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LGBTQ Student Experiences in the Iowa City Community School District

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Austin Adams is a fourth-year undergraduate student at the University of Iowa. He is currently pursuing degrees in Political Science (BS), Ethics and Public Policy (BA), and Economics (BA), as well as a minor in Philosophy. Austin is an intern with the Public Policy Center for the summer and fall of 2017. During his time as an undergraduate, he has pursued his interests in policymaking and public service through both his studies and his out-of-class work. He has conducted research on racial disparities in the State of Iowa's County Jail System, worked on a team of researchers to study effective political communication on Twitter, and studied Policy Diffusion Theory in the context of the legalization of medical and recreational marijuana. He served for two years as the President of the Hawkeye Optimist Chapter, a service-based organization which serves the disadvantaged youth of Iowa City. He has also held positions on the executive board of Delta Lambda Phi and the University of Iowa Service Council.

Sean Finn
Sean Finn is a fourth-year undergraduate student at the University of Iowa pursuing degrees in Economics (BS) and Ethics and Public Policy (BA). Sean is an intern with the Public Policy Center during summer 2017, and is driven by his passions for policy and its relationship with social justice and equity, especially for marginalized communities. He is particularly interested in the intersection of trans and non-binary identity and other oppressed identity groups.

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Tessa Heeren is a Research Coordinator at the University of Iowa Public Policy Center. Tessa began working in the research-practice partnership as a Master of Social Work student at the University of Iowa in 2015 and brings experience in community engagement and service provision to the research team. Tessa's involvement in the project stemmed from a desire to inform education policies through community-based research. Along with her work in the Public Policy Center's Social and Education Policy Program, Tessa has an appointment in the Health Policy Research Program, where she contributes to the evaluation of state health policies and programs.

Overview

The analysis of the 2017 Iowa City Community School District (ICCSD) Student Experiences of School Climate Report and survey data revealed a consistent pattern of disparities in student experiences for non-binary gender and LGB students.[1] Given the systematic nature and severity of these disparities, the District plans to build on its current programming and begin new initiatives to address these disparities. To inform the decision-making of the District, this policy brief provides answers to the following questions:

1. **Why is it important to understand the experiences of LGBTQ students?**

2. **How do LGBTQ students experience school climate in the ICCSD?**

3. **What are the strategies for intervening that have been shown in the education research literature to effectively improve school experiences for LGBTQ students?**

4. **What are the evidence-based recommendations that can inform the ICCSD decision-making process in addressing disparities in school experiences for LGBTQ students?**

This policy brief will serve as the background for a multi-stakeholder task force which will provide feedback and prioritize the recommendations regarding how to support positive experiences and outcomes for LGBTQ students.

Terminology

Due to varying preferences in terms related to LGBTQ identities, this policy brief utilizes broad terms to encompass all students in the LGBTQ community. The listed terms are defined as they are used in the following text.

LGBTQ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning

Lesbian: a homosexual woman

Gay: a homosexual man

Transgender (trans): describes someone who does not identify solely with the sex they were assigned at birth

Queer: a broad term to encompass all members of the LGBTQ community; also a sexual identity meaning the individual is not heterosexual/straight

Questioning: describes an individual who is unsure of or exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity
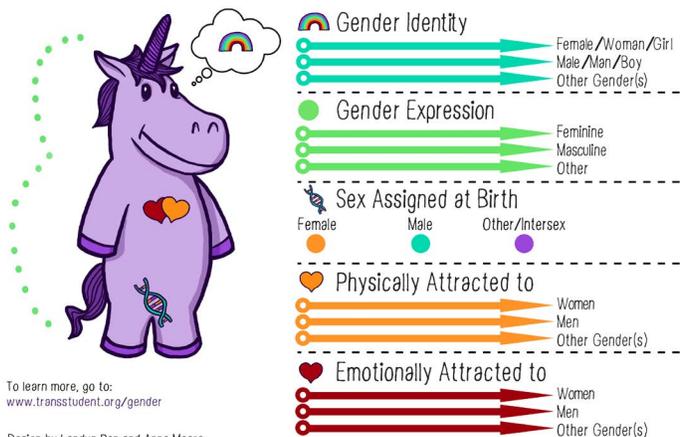
Non-binary (gender) - describes someone who does not identify with the binary identities of man/boy or woman/girl; also an umbrella term for many non-binary gender identities

Homophobia - a prejudice or negative opinion towards LGBQ people due to their sexual orientation

Transphobia - a prejudice or negative opinion towards transgender people due to their gender identity

The Gender Unicorn

Graphic by: TSER (Trans Student Educational Resources)

- Gender Identity: Female/Woman/Girl, Male/Man/Boy, Other Gender(s)
- Gender Expression: Feminine, Masculine, Other
- Sex Assigned at Birth: Female, Male, Other/Intersex
- Physically Attracted to: Women, Men, Other Gender(s)
- Emotionally Attracted to: Women, Men, Other Gender(s)

To learn more, go to:
www.transstudent.org/gender

Design by Landyn Pan and Anna Moore

This image is intended to visualize the differences between gender identity, gender expression, birth sex, and physical/emotional attractions.

Background and Purpose

In February 2017, a survey was administered to all 5th through 12th grade students in the Iowa City Community School District (ICCSD). The 2017 survey was the second iteration of the student experiences of school climate survey first administered in 2016. The student experiences of school climate survey provides the District with detailed information regarding students' own perceptions and experiences of the District's schools. The survey includes items related to teacher and mentor relationships, inclusive school climates and classrooms, safety, and the disciplinary environment.

The student experiences of school climate survey provides in-depth information to better understand factors that contribute to disparate achievement and discipline outcomes.

The student experiences of school climate survey is a key needs assessment component of a larger research practice collaboration between the University of Iowa's Public Policy Center (PPC) and the Iowa City Community School District. This long-term collaborative partnership works to improve the equitability of school experiences and outcomes for students in the District through research-based solutions. The Comprehensive Equity Plan, along with the ICCSD Board of Education's Strategic Plan, guide the direction and priorities of the partnership. The partnership leverages both the expertise of social science and education policy research at the University of Iowa's Public Policy Center, and the practitioner knowledge and expertise found in the District and its schools, to more effectively address persistent inequities in the District.

> *The student experiences of school climate survey provides in-depth information to better understand factors that contribute to disparate achievement and discipline outcomes.*

The 2016 student survey analysis provided a wide-ranging baseline assessment of student experiences and highlighted a consistent pattern of disparate experiences for students of color and of lower socioeconomic status.[2] These findings led to the identification of three focus areas: teacher and mentor relationships, inclusive community, and disciplinary environment. In order to inform District decisions about how to address each of these focus areas, the PPC research staff authored focus area policy briefs synthesizing the current state of research knowledge and identifying strategies with evidence of effectiveness in improving these student experiences and/or reducing inequities in these areas.[3,4,5] The recommendations in these policy briefs then served as the background for a multi-stakeholder task force. The multi-stakeholder task force provided feedback and prioritized the recommendations, drawing upon both their own relationship and experience with the District and its schools, and on the survey data and research literature summarized in the policy briefs.

