



## LGBT Students Still Face Hostile School Climates

**Robert Rader**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CABE

**Vincent Mustaro**

SENIOR STAFF ASSOCIATE FOR POLICY SERVICE, CABE

Students can be most successful when they attend a school which a safe and supportive learning environment. Boards of education, through their governance structure, policies, and practices, can help ensure that all youth maintain good mental and physical health. Developing such a culture also requires caring, accepting parents and supportive adults.

Regretfully, this environment has not been universally achieved for all students. To help Board Members better understand the needs of all students, the National School Boards Association, for the last two years, has held Equity Symposiums, consistent with its mission of NSBA advocating for “Equity and Excellence in Public Education through School Board Governance.”

One of the informative sessions Bob recently attended was “Coming Out for Inclusion: Serving LGBT Students and Improving School Climate.” Andrew Peters, the State Policy Manager for GLSEN, the “leading national organization focused on supporting LGBT students in k-12 schools” discussed its 2015 National School Climate Survey and the authority of Boards to create and adopt policies to make schools more inclusive for LGBT students.

One of the questions frequently asked is what percentage of students in high schools identify as straight or LGBT? According to Peters, 88% of students say they’re straight. 12% list themselves as “other”. However, we need to be concerned about all of our students! The national statistics on what LGBT students face are eye-opening. Harassment continues in our schools as evidenced by the following:

- 58% of LGBT students felt unsafe at school

because of their sexual orientation and 43% because of their gender expression;

- 85% experienced verbal harassment and 27% were physically harassed because of a personal characteristic, usually sexual orientation;
- 98 percent of these students heard “gay” used in a negative way;
- 66% reported personally experiencing LGBT-related discriminatory policies or practices at school;
- 51% of transgender students had been prevented from using their preferred name or pronoun; and,
- 60% of transgender students had been required to use a bathroom of their legal sex.

The result of this climate: LGBT students are three times as likely to miss school; have lower self-esteem; and, lower GPAs than other students. They are four times as likely to try suicide and three times more likely to have been forced to have sex. They are more likely to use drugs and more likely to be disciplined at school.

Peters categorized this situation as a “health crisis” in our schools.

While we know that Connecticut law protects LGBT students and the figures cited above were national, the 2015 State Snapshot on School Climate in Connecticut, upon investigation, revealed the following:

- 85% of students heard “gay” used in a negative way;
- About a third of LGBT students and 62% of transgender students were unable to use the school restroom that aligned with their gender; and
- 63% were verbally harassed, 21% were physically harassed and 10% were actually assaulted.

*continued*

Some encouraging factors also were revealed:

- Almost all LGBT students knew of at least one supportive educator and 87% could identify six or more supportive educators; and,
- 84% had access to a Gay-Straight Alliance or “similar student club that provides a safe and affirming space and promotes a more welcoming school climate for LGBTQ students.”

LGBT youth can be successful and thrive in our Connecticut schools if they feel socially, emotionally, physically safe and supported. The creation of a positive and nurturing school climate is essential. GLSEN recommends that districts have policies that protect LGBT students, especially anti-bullying policies. The organization also suggests that school handbooks have clear language on bullying and clear reporting processes. Other policies which have a bearing on this issue also need to be a part of school handbooks.

It also is important to ensure that educators understand these issues and teachers should feel empowered to intervene in incidents of harassment. Staff

training on how to create and maintain a safe and supportive school environment for all students must be provided. Educators should also make it known to students that they are willing to speak to students about these issues. A sign or symbol on a door can tell students that a supportive adult is available.

Schools districts can implement clear policies, procedures and activities designed to promote a healthy environment for all students. This encourages respect for all students through prohibiting bullying, harassment and violence. CABE can assist by providing Boards with policies on bullying and safe school climate, nondiscrimination, youth suicide prevention, harassment, sexual abuse prevention and education program, cyberbullying, transgender and non-conforming youth and equity and diversity.

On the national level, the Supreme Court has before it *Gloucester School Dist. v GG*, which is expected to provide guidance on restroom access to transgender students.

The GLSEN 2015 National School Climate Survey is available at [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org).