



# LGBT-INCLUSIVE SEXUAL EDUCATION IN CANADA

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## Summary

LGBT students in Canadian schools are harassed and assaulted at significantly higher rates than other students, and frequently experience hostile school climates that have negative outcomes on school performance, physical and mental health. Traditional sex ed curricula are inadequate for the needs of LGBT students, and a comprehensive LGBT-inclusive sexual education curriculum can help overcome obstacles to the full benefits of public education.

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## **Introduction**

Historically, sexual education curricula in public schools in North America have approached the teaching of topics related to sexuality and sexual health predominantly from the perspective of heterosexual relationships. LGBT students, who are subjected to significantly higher levels of harassment and assault in schools and frequently experience a hostile school climate, feel that sexual education is irrelevant to them and often report that LGBT topics are taught in a negative way. LGBT students largely get information on sexual activity from the internet, and frequently from on-line pornography, with sometimes harmful results. This school climate, combined with the inadequacies of traditional sexual education curricula, contributes to negative outcomes in school performance, social inclusion, and health for LGBT students. A comprehensive, LGBT-inclusive approach to sexual education will help to improve the education of LGBT students, contribute to improved physical and mental health outcomes, promote social inclusion, and foster a climate of tolerance in schools and society at large.

### **I. The need for comprehensive LGBT-inclusive sex ed in schools**

#### **A. Harassment & assault of LGBT students**

Reliable Canadian statistics on the proportion of LGBT students in schools are difficult to obtain, but a reputable U.S. study done in 2005 identified about 5% of the population of adolescents aged 13-18 years old who self-identified as LGBT (Mitchell et al). Canadian schools likely have similar statistics.

Students who identify as LGBT are subject to significantly higher levels of harassment or assault in Canadian schools. A comprehensive Canadian study released in 2011 provided statistics on this subject. Among their findings:

- 70% of all students, LGBT and non-LGBT, reported hearing homophobic or transphobic comments every day at school, including almost 10% of students who heard them from teachers
- 74% of trans students, 55% of sexual minority students, and 26% of non-LGBT students reported having been verbally harassed about their gender

expression

- 37% of trans students, 32% of female sexual minority students, and 20% of male sexual minority students reported being verbally harassed daily or weekly about their sexual orientation
- 37% of youth with LGBT parents reported being verbally harassed about the sexual orientation of their parents
- 21% of LGBT students reported being physically harassed or assaulted due to their sexual orientation
- 20% of LGBT students and almost 10% of non-LGBTQ students reported being physically harassed or assaulted about their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity
- 37% of trans students, 21% of sexual minority students, and 10% of non-LGBT students reported being physically harassed or assaulted because of their gender expression
- 27% of youth with LGBT parents reported being physically harassed about the sexual orientation of their parents
- Levels of sexual harassment are significantly higher for LGBT students, particularly trans students (49%) and gay male students (40%)
- 64% of LGBT students and 61% of students with LGBT parents reported that they feel unsafe at school

(Egale)

## **B. Hostile school climate**

The United States-based organization GLSEN conducted a major survey of U.S. schools to gauge the experiences of LGBT students. The results, released in 2017, documented the challenges that these students experience at school. The study showed that “schools nationwide are hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBT students, the overwhelming majority of whom routinely hear anti-LGBT language and experience victimization and discrimination at school. As a result, many LGBT students avoid school activities or miss school entirely” (GLSEN, “School Climate Survey”).

Among the survey's findings:

- 34.8% of LGBT students missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.
- Approximately 4 in 10 students avoided gender-segregated spaces in school due to safety concerns (bathrooms: 42.7%; locker rooms: 40.6%)
- Most LGBT students reported avoiding school functions (75.4%) and extracurricular activities (70.5%) because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.
- Most LGBT students (62.2%) reported experiencing LGBT-related discriminatory policies or practices at school.

### **C. Effects of LGBT discrimination & victimization**

The GLSEN 2017 School Climate Survey identified a number of negative outcomes for LGBT students subjected to discrimination and victimization at school based on sexual orientation or gender expression. LGBT students:

- had lower grade point averages than students who were less often harassed
- were nearly twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education
- were more likely to have been disciplined at school
- had lower self-esteem and sense of school belonging and higher levels of depression.