The broad aim of the Equity Implemented Research Partnership is to improve the equitability of school experiences for students in the ICCSD through evidence-based solutions.

The feedback and recommendations of the multi-stakeholder task force were summarized in a report presented to the Board of Education in January 2017.[6] In line with the recommendations of the policy briefs and multi-stakeholder task force, the District implemented two interventions designed to address student disparities in selected schools in 2016-17: adopting a school-wide restorative justice approach to school discipline, building school community, and fostering student-teacher relationships (in 3 schools); and an implicit bias training for teachers and administrators (in 8 schools). After this first year of implementation, both initiatives were evaluated by PPC research staff for evidence of effectiveness.

> *The broad aim of the Equity Implemented Research Partnership is to improve the equitability of school experiences for students in the ICCSD through evidence-based solutions.*

Importance of LGBTQ Student Experiences in School

What does inclusion mean for LGBTQ students?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines school connectedness as "the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals."[7] Research continues to show associations between students' perceptions of connectedness and their academic motivations,[8] achievements,[9] and mental health.[10]

LGBTQ student marginalization can stem from language and actions that assume only male and female gender identities, center heterosexual experiences, or assume that all students identify in the same way. For example, dividing a classroom into "boys and girls" ignores the identity of non-binary students. Leading a sexual education discussion that only addresses safe sex practices for heterosexual, non-transgender students is exclusive and neglects the specific safety and health needs of LGBTQ students.

LGBTQ students also find themselves being excluded through a lack of representation in general education. According to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) 2015 National Climate Survey, 63% of LGBTQ students have heard nothing about LGBTQ figures in their classes, while 15% have heard negative remarks about LGBTQ figures in their classes.[11] GLSEN also reported that 58% of all LGBTQ students could not find a single book related to LGBTQ topics in their school library. For many LGBTQ students, inclusion is an affirmation of their identity and place in society. The inclusion of LGBTQ students is interconnected with victimization, feelings of safety, and support within school.

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What are the disparities in victimization and safety for LGBTQ students?

While physical and emotional safety should be a foundational guarantee in school, equity in safety is a persistent issue for LGBTQ students. In the 2015 National School Climate Survey conducted by GLSEN, 60% of LGBTQ students reported feeling unsafe in school due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, and most of them also reported avoiding bathrooms, locker rooms, and school functions due to feelings of being unsafe.[11] The survey also shows that 90% of LGBTQ students reported being harassed at school; 25% of them were physically harassed, and about 17% were physically assaulted. Another national survey from 2015 showed 10% of LGBTQ students in the country have been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property.[12]

While studies are mixed about the link between safety and academic achievement, it is clear that feelings of safety are strongly connected to feelings of anxiety, loneliness, depression, and other psychological problems, which are connected to participation in school.[13] Although bullying is a general issue in most schools, homophobic and anti-LGBTQ sentiments are one of the most common manifestations of bullying.[14] These feelings of loneliness and depression are directly related to suicide rates among LGBTQ students. The suicide rate of LGB students is 4 times higher than that of their straight peers, and their attempts are 4 to 6 times more likely to result in bodily injury requiring professional treatment.[15] Further, each homophobic or anti-LGBTQ event faced by an LGBTQ student makes them 2.5 times more likely to engage in self-harming behaviors.[16] This evidence supports the need to focus on programs that will increase feelings of safety specifically for LGBTQ youth.

Although bullying is a general issue in most schools, homophobic and anti-LGBTQ sentiments are one of the most common manifestations of bullying.

What are the disparities in student support for LGBTQ students?

Various forms of support are critical for the success and well-being of all students, and strong and healthy student-teacher relationships are particularly consequential.[17] Supportive adults in school can advocate for LGBTQ inclusive policies, but results from national student surveys show LGBTQ advocates in school are uncommon. More than half of transgender students have been required by teachers or staff to use a bathroom or locker room that did not match their gender identity.[18] Over a third of LGBTQ students know fewer than six staff in their schools who are supportive of LGBTQ students; many (between 3% and 5%) don't know of any.[19, 20] GLSEN's national school climate survey found that more than 1 in 4 students perceived their school administration as being unsupportive of LGBTQ students.[20]

Researchers have found that when teachers intervene in support of LGBTQ students experiencing harassment, students feel safer and the frequency of harassment decreases.[21, 22] Other studies show that school interventions to reduce harassment of transgender students was associated with transgender students feeling safer and more connected to teachers and staff.[23] Although teachers have the ability to intervene and improve student experiences, nearly two-thirds (63.5%) of LGBTQ students who reported being harassed or assaulted to a teacher or staff member said that the teacher did nothing about the incident or told the reporting student to ignore it.[24] Less than half (42.7%) told the perpetrator to stop and even fewer (18.2%) disciplined the perpetrator, while almost 1 in 10 reporting students (9.5%) were disciplined themselves.[24]

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How do victimization, inclusion, and support affect LGBTQ student outcomes?

School climate research has consistently found that LGBTQ students who experience victimization such as bullying, harassment, and assault in school have lower GPAs, miss school more often, have lower self-esteem, experience more mental health issues, feel less connected to teachers and lower belonging to the school community, and experience higher substance use and abuse.[25, 26, 27, 28, 29] These experiences of victimization are particularly impactful when they are identity-based, as opposed to harassment that is not centered on identity.[29] Identity-based harassment is associated with more severe negative outcomes, including higher levels of both substance use and mental health problems, compared to general harassment.[30] In addition, LGBTQ youth are disciplined more often than non-LGBTQ students, particularly those who already face victimization in school; these students also have significantly higher rates of suspension and detainment in juvenile facilities.[31, 32,33]

Efforts to include and support LGBTQ students result in positive outcomes for those students. In a study that identified transgender (trans) students, when trans youth feel supported in school (e.g. teachers use the right name, pronouns, gender identification, etc.), their mental health outcomes are comparable to their non-transgender peers.[34] Another study focusing on sexual orientation found that positive school climate protects LGB and questioning students against depression and drug use.[35] For all students, including those who are LGBTQ, connections to teachers and staff is essential to success.[36, 37] For LGBTQ students in particular, having positive relationships with school personnel can greatly improve students' sense of safety.[37] These relationships, in addition to exposure to teachers who are supportive of LGBTQ youth, are essential to the well-being of these students. LGBTQ youth who report knowing supportive teachers and staff have overall more positive outcomes, including better academic performance and attendance, stronger self-esteem, and fewer instances of victimization.[38]

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LGBTQ Students in the ICCSD

The following section describes the LGBTQ student population in the District, and provides an analysis of their experiences in the District using data from the 2017 student experiences of school climate survey. In the survey, students were asked to report the following basic demographic information about themselves: grade level, school, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and level of parental education. Table 1 shows the gender inclusive survey response options for 5th and 6th grade students, and 7th through 12th grade students. Because there were a small number of responses in some response categories, all the responses that were not male or female were collapsed into a "non-binary" group for reporting (1.2% of the student survey sample did not provide information about their gender identification). Overall, 2 percent of students selected a Non-Binary gender identity (82 students). The total sample size was 5,148 students.

