issue for students with LGBT parents.

### Finding 1: LGBT students are more likely than heterosexual students to report concerns about school safety for students with LGBT parents.

LGBT students, a group that represents one-third (33%) of the PSH survey respondents, are more likely than heterosexual (or “straight”) students to report that their schools are not safe for students with LGBT parents. Figure 1 shows that 41% of LGBT students said that their schools are unsafe for students with LGBT parents; in contrast, 27% of heterosexual students said that their schools are unsafe for students with LGBT parents. LGBT students may be more sensitive to the experiences of students with LGBT parents because they are more likely to experience anti-LGBT harassment themselves.

**Figure 1**  
SCHOOLS ARE UNSAFE FOR STUDENTS WITH LGBT PARENTS



### Finding 2: Five steps that schools can take to improve the climate for LGBT students also improve the climate for students with LGBT parents.

Existing research shows that there are steps schools can take to improve school climates for LGBT students. These include: (1) establish and publicize school policies that prohibit harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity or expression, (2) train teachers to intervene in harassment, (3) support Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) or similar student clubs, (4) provide information about support related to sexual orientation and gender identity, and (5) introduce curriculum that includes LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity. Each of these steps is associated with greater school safety for LGBT youth and lower rates of harassment. These five steps and their links to school safety for students with LGBT parents are shown on the following pages.

**STEP 1: Establish and publicize a school policy that specifically prohibits harassment on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender, including gender identity, appearance, and behavior.**

When students report that they do not have a school policy that specifically prohibits harassment on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity or expression, one-third (34%) say that their school is unsafe for students with LGBT parents. Yet when students report that they do have a policy that specifically prohibit harassment on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity, fewer students (29%) describe an unsafe environment for students with LGBT parents.

**Figure 2** shows that this difference is particularly strong for LGBT students. These results show that nearly half (46%) of LGBT students who report no policies say that their schools are unsafe for students with LGBT parents.

**STEP 2: Train teachers and staff to stop anti-LGBT slurs and harassment.**

When teachers step in to stop negative anti-LGBT comments and harassment, students perceived a safer climate for students with LGBT parents. 38% of all students say the environment is unsafe when teachers do not intervene, compared to 27% when teachers do intervene.

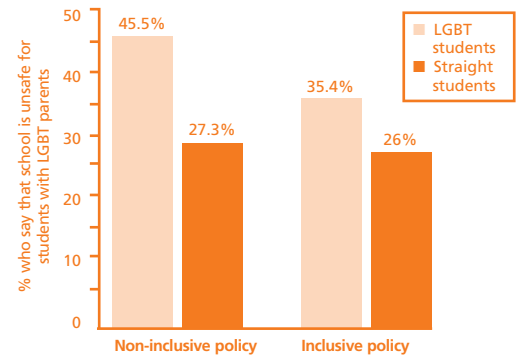
**Figure 3** shows that this finding was especially strong for LGBT students. Among students who said that their teachers did not step in to stop harassment, nearly half (47%) of LGBT students say that their schools are unsafe for students with LGBT parents. One-third (34%) of LGBT students say that their schools are unsafe for students with LGBT parents when they hear their teachers stop harassment.

**STEP 3: Support the establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance or similar student club**

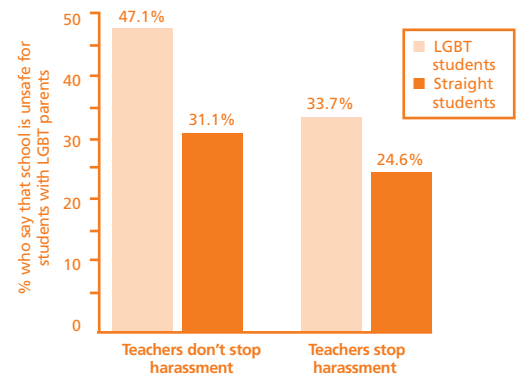
When students report that there is a GSA at their school, 30% report unsafe school climates for students with LGBT parents. In comparison, when students report no GSA, significantly more -- 42% -- say that the school is unsafe for students with LGBT parents.

**Figure 4** shows that this finding is particularly true for LGBT students. When there is no GSA, half of LGBT students say that the school is unsafe for students with LGBT parents; when there is a GSA, 39% of LGBT students say that the school is unsafe for students with LGBT parents.

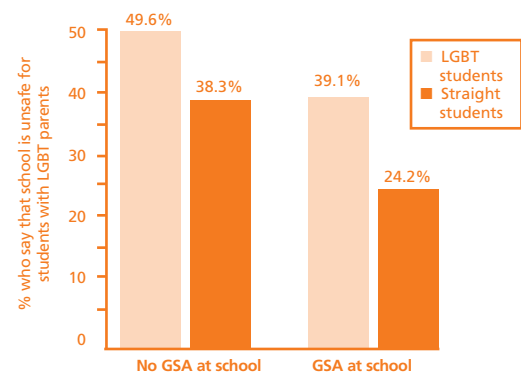
**Figure 2**  
WHEN HARASSMENT POLICIES DO NOT INCLUDE SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER, STUDENTS WITH LGBT PARENTS ARE REPORTED TO BE LESS SAFE.



**Figure 3**  
STUDENTS WITH LGBT PARENTS ARE REPORTED TO BE LESS SAFE WHEN TEACHERS DO NOT STEP IN TO STOP HARASSMENT.



**Figure 4**  
STUDENTS WITH LGBT PARENTS ARE REPORTED TO BE LESS SAFE WHEN THE SCHOOL DOES NOT HAVE A GSA.



#### STEP 4: Ensure that students know where to go for information and support related to sexual orientation and gender identity

Among students who know where to get information about LGBT issues, 28% report unsafe climates for students with LGBT parents. In contrast, more students who do not know where to go for information and support (40%) report unsafe school environments for students with LGBT parents.

