

SCHOOL SAFETY AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Research shows that many students feel unsafe at school – but is safety associated with school grades and academic performance? In this research brief we report on prior studies and present new data that show that students in California report better academic outcomes when they feel safe at school – this result is particularly strong for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students. Data from the Preventing School Harassment Survey shows that school safety is linked to higher school grades as well as intentions to attend college.

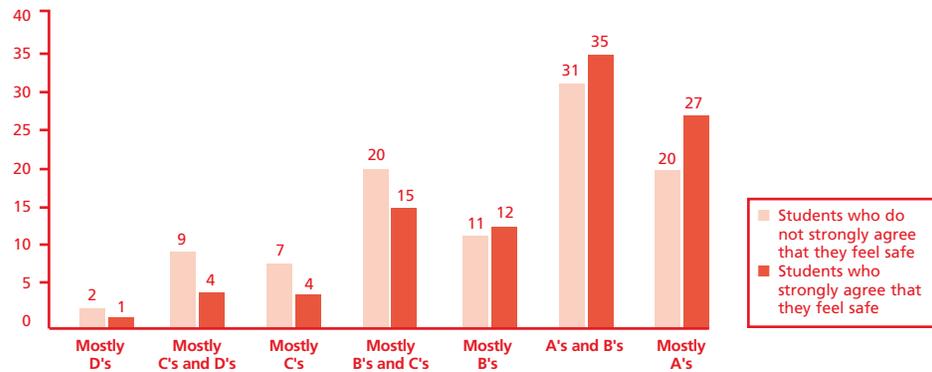
Background

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (referred to as the “Add Health” study) is one of the few data sources that is national in scope and allows researchers to examine the school experiences of youth who report same-sex romantic attractions and relationships. One recent study used this data to find that these youth felt less connected to their school community than their heterosexual peers, and that sexual minority boys in particular performed worse academically and were less prepared for postsecondary education (Pearson, Muller & Wilkinson, 2007).

Another national study of high school students is the National School Climate Survey from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2008). Results from that study show that harassment at school was linked to lower academic achievement among lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) students. Students who were more frequently harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression reported an average grade point average (GPA) almost half a grade lower than students who were less often harassed.

These studies suggest that school safety is an important factor in academic success. To understand this issue for students in California, we used data from the Preventing School Harassment Survey to study the link between school safety and academic achievement, in terms of school grades and academic goals for the future.

Figure 1
STUDENTS WHO FEEL MORE SAFE AT SCHOOL HAVE HIGHER GPAs



Finding 1: Students who feel safe at school are more likely to have higher grade point averages; this is true for all students and for LGBT students.

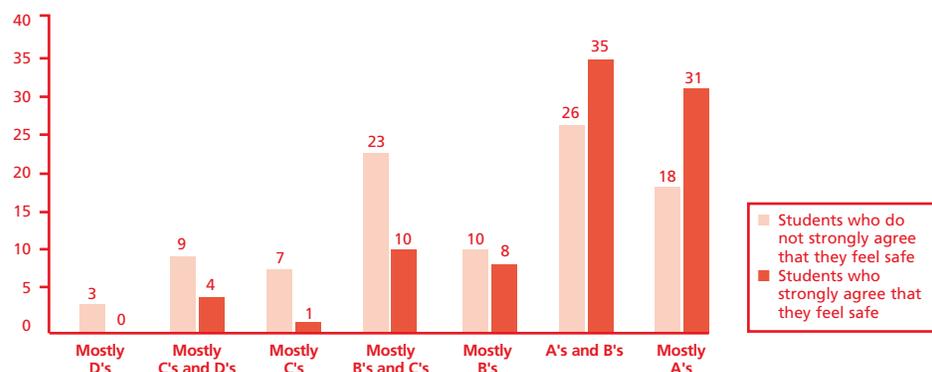
Among all students surveyed, school safety was linked to higher GPAs. Because most students agreed or strongly agreed that they feel safe at school, we examined GPAs and specifically compared those who strongly agreed that their school was safe with those who did not strongly agree (they “agreed”, “disagreed”, or “strongly disagreed”). Strong feelings of personal safety are linked to higher grade point averages. Figure 1 shows that among students with GPAs of B or above (mostly B's, mostly A's & B's, and mostly A's), the majority of students strongly feel safe. For example, among students with mostly A grades, 27% strongly agreed that they felt safe compared to 20% who did not strongly agree that they felt safe, and the same pattern exists for students who have mostly A's & B's and mostly B's.

Among students with grades below mostly B's, the pattern is the opposite: they report less school safety. For example, among students with mostly B's and C's, 20% of the students did not strongly agree that they felt safe, compared to only 15% who strongly agreed that they felt safe.

Figure 2 shows that among LGBT students, school safety was linked to higher grade point averages (GPA) as well. Strong feelings of safety are linked to higher grades for students who have mostly A's and mostly A's and B's, whereas students with mostly B's and below tend to feel less safe.