Table 1. Survey Responses for Gender and Sexual Orientation

Gender Response Categories		Report Categories	Survey Sample
5th & 6th Grades	7th – 12th Grades		
Male	Male	Male	49%
Female	Female	Female	49%
Other, please specify		Non-binary	2% (82 students)
	Transgender male		
	Transgender female		
	Gender queer/ Gender-nonconforming		
	Different identity		
Sexual Orientation Question: **Do you identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or asexual?"**			
Yes		LGB	8% (376 students)
No		Non-LGB	92%

Students were also asked to identify their sexual orientation. The survey item asked, "Do you identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or asexual?" The response choices were yes, no, and prefer not to answer. Eight percent of students surveyed identified as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Pansexual, or Asexual (376 students). Throughout this brief, all students answering affirmatively are referred to as LGB students.

Non-binary gender and sexual orientation questions were added to the 2017 student survey of school climate experiences for several reasons.

- Feedback from the 2016 climate survey, requesting more LGBTQ inclusivity.
- Developmentally appropriate: children are able to identify their gender identity as early as age 3, and romantic attraction as early as age 8.[39, 40]
- Alignment with the District Equity statement.
- Substantial documentation in research of disparate experiences for LGBTQ students.
- Beneficial for LGBTQ students: children who receive support and acceptance in their self-identifications have less prevalence of mental health issues.[41]
- Collect baseline data for potential LGBTQ specific equity programming.

For the analysis provided in this policy brief, student confidentiality is maintained by only reporting aggregate data, and suppressing any data that has fewer than 10 students.

A Profile of LGBTQ Students in the ICCSD

The following data breaks down demographic information within the LGBTQ community.

Figure 1 shows the racial and socioeconomic status composition of the non-binary and/or LGB student population in the District. The majority of LGBTQ students in the ICCSD are white (66% of the LGB population and 50% of the Non-Binary population). Multiracial students comprise the next largest racial group of the LGBTQ student population, with 14% of LGB and 28% of Non-Binary students identifying as multiracial. The small sample size of Non-Binary students limited reporting for Black, Latino, and Asian students, but LGB students identified as Black (10%), Asian (5%), and Latino (3%).

Figure 1. LGBTQ Students by Race
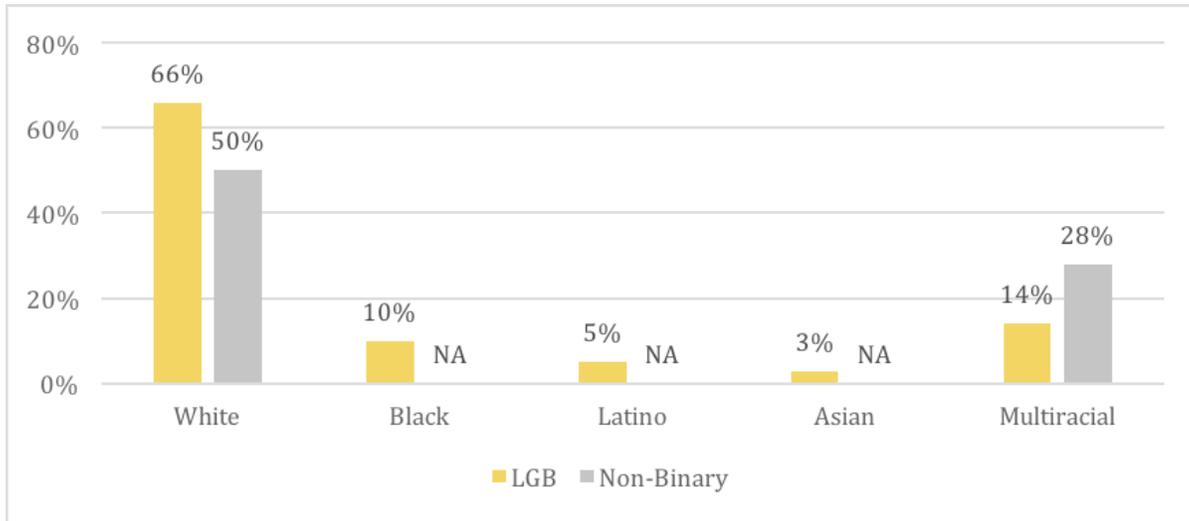
Note: categories are labeled NA if responses were n < 10

Figure 2 shows the LGBTQ student population distribution across parental education, which is used as a proxy for socioeconomic status. Slightly fewer than half (48%) of students who identify as LGB and Non-Binary reported high levels of parental education (More than college).

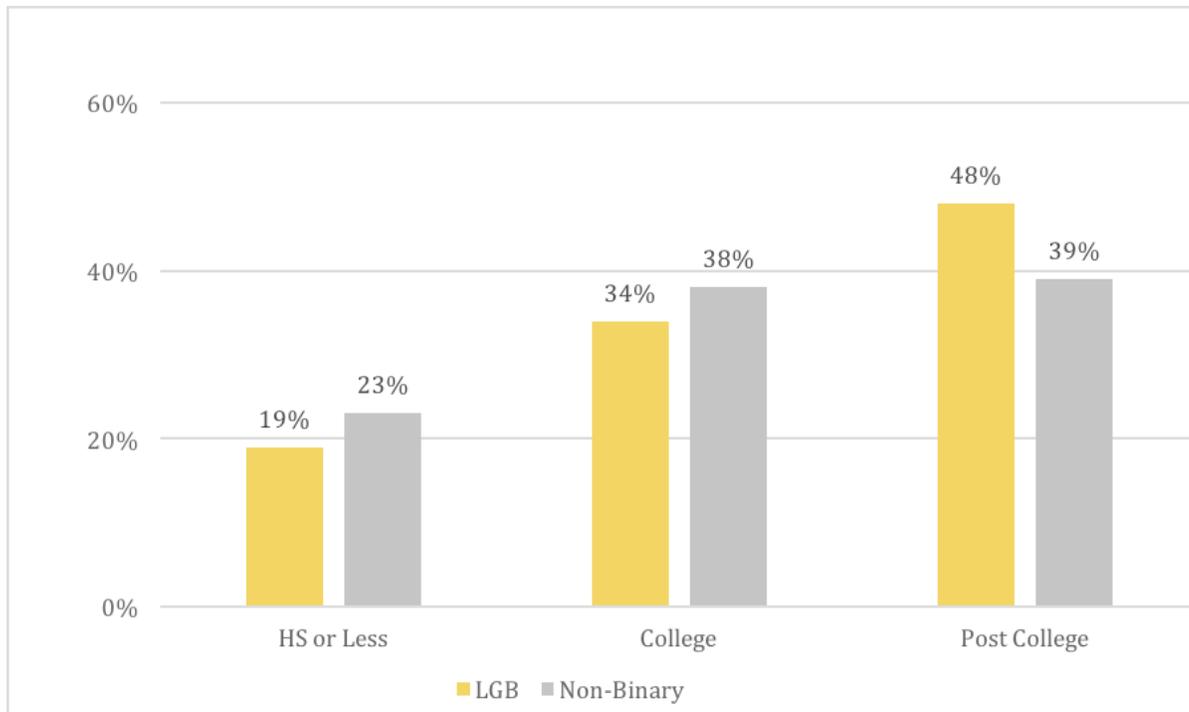**Figure 2. LGBTQ Students by Parental Education**