Figure 5 shows that this finding is pronounced for LGBT students: when they do not know where to go for information and support, nearly half (45%) of LGBT students feel the climate is unsafe for students with LGBT parents.

#### STEP 5: Introduce curriculum that includes LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity

When LGBT persons and issues are explicitly included or discussed in the school curricula, all students believe the environment is safer for students with LGBT parents.

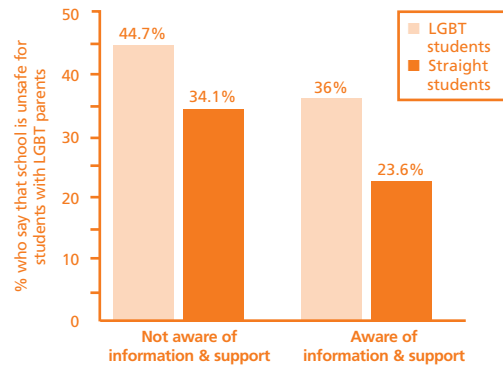
Figure 6 shows that this is particularly true for LGBT youth, who report significantly safer environments for students with LGBT parents when they learn about LGBT issues at school. Less than one-third (31%) of LGBT youth who learned about LGBT issues said that their schools were unsafe for students with LGBT parents, compared to nearly half (48%) of LGBT youth who did not learn about LGBT issues.

#### The cumulative effect

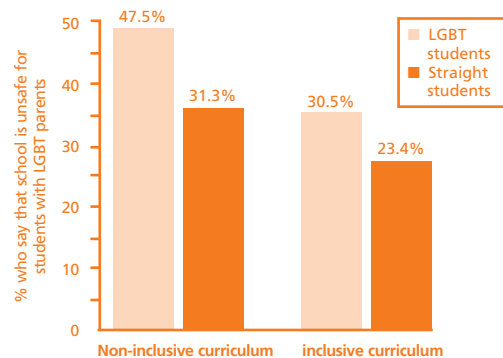
Students report that schools are safer for students with LGBT parents when they report that multiple steps have been taken by their schools to improve the climate.

Figure 7 shows that more than half of students who report zero school safety steps say that their school is unsafe for students with LGBT parents (56%). In contrast, less than one quarter of students who report 4 or 5 of the school safety steps say that their schools are unsafe for students with LGBT parents (21%-24%).

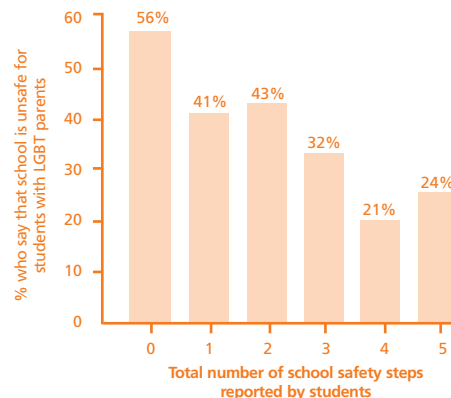
**Figure 5**  
STUDENTS WITH LGBT PARENTS ARE REPORTED TO BE LESS SAFE WHEN STUDENTS DO NOT KNOW WHERE TO GO FOR INFORMATION OR SUPPORT.



**Figure 6**  
STUDENTS WITH LGBT PARENTS ARE REPORTED TO BE LESS SAFE WHEN STUDENTS DO NOT HAVE LGBT-INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM.



**Figure 7**  
STUDENTS WITH LGBT PARENTS ARE REPORTED TO BE SAFER WHEN THERE ARE MULTIPLE SCHOOL SAFETY STEPS IN PLACE AT THE SCHOOL.



## Recommendations

### Parents:

- Request that the school curriculum include attention to LGBT families, people and information, as well as other types of family diversity
- Volunteer in parent activities at your child's school; get to know the teachers and administrators
- Ask that school policies and procedures be inclusive of all families

### Teachers and school site staff:

- Include attention to LGBT families, people and information in the curriculum
- Don't assume that the parents of your students are heterosexual; use inclusive, non-gender specific language to show that you understand that some students may have LGBT parents
- Intervene when you hear anti-LGBT harassment or slurs, or harassment about LGBT families.

### Local school officials and administrators:

- Assure that school policies and procedures are inclusive of LGBT families
- Support inclusion of LGBT families, people and information in the curriculum
- Encourage LGBT parents to participate in the activities of the school
- Refer to the California Safe Schools Coalition's All Families Welcome brochure; request copies for your school

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Data are from the 2003, 2004, and 2005 Preventing School Harassment (PSH) survey. The survey was designed to study the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning high school students in California and the steps schools can take to make schools safer. The PSH survey was developed by the California Safe Schools Coalition and administered by Gay-Straight Alliance Network. Data from more than 2,400 students were collected in schools and on the internet. Students were asked about their experiences of safety at school and about the steps schools can take to make schools safer.

Thanks to the following individuals and organizations for their contributions: Meredith Fenton, COLAGE; Aimee Fisher, Our Family Coalition; Arielle Rosen, L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center.

This brief is based on the following research:

Russell, S. T., McGuire, J. K., Lee, S-A., Larriva, J. C., & Laub, C. (2008). Adolescent perceptions of school safety for students with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender parents. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, 5, 11-27.

Suggested citation:

Russell, S. T., McGuire, J. K., Larriva, J., Laub, C., Manke, E., & Rosen, A. (2009). *School Safety for Students with LGBT Parents*. (California Safe Schools Coalition Research Brief No. 6). San Francisco, CA: California Safe Schools Coalition.