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### **Title**

Ensuring the Safety of LGBT Students at School

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8cc4654t>

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### **Publication Date**

2012-12-01

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December 2012

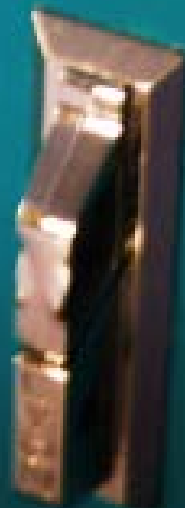
# Policy Brief 8

RETHINKING POLICY ON GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND WOMEN'S ISSUES

## ENSURING THE SAFETY OF LGBT STUDENTS AT SCHOOL

BY ASHLEY DEBAUN

FAGGOT



*People would be like "faggot, fag," and they'd taunt me in the hallways and I felt like I could never escape it.*

*—Jamey Rodemeyer, quoted in Washington Post, Sept 21, 2011*

BY ASHLEY DEBAUN

# ENSURING THE SAFETY OF LGBT STUDENTS AT SCHOOL

*Generally defined as intentional, repeated aggressive behavior meant to cause physical, emotional, or mental harm, bullying and harassment are serious problems faced by all children in school.<sup>1</sup> Bullying and harassment can have lifelong negative effects—physical, emotional, and psychological health problems—not only for the person being bullied but also for the bullies and the bystanders.*

LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER (LGBT) youth are the targets of bullying and harassment in disproportionately large numbers. A survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in 2009 found that nearly nine out of ten self-identified LGBT students in grades 6 through 12 had experienced harassment at school and nearly two-thirds felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation.<sup>2</sup> Harassment can have damaging effects on LGBT students and those who are perceived by other students as being LGBT. These effects include suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, and deaths by suicide. High levels of harassment and bullying are correlated with poorer educational outcomes, lower future aspirations, frequent school absenteeism, and lower grade-point averages.<sup>3</sup> LGBT bullying affects the person being bullied, their family and friends, and fellow students. Every child should have an opportunity to attend school in a safe environment, but little is being done to prevent harassment of LGBT students.

## CRITIQUE

Over the past year, the media has brought attention to the bullying- and harassment-related suicides of Jamey Rodemeyer, Seth Walsh, Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, and other LGBT or LGBT-perceived youth. While this focus has resulted in increased societal awareness, no federal law currently addresses bullying and harassment of LGBT youth in schools.<sup>4</sup> Only

*We've got to dispel the myth that bullying is a normal rite of passage, or an inevitable part of growing up. It's not. We have an obligation to ensure that our schools are safe for all of our kids. Every single young person deserves the opportunity to learn and grow and achieve their potential, without having to worry about the constant threat of harassment.*

**—President Barack Obama,  
It Gets Better Project, October 22, 2010**

14 states have anti-bullying laws that are designed to protect students based on sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>5</sup> Most states have no laws to protect LGBT youth in schools and some have laws that enforce a “neutrality policy that prevents staff from becoming involved if an incidence occurs that involves sexual orientation or gender identity which can result in a child getting very hurt both physically and/or emotionally from bullying.”<sup>6</sup> Staff, administrators, and teachers do not have the training or resources to handle such incidents effectively and to provide appropriate support for students who are being or have been harassed. Parents and students are also not informed on bullying and anti-bullying policies. Anti-bullying policies can be unclear and can be interpreted and implemented differently. Therefore, too few schools are taking preventive measures.

In the GLSEN survey, 62.4% of students who were harassed or assaulted reported that they believed the situation would become worse or they would be offered little or no help if they reported the situation to school staff.<sup>7</sup> The study also shows that 33.8% of the students who did report incidents of harassment or assault to staff got no response from the school. The report, however, also found that students are more likely to report problems and staff are more likely to help at schools where policies explicitly prohibit bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>8</sup>

## RECOMMENDATION

Passage of the Safe Schools Improvement Act of 2011 (SSIA), a bill to amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, would require schools and districts to submit reports on incidences, surveys, and other data regarding bullying and harassment of students. It would require that each state assess needs and implement an anti-bullying program or other preventive measures that would address bullying and harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity along with other attributes such as race, religion, and having a disability.<sup>9</sup> The SSIA defines bullying as “conduct, including an electronic communication, that adversely affects the ability of one or more students to participate in or benefit from the school’s educational programs or activities by placing the student (or students) in reasonable fear of physical harm.”<sup>10</sup> It defines harassment as “conduct, including an electronic communication, that adversely affects the ability of one or more students to participate in or benefit from the school’s educational programs or activities because the conduct, as reasonably perceived by the student (or students), is so severe, persistent, or pervasive.”<sup>11</sup>

School needs to be a safe place for all. To prevent bullying and harassment of LGBT students, schools should be regularly checked for compliance, and teachers, school counselors, and administrators should be trained in techniques for identifying and stopping harassment. Creating a school-wide culture of inclusion and respect for difference will benefit the whole community.

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MORE INFO: Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network can be reached by calling 202-347-7780 or emailing [publicpolicy@glsen.org](mailto:publicpolicy@glsen.org).

## NOTES

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