Figure 3 shows the LGBTQ student population distributed by school types. About half of LGB and Non Binary students are in high school (49% and 48% respectively). Almost 1 in 5 (18%) LGB students in the District attend Elementary school (5th and 6th grades) and about 1 in 3 LGB and Non-Binary students in the District attend Junior High schools.

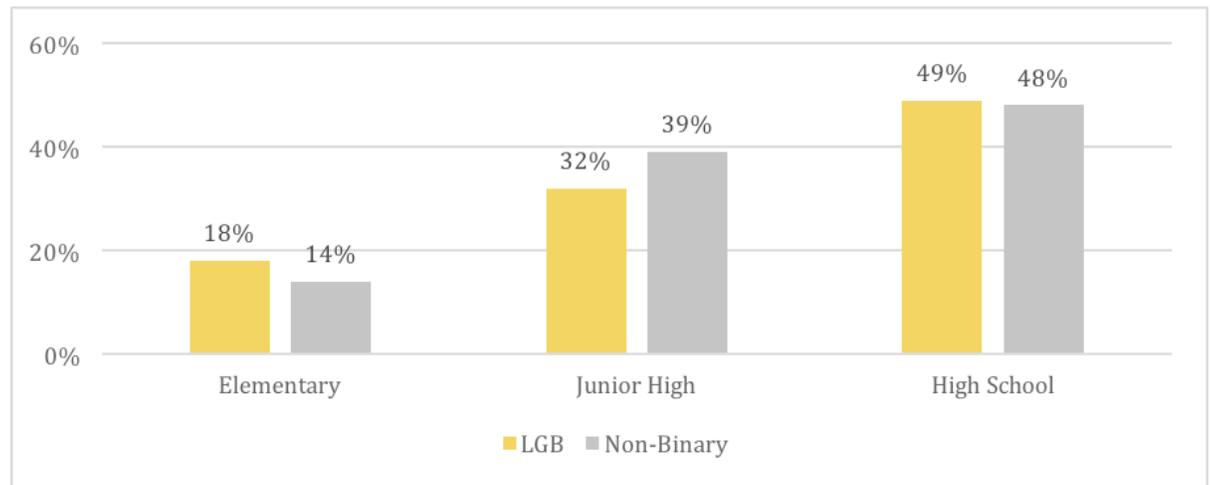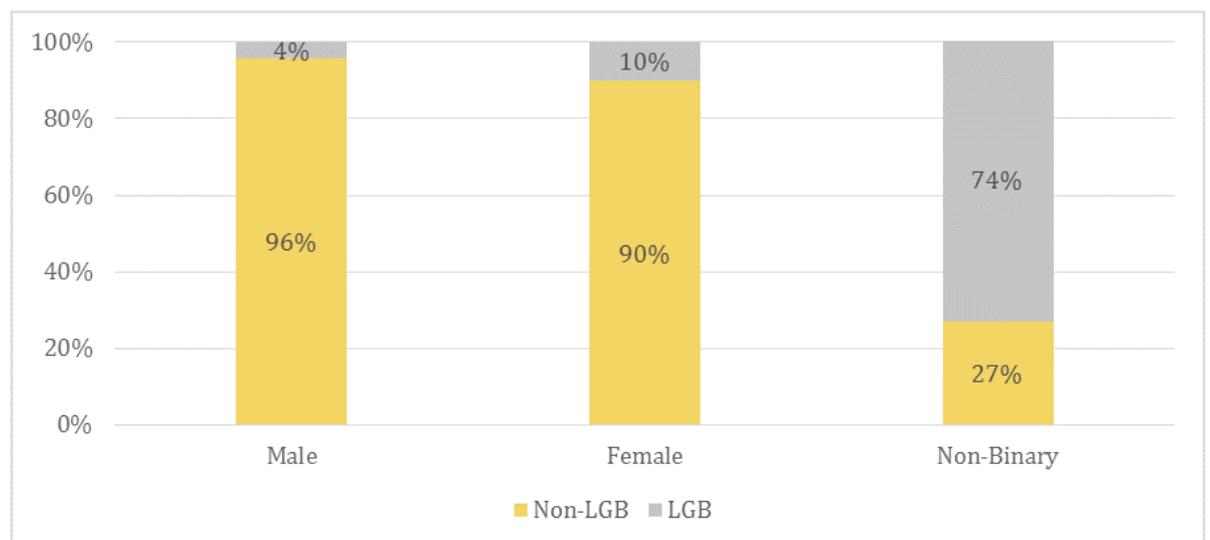**Figure 3. LGBTQ Students by School Type**

Figure 4 shows sexual orientation by gender. Almost three-quarters (74%) of Non-Binary students identified as LGB. One in ten female-identified students also identified as LGB, while 4% of male students identified as LGB.

Figure 4. The Intersection of Sexual Orientation and Gender

Additional Resources

Full Report

Full descriptive analysis for all survey questions across all social groups is available in the main report, which can be found at http://ppc.uiowa.edu/sites/default/files/2017iccsd_report.pdf

Interactive Graphic

Due to the large number of survey items, this report includes only selective graphs of key findings from the student experiences of school climate survey. An interactive graphic has been created to view District averages, or differences by school type, racial identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or parental education for every survey item. A drop down menu allows you to select the survey item and average values for the item. The interactive graphic can be found on the main report page: http://ppc.uiowa.edu/publications/student-experiences-school-climate-iowa-city-community-school-district-2017