With these results we cannot prove that school safety causes higher grades. However, these findings are consistent with other research, and show that there is a strong link between safety and academic performance, and that the link is particularly strong for LGBT students.

Figure 2
LGBT STUDENTS WHO FEEL MORE SAFE AT SCHOOL HAVE HIGHER GPAs



Finding 2: Students who feel safe at school are more likely to plan to go to college.

Figure 3 shows that nearly 9 out of 10 (87%) of those who strongly agree that they feel safe plan to go college, compared to only two-thirds (69%) of those who do not strongly agree that they feel safe. The results are similar for LGBT students: 83% of those who strongly agree that they feel safe also plan to attend college compared to 67% of those who do not strongly agree that they feel safe.

We also examined students' perceptions of safety for LGBT students and the association between LGBT student safety and college plans. Figure 4 shows that among those who strongly agree that school is safe for LGBT students, 83% plan to go to college, whereas only 70% who do not strongly agree that school is safe for LGBT students plan to go to college. Again the results are similar for the LGBT students in the study: 83% of those who strongly agree that school is safe for LGBT students plan to go to college, compared to only two-thirds (67%) who do not strongly believe that school is safe for LGBT students.

Figure 3

SCHOOL SAFETY IS LINKED TO COLLEGE PLANS

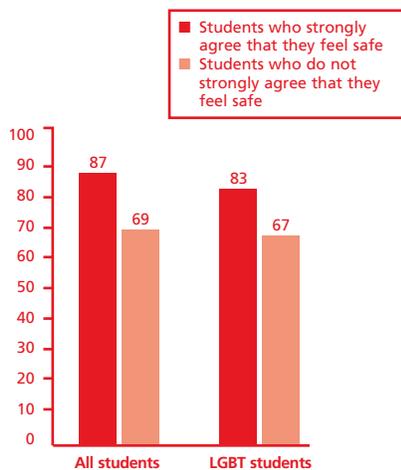
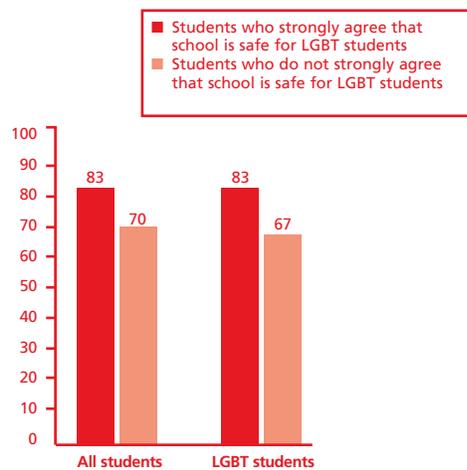


Figure 4

PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL SAFETY IS LINKED TO COLLEGE PLANS



Recommendations for teachers and administrators

- Discuss the link between school safety and student academic achievement with students, parents, and colleagues.
- Intervene if you hear bias-related comments and slurs. Use each comment as an opportunity to provide education and reaffirm school policy.
- Request training on preventing harassment and discrimination, and ask to help publicize school policies on harassment.
- Set the climate in your classrooms early and as often as necessary, letting students know that bias-related harassment and slurs are not acceptable.
- Treat all forms of bias-related harassment and slurs as serious and preventable.
- Find out about community resources and information related to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.
- Integrate representations of LGBT people and discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity into existing curricula.

Recommendations for students

- Speak out when you hear slurs or negative comments about another person based on a personal characteristic (like their race, religion, sexual orientation, body size, or gender nonconformity).
- Find out how to make a complaint when harassment happens in your school. You can make a complaint about harassment even if you aren't the target of it.
- Speak out in support of actions school districts and schools can take:
 1. publicizing and enforcing anti-harassment policies,
 2. providing resources, information, and support to students,
 3. training teachers and other staff about bullying and academic achievement,
 4. measuring and monitoring bias-related harassment in their local school district, and
 5. including LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity in the curriculum.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Data are from the 2003, 2004 and 2005 Preventing School Harassment (PSH) survey. The PSH survey was designed to study the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning high school students and their straight allies, and the steps schools can take to make schools safer. The PSH survey was developed by the California Safe Schools Coalition, and administered by the Gay-Straight Alliance Network. Data from over 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. Students were also asked to report their grades (GPA), as well as their goals for the future, including their plans to attend college.

References:

Pearson, J., Muller, C., & Wilkinson, L. (2007). Adolescent same-sex attraction and academic outcomes: The role of school attachment and engagement. *Social Problems*, 54(4), 523–542. Kosciw, J. G., Diaz, E. M., & Greytak, E. A. (2008). 2007 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation's schools. New York: GLSEN.

Suggested citation:

Clarke, T. J., & Russell, S. T. (2009). *School Safety and Academic Achievement*. (California Safe Schools Coalition Research Brief No. 7). San Francisco, CA: California Safe Schools Coalition.