

Issue Briefing: School Climate and California LGB Youth Questions and Answers

A positive school climate is paramount to addressing disparities in health and well being among lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth in California. We were pleased to host Jenny Betz from WestEd to discuss the latest research on school climate and Hannah Herrick, a UC Berkeley student, to share her high school experience as part of the LGB community. A recording of the webinar and slides are available at kidsdata.org. Responses to audience questions are below.

Are there policies to ensure or mandate that school staff/administration have the training about LGBTQ+ policies/laws to prevent discrimination towards LGBTQ+ students?

Students are absolutely protected on almost every level. California laws prohibit discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation. In addition, general non-discrimination policies apply. For example:

- *SB 48: Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act*
Schools are required to teach about historical contributions of people who are LGBT and people with disabilities in addition to women, people of color, and other historically underrepresented groups
- *AB 537: California Student Safety and Violence Protection Act*
Adds actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity to the existing nondiscrimination policy in California's Education Code

What do we do when teachers/schools do things that are out of compliance with California laws, the FAIR Education Act? Is there a hotline or outside source students or staff can call or turn to for support and advocacy?

Start with dialog. We need to hold our own selves and our colleagues accountable, so the burden doesn't fall on youth. External organizations are available to help, including:

- The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of [northern](#) and [southern](#) California provide information on boundaries of the law
- Local LGBTQ+ centers can offer support and guidance on addressing non-compliant administrators or teachers.
- The [California Teachers Association](#) website has a section on resources for addressing LGBTQ+ issues.

When teachers fall into a category of people who are overworked and underpaid, how do you engage teachers who say that they just don't have the time or energy to do the work of getting up to speed with regards to cultural competency and/or knowing the rights of LGBTQ+ youth in schools?

This is a common concern. We know that clear commitment of a school's leadership to the LGBTQ+ student community is critical to promoting a community of support for all students. It can start with dedicating time at staff meetings and professional development trainings for discussions centered on laws, policies and actions that are grounded and useful for your community. Create a safe space for teachers as you would for students to talk, share, and express support.

On a large high school campus, where students are still fearful about being out, what are some suggestions for where to start to support LGBTQ+ students?

Show support through words, actions and the physical environment. Provide access to a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), offer opportunities to have a safe space on campus, identify supportive faculty and staff, and provide an environment for peer support. If there is not a GSA or similar club, then other clubs such as diversity club, school climate club, or social justice club can be useful spaces.

Faculty and staff should be aware that in some situations LGBTQ+ students may not feel comfortable being out in public, which may exclude the possibility of having a club where they would expose their identity. In environments where LGBTQ+ students do not feel safe to come out, the best approach is to provide one-on-one counseling that wouldn't expose their identity. A sticker in a window could symbolize a safe open space where students can feel comfortable talking to a particular adult without outing themselves to an entire school. Ninety percent of the student community might not notice a sticker or a poster, but those who need to notice it will notice it.

How can I gain more resources and support for starting a GSA club on campus?

From the student perspective, first go to a trustworthy teacher or staff member. Likely, other students in similar positions have come to some of the same faculty and perhaps they can help you gather members or gauge interest in such a club. From the staff or faculty perspective, a way to reach out to students could be as simple as putting a sticker in your window. This will signal to anyone who needs help or guidance that you can provide a safe space for them. If you notice that several students reach out to you this could be a good sign that there would be enough support to start a GSA or Queer Straight Alliance (QSA). Starting a GSA is the same as starting any other non-curricular club at school and is governed by the same school site rules. [GSAnetwork.org](https://www.gsanetwork.org) offers guidance for starting a GSA on campus.

What events can leaders put on that would be inclusive for allies and LGBTQ+ youth that promote awareness and acceptance?

Generally speaking, there doesn't need to be new events that would be inclusive. Rather, just make sure that the events that a school already has are inclusive. For example, do not encourage the norm that dances should exclusively have male and female couples. There doesn't need to be extra attention focused on LGBTQ+ students, just make sure that already existing spaces are open and welcoming to different identities.

If an incident has occurred in which peers have bullied queer students or there is a lack of inclusion by the administration or some other entity, there are community building events that can be helpful in encouraging diversity and acceptance. A 'Synergy Day' could facilitate many discussions and group activities. A particularly useful activity is called "Crossing the Line." It consists of all students standing behind an imagined line while various statements or phrases are read. If they apply to you, you are expected to cross the line. These statements vary on topics such as sexual assault, queer identities, and mental health. Those who cross the line are then told to turn around and face those who did not cross. This activity can have a powerful effect on recognizing similarities and differences and understanding your classmates better.

Are there specific tools or activities that you have found effective for non-LGBTQ+ students to understand their investment in creating an inclusive and affirming student culture?

Sharing of stories of those who have experienced exclusive and discriminatory circumstances is an effective method. Story-telling often illuminates experiences that many non-LGBTQ+ students may never have even thought possible. In the right environment, this can do wonders to foster acceptance. Outline the importance of being an ally and all the responsibilities that come with that. Emphasize the importance of being an active bystander as well as being an ally for the entire queer community, not just identities such as lesbian and gay.