Online Appendix

For the online appendix, which contains a list of LGBTQ-related books, activities, and other resources for parents, teachers, and students, please see: http://ppc.uiowa.edu/sites/default/files/appendix_resources.pdf
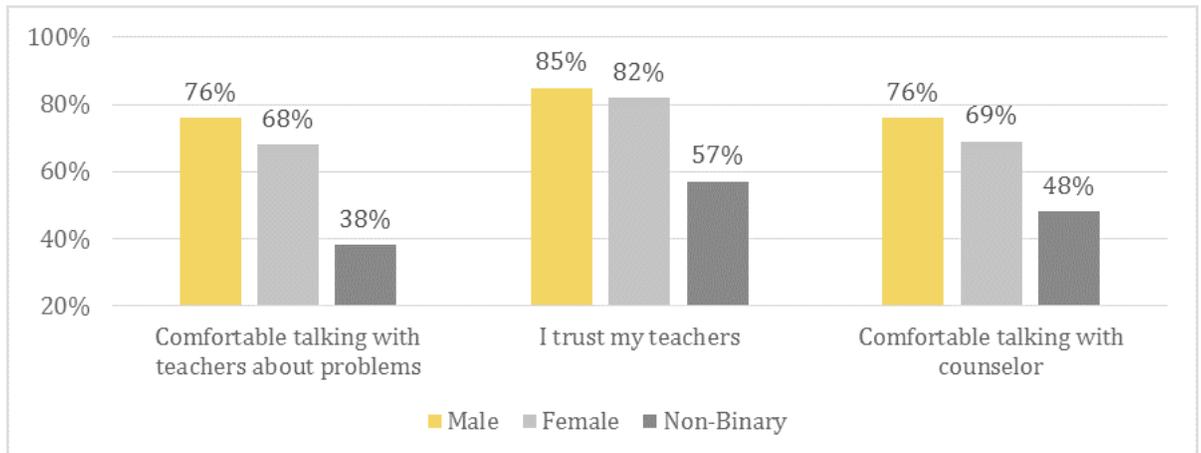
Relationships with Teachers and Counselors

Students were asked a wide range of questions about their relationships with teachers, staff, counselors, and mentors. Teacher relationships were most extensively explored with questions related to equitable and respectful treatment, general and personal concern, and academic support. Students were also asked about support from school staff, counselors, and other adults in the school. Figures 5 and 6 show the responses of LGB compared to non-LGB students, as well as non-binary gender students, for a few representative survey items. The results show that LGB and non-binary students are far less comfortable talking with teachers and counselors than non-LGB students. About half of LGB students feel comfortable, 54% with counselors and 50% with teachers, while only 38% of non-binary students reported being comfortable talking about problems with their teachers.

Figure 5. Relationships with Teachers and Counselors by Sexual Orientation
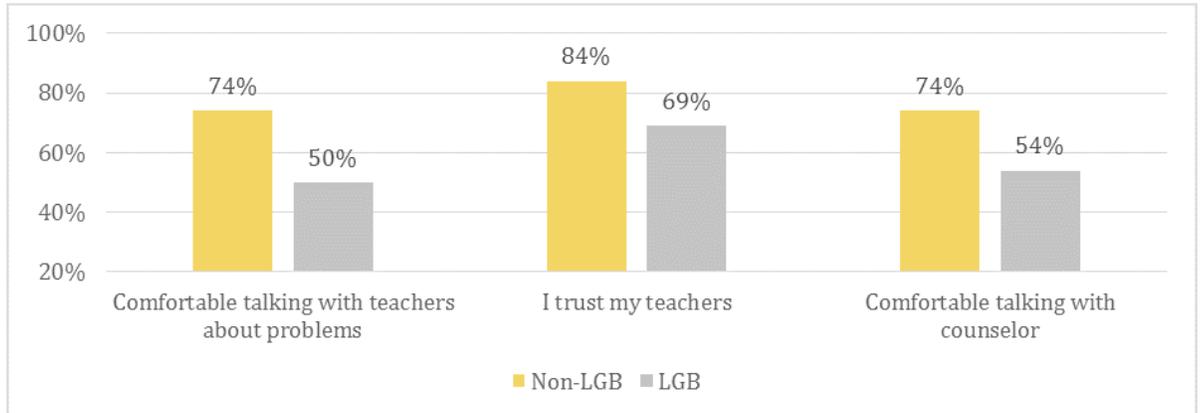
**Figure 6. Relationships with Teachers and Counselors by Gender**

Key Finding

LGBTQ students have lower trust in and comfort interacting with their teachers and counselors than non-LGBTQ students.

Inclusive Climates and Classrooms

Students were asked questions about their experience of school climate and classrooms in regard to inclusion. This included questions about the way students and the school value diversity, hurtful comments students have heard from peers and teachers as well as other experiences of disrespect, students' sense of belonging at school, and the inclusiveness of class materials and discussions. Figures 7 and 8 display select representative results from these sections. While 83% of non-LGB students responded that they felt that they belong, only 62% of LGB and 48% of non-binary students felt the same way. Twenty percent fewer LGB students felt their contributions in class are valued compared to non-LGB students. Additionally, less than half of LGB and non-binary students reported that students at their school respect everyone's differences.

Figure 7. Inclusive Climates and Classrooms by Sexual Orientation
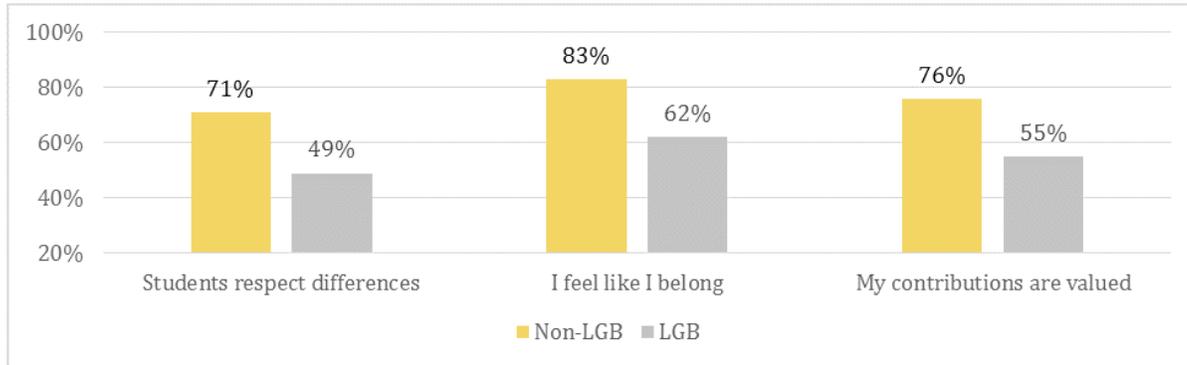
**Figure 8. Inclusive Climates and Classrooms by Gender**
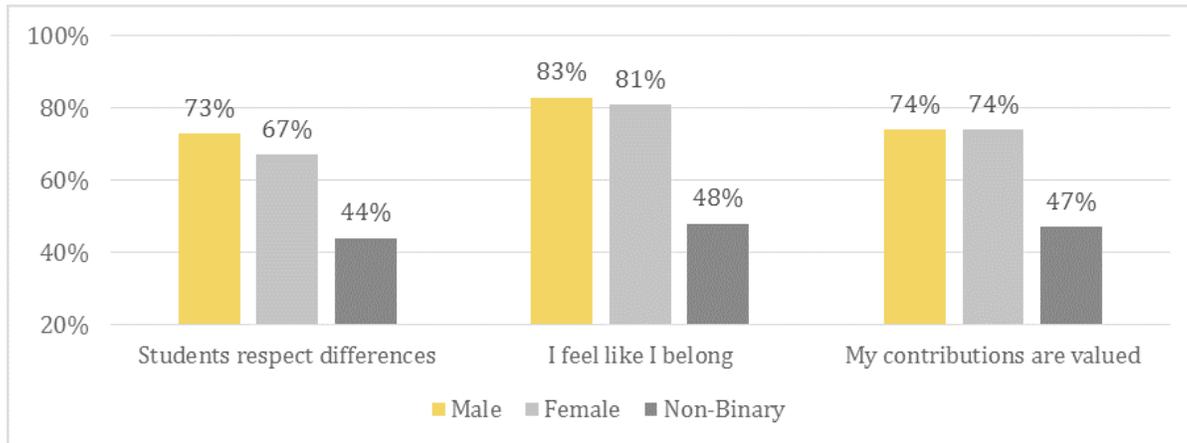
Key Finding

LGBTQ students feel less respected and experience a lower sense of belonging in school than their non-LGBTQ peers.

Feelings of Safety

The student experiences of school climate survey also asked various questions about students' perceptions of safety and the disciplinary environment of their schools. They were asked about the fairness of rules in their school and about their feelings of safety in different school locations as well as to and from school. In the results, shown in Figures 9 and 10, it is clear that LGB and non-binary students do not have strong feelings of safety within their schools. Compared to 84% of non-LGB students, only two-thirds of LGB students feel that their school is welcoming and safe. Whereas about half of non-LGB students feel safe in their hallways and bathrooms, only 1 in 5 non-binary students feels safe in those areas.

Figure 9. Feelings of Safety by Sexual Orientation
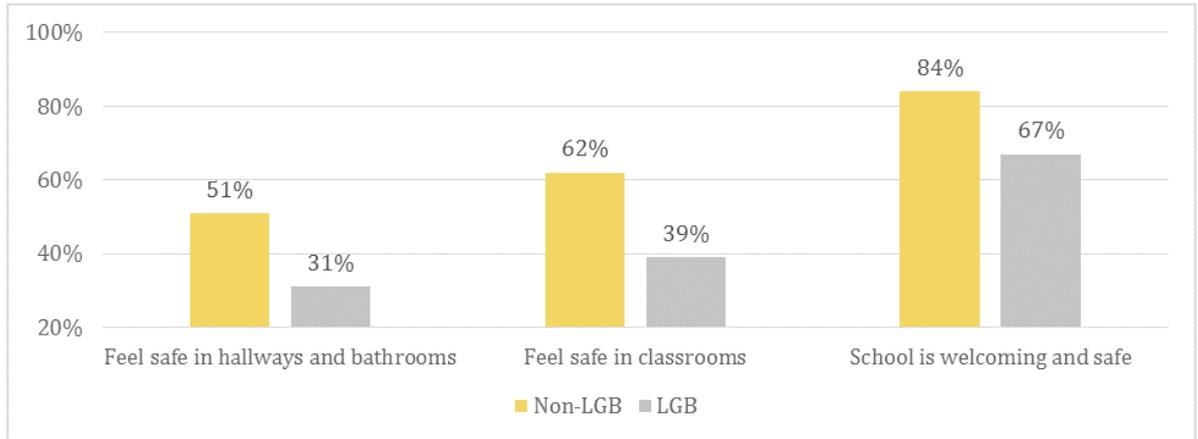
Figure 10. Feelings of Safety by Gender
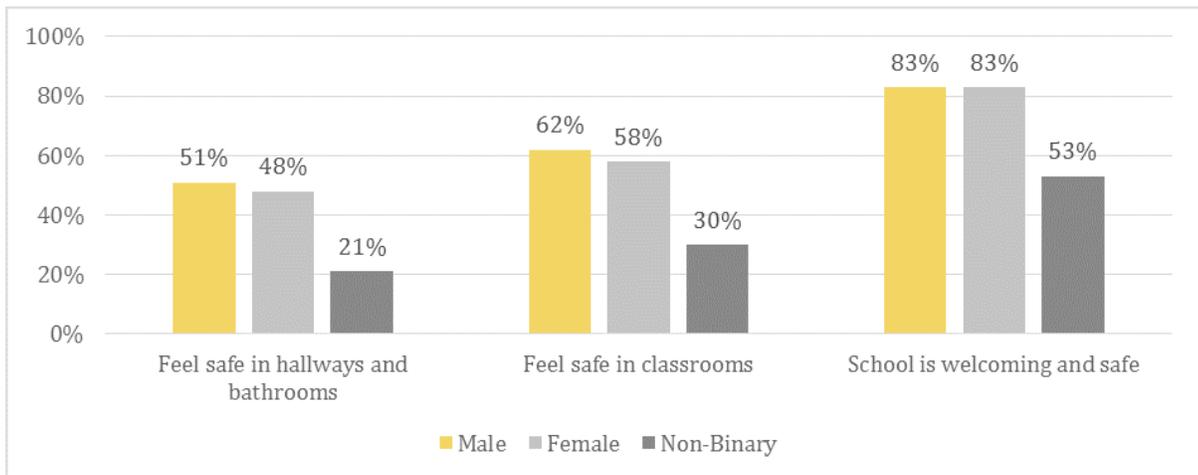
Key Finding

LGBTQ students feel significantly less safe in and around school than non-LGBTQ students.

Validation and Victimization

Students were given opportunities throughout the survey to express their experiences related to identities in school, including gender and sexual orientation. Questions asked about any hurtful comments they heard about identities, how important gender was to their personal identity, how often classroom materials represented them, and whether they had opportunities to discuss identities in class. Figure 11 shows selected responses of LGB and non-binary students about their experiences involving their personal identities in school. Under a third of LGB students reported having opportunities in class to discuss sexual orientation, and 88% reported hearing hurtful comments about sexual orientation. Among non-binary students, 28% felt that there are opportunities to talk about transgender identity in class.

Figure 11. LGBTQ Identity Validation and Victimization
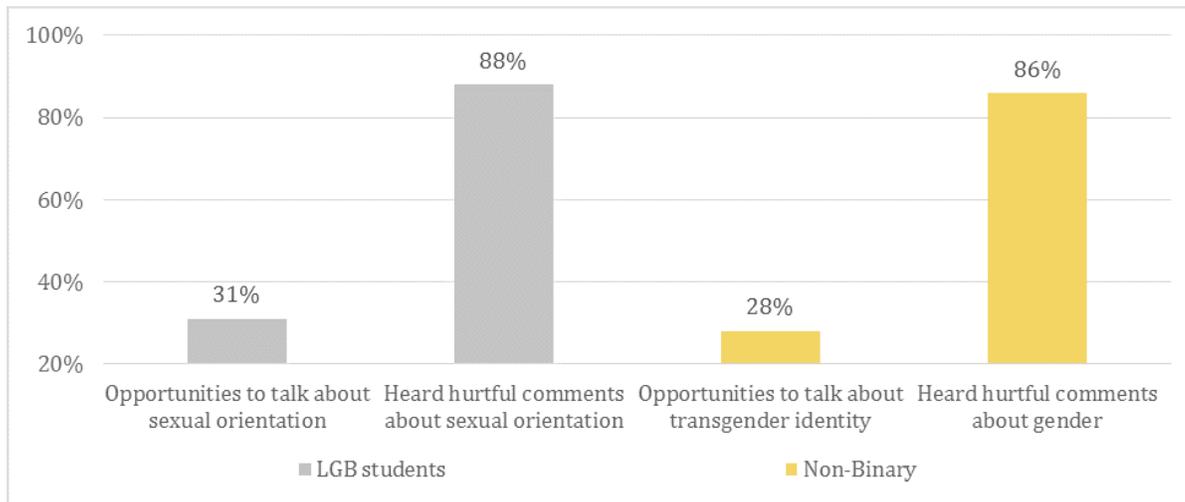
Key Findings
- *LGBTQ students do not get many opportunities to discuss topics relevant to their LGBTQ identities in class settings.*
- *Students with LGBTQ identities hear hurtful comments about gender and/ or sexual orientation at much higher rates than non-LGBTQ students.*

Intervention Strategies

In response to the systematic disparities in school experiences for LGBTQ students, schools and districts throughout the country have identified promising solutions. Examples of strategies implemented by school districts nationwide include anti-bullying policies, LGBTQ student groups, inclusive curriculum, and professional development. Each of these strategies are described below and, when possible, evidence of effectiveness or impact is provided.

Policy Context for LGBTQ Students

At times it can be unclear how government policies affect the way schools interact with LGBTQ students, especially when they are not consistent at the state and federal levels. In Iowa, the legislature passed the Safe Schools Law in 2007 which protects all Iowan students from bullying and harassment based on various identities, including sexual orientation and gender identity.[42] In May 2016, the Obama administration Department of Education and Department of Justice released a "Dear Colleague" letter providing guidelines on how to comply with Title IX regulations in regard to LGBTQ and, in particular, trans students. [43] These guidelines were rescinded in February 2017 after the change in administration, but the Title IX law has not changed. That is, it is still possible for LGBTQ students anywhere in the country to challenge the legality of a school's practices that "exclude, separate, deny benefits to, or otherwise treat differently on the basis of sex." [43]

Anti-bullying Policies

Nationwide climate studies have found that school- and district-level anti-bullying policies that include reference to sexual orientation and gender identity are associated with fewer incidents of bullying for LGBTQ students.[44] LGBTQ students attending schools with these inclusive policies report less victimization, feel safer at school, feel more like they belong, and are more likely to talk to a staff member when dealing with problems at school. However, when schools have anti-bullying policies that don't mention sexual orientation or gender identity, outcomes for LGBTQ student experiences are similar to schools with no anti-bullying policies at all.[45]

Despite these findings, researchers do not claim that inclusive anti-bullying policies cause these outcomes.[46, 47] Contextual factors may affect the existence of such policies, which influence the positive outcomes listed above. Although a causal relationship has not been shown to exist, this does not diminish the value of maintaining and publicizing LGBTQ-inclusive anti-bullying policies.

LGBTQ Student Groups

It is increasingly common for schools to become home to student-led LGBTQ groups, often categorized as "Gay Straight Alliances" or GSAs.[48] These groups are student-led and school-based, serve LGBTQ students, and have varying purposes from socialization to change-making. Although GSA is a common name for this type of group, there exist many versions of this concept throughout the country, generally without any form of central leadership. All junior high and high schools in the Iowa City Community School District are currently home to an LGBTQ student group of some sort. This is encouraging, as an array of research has documented the positive effects these groups have on LGBTQ students.

LGBTQ students who attend a school that has a GSA-type group have been shown to experience less homophobic and transphobic hate speech, less harassment and victimization, and more feelings of physical and emotional safety at school.[48, 49, 50, 51, 52] Such students also exhibit lower rates of depression and suicidality, fewer suicide attempts, fewer substance abuse issues, and better overall psychological well-being[53, 54, 55, 56] Academic attendance is higher for these students, as well as feelings of accountability and likelihood of attending college.[56, 57, 58, 59] Finally, LGBTQ students whose schools have GSAs are more likely to have positive relationships with teachers, experience more positive school climate, and have a greater sense of belonging to and connectedness with their school.[60, 61, 62, 63]

In addition to these outcomes, the benefits of a GSA extends beyond LGBTQ students in K-12. Researchers have found that the presence of a GSA decreases overall victimization experiences for non-LGBTQ students.[64] The benefits of psychological well-being and educational attainment also extend years past graduation from high school.[65] It is also important to note that these benefits have been shown to affect LGBTQ students regardless of whether or to what extent they participated in the GSA — merely the presence of the group within the school is enough to make a difference, and the GSA's effects on individual members are significantly less than the effects on overall school climate.[65, 66]

Inclusive Curriculum

An inclusive curriculum meets the varied needs of a diverse student population, where students come from differing social and cultural backgrounds. Inclusive curricula are student-centered and inclusive of the voices and experiences of each student. Making a curriculum more inclusive often involves changing or adding content to lessons and changing the way content is displayed. The Safe School Coalition (SSC) provides many examples of these practices.[67] Contributions made to society by LGBTQ and other non-majority people are often omitted completely in curriculum. When these

contributors are mentioned their minority status is generally either omitted altogether or broadcasted as the most relevant aspect of the person's 'claim to fame,' instead of their actual accomplishments. Although potentially challenging at first, it is possible to mention a person and their identity without tokenizing it. When minority identities are omitted entirely, minority children miss out on having a role model that looks like them. When minority figures are tokenized, it conveys a message that it is abnormal for people of said identity to be successful. These messages affect both non-majority and majority students in similar ways.

> *When minority identities are omitted entirely, minority children miss out on having a role model that looks like them. When minority figures are tokenized, it conveys a message that it is abnormal for people of said identity to be successful.*

Never mentioning minority identities or tokenizing them portrays to all students that these people and their identities and experiences are lesser. For the minority students, this experience causes them to feel less included, which, as previously mentioned, hinders their academic motivations,[68] achievements,[69] and mental health.[70] Simultaneously, majority students can also grow to believe that non-majority people and their experiences are lesser, which directly affects their treatment of their minority peers. The GLSEN 2015 National Climate Survey shows this effect being reduced through an inclusive curriculum. LGBTQ students in schools with an inclusive curriculum hear homophobic and transphobic comments between 16 and 23 percent less than students in schools without inclusive curricula.[71] Further, LGBTQ students in schools with an inclusive curriculum also report feelings of safety between 13 and 22 percent higher than those under non-inclusive curricula. Thus, an inclusive curriculum is a beneficial method to improve school climate by targeting both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students' perceptions of the LGBTQ community.

Educational policy research recommends planning inclusive classrooms incrementally.[72] The planning process could include evaluating major lesson topics, activities, and other major aspects of

class structure and discussion. The Cornell University's Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) offers two major reflective questions to guide creation of inclusive curricula:

1) What are your own cultural influences and personal ways of teaching and learning and how might these influence your choices in course design?

2) What are your students' cultural influences and personal ways of learning and how might these influence motivation and course expectations?[73]

Further, Michigan State University recommends including the work of scholars from a diverse set of backgrounds, purposefully attending to who is represented in presentations and how, and maximizing the amount of different student voices in each lesson.[74] It may be helpful for educators to create goals for students related to diversity and respect, which can redefine course goals and standardize expectations.

The CTE recommends setting standard ground rules in the classroom at the beginning of the year, so conversations about stereotypes and other diversity subjects remain civil and productive.[75] The CTE also suggests setting ground rules as an entire class, while holding the power to veto and set your own rules. This method can be seen as initial progress made on inclusivity, as it allows each student to have a heard voice and suggest rules that they believe will make them more comfortable and able to learn. When these rules are enforced, students may be more likely to respect them because they helped create them. A further step to maintain rules could be posting them for the class to see, and even having students sign their name on it as a promise to follow class rules.

Without careful selection, materials and activities can be exclusive by default. For example, a book about families and what they can look like may not include same-sex and interracial parents. Or, an activity may exclude certain students if it builds on assumptions that all students have a traditional family. Fortunately, there are many options to replace books and activities like this in classrooms, as well as resources on how to incorporate inclusivity into lessons (*see online appendix*).

Finally, to truly make a curriculum entirely inclusive, it must also be inclusive in terms of accessibility. Thus, every educator should consider following the basic principles of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), providing multiple means for representation, expression, and engagement (*see online appendix*).[76]

Professional Development

Due to previously-mentioned high levels of harassment and bullying towards LGBTQ students within school walls, as well as a lack of perceived support from teachers, it is important for teachers to be familiar with the specific needs of students in protected classes. Professional development related to LGBTQ students can help educators understand gender and sexual orientation vocabulary, as well as strategies to de-escalate LGBTQ-related bullying (see online appendix).[77, 78, 79] Further, less formal professional development options can involve educational booklets on gender and sexual orientation, including relevant vocabulary and common myths regarding the LGBTQ community.[80]

While many programs related to LGBTQ students have been implemented in school districts, these programs have not yet been evaluated by credible, peer-reviewed studies. However, the effectiveness of professional development for educators has been studied for years, showing positive results from many programs.[81, 82, 83] The basis of professional development is to provide teachers with enough knowledge, strategies, and skills to handle specific situations that can arise in schools, such as bullying and classroom management. Specifically for LGBTQ students, professional development should involve education on LGBTQ identity, mental health in the LGBTQ community, and disparities and disadvantages faced by LGBTQ youth. This basis of knowledge would build efficacy for school staff to identify and de-escalate identity based bullying, and enhance relationships with LGBTQ students. Thus, professional development can be very important for addressing LGBTQ identity based bullying.

Recommendations

Inclusive Curriculum

While schools in the ICCSD are currently taking initiative to include more LGBTQ-related books in their libraries and structure a more inclusive curriculum, the LGBTQ student survey data shows that feelings of inclusivity remain low amongst LGBTQ students. Adding LGBTQ-inclusive materials to existing curriculum and replacing curriculum when necessary could enhance perceptions of inclusivity for LGBTQ students.

> *Recommendation: ICCSD develops inclusive curriculum for all students in the District, by gradually integrating LGBTQ-inclusive material into existing curriculum and updating curriculum as needed.*

Professional Development

While the ICCSD already commits itself to anti-bullying policies and professional development, survey results show that LGBTQ students in the District report high levels of harassment compared to their non-LGBTQ peers. Thus, it is important to stress the significance of knowledge specifically related to LGBTQ identities. At the elementary level, the District uses the Steps to Respect Bullying Prevention Program. Further, some of the secondary level schools use the Mentors in Violence Prevention training program. However, both of these programs have limited focus on the treatment of LGBTQ students. The ICCSD could consider a separate training that focuses on LGBTQ identity, mental health in the LGBTQ community, and disparities and disadvantages faced by LGBTQ youth. Teachers can combine this knowledge with experience and trainings related to bullying and harassment to better support LGBTQ students.

Further, it is important that counselors and nurses are trained on information regarding LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students can often face significant mental health problems due to harassment and exclusion, as well as a lack of acceptance from family or friends. Thus, LGBTQ-related training is necessary for a counselor to be as effective as possible for LGBTQ students. Similarly, it is appropriate to train nurses on health related to trans students, so they can effectively communicate and care for transgender youth.

> *Recommendation: ICCSD provides professional development opportunities for all ICCSD educators and student support staff on topics of LGBTQ identity, experiences, and inclusion.*

LGBTQ Student Groups

All junior high and high schools in the Iowa City Community School District have an established LGBTQ student group. While some schools report low and inconsistent membership, the mere existence of the group can impact students and perceptions. Schools could consult current group members to strategize enhancing membership, activities, and visibility of current LGBTQ student groups.

> *Recommendation: ICCSD continues to support LGBTQ student groups, and fortify efforts to increase visibility.*

Visibility

Research shows that the visibility of LGBTQ anti-bullying policies, programs, and groups affects how effective they are in reducing harassment towards LGBTQ students.[84] Visibility serves dual purposes by establishing a welcoming environment for LGBTQ students and demonstrating the school's commitment to equity for non-LGBTQ students. Thus, visibility of LGBTQ culture in general is important to inclusive school climate.

Inclusive curricula reinforce visibility of LGBTQ and other diverse people. Examples of inclusive curricula as a tool for increasing LGBTQ visibility include posters of LGBTQ historic figures displayed in the classroom, as well as LGBTQ-diverse families and couples portrayed in slides, examples, and word problems in math courses.

Similarly, the visibility and consistent enforcement of explicit rules against LGBTQ-related harassment and bullying shows the commitment of the school to protect LGBTQ students. This message of commitment displays to non-LGBTQ students that LGBTQ-related bullying is not acceptable.

Recommendation: ICCSD improves the visibility of its sexual orientation and gender identity-inclusive anti-bullying policy, its LGBTQ student groups, and its efforts to be inclusive and affirming of LGBTQ students.

Consistent and Accurate Tracking of School Climate

In order to further the understanding of LGBTQ student experiences in the ICCSD, it is important to continue including the expanded gender identity and sexual orientation demographic questions in the annual student experiences of school climate survey.

It is important that the ICCSD sustains its efforts to support LGBTQ students with long-term planning. Along with seeking inclusive curriculum, strengthening LGBTQ student groups, and implementing research-based strategies to improve the climate of LGBTQ students, the District can emphasize equity goals by integrating LGBTQ affirming practices into the current processes. The District can examine current practices and inform curriculum development with school specific climate data. By incorporating equitable practices into routines, the ICCSD can promote accountability and maintain an organizational culture of inclusivity.

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