The effects of this victimization often spill over into society at large, at great social and economic cost. NBC News reports from the U.S. that

the alarming rate of bullying, homelessness, HIV and suicide among LGBT youth should be an outrage: Nearly a fifth of students are physically assaulted because they are LGBT; among homeless children, 25 to 50 percent are LGBT; the CDC reports among youth aged 13 to 24 diagnosed with HIV in 2014, 80 percent were gay and bisexual males; and gay teens are also eight times more likely to report having attempted suicide (Nottage).

**D. Inadequacies of traditional sex-ed curricula**

Traditional sexual education curricula focus their attention on reproduction, pregnancy prevention, and heterosexual vaginal sex, and in many cases emphasize an “abstinence-only” focus. Instruction in schools on the topic of sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) is often taught only from the perspective of heterosexual relationships. LGBT students often do not receive information in their sexual education classes that is relevant to their experience, and many turn to other less reliable sources.

In a 2005 U.S. study of LGBT adolescents, 69% of LGBT youth reported that relevant information on sexual orientation was not provided in the sexual education curricula at their schools, and 12% said it was discussed in a negative way (Mitchell et al).

In a 2010 U.S. study involving young men who have sex with men (YMSM), most respondents reported that they rarely, if ever, heard anything about same-sex sexuality in their school’s sexual education classes. In addition, they were rarely “out” to their parents while attending school, or found approaching their parents for information embarrassing or otherwise challenging. As a result of this lack of education, most YMSM in the study turned to the internet for information on homosexuality. Most reported that on-line pornography was their only source of information on same-sex sexual activity, and most learned about sex from actual experimentation and/or their sexual partners. This required these young men to place a great deal of trust in their partners to take the necessary steps to make sure the experience was safe and pleasurable, leading many of them into risky sexual behavior (Kubicek et al).

When schools are a source of reliable, non-judgmental, evidence-based information on sexual activity and sexual health, and when LGBT students feel that teachers and school-based health professionals are sympathetic and that schools provide a safe environment for them to ask for this information, then LGBT students have access to the same level of support as non-LGBT students. They can navigate through what can be a confusing and turbulent emotional landscape with help from trained professionals and not be forced to rely on

questionable and sometimes dangerous sources of information.

## **II. The value of an LGBT-inclusive curriculum & school climate**

### **A. Positive outcomes of LGBT-inclusion in schools**

Schools can counter the negative effects of bullying and discrimination of LGBT students by promoting school environments that are safe and welcoming to LGBT students, and by adopting LGBT-inclusive elements in the curriculum. Research in the U.S. has demonstrated that an LGBT-inclusive curriculum contributes to a safer school environment, helps LGBT students feel more connected to their schools, and reinforces peer acceptance of LGBT students. Sexual minority students at schools with this type of curriculum were:

- half as likely to experience high levels of victimization because of sexual orientation or gender expression
- less likely to feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.
- about half as likely to miss school because of feeling unsafe or uncomfortable
- more likely to report that their classmates were accepting of LGBT people
- less likely to hear homophobic remarks or negative comments about gender expression
- More likely to report that their peers usually intervene when hearing homophobic remarks

(GLSEN, “Teaching Respect”)

### **B. Negative outcomes of LGBT exclusion in schools**

Research in the U.S. shows that students in schools with an LGBT-inclusive curriculum are more comfortable talking to teachers about LGBT issues, and talk to their teachers about them more frequently (GLSEN, “Teaching Respect”).

There are jurisdictions in North America where teaching of LGBT topics in school curricula is severely restricted or banned; several U.S. states have so-called “no

promo homo” laws that explicitly prohibit the positive portrayal of homosexuality in schools. Some laws restrict or prohibit any portrayals of homosexuality in a positive light; in other words, schools are only permitted to portray homosexuality in a negative way. South Carolina’s Comprehensive Health Education Act, for example, stipulates that “alternative lifestyles from heterosexual relationships” may only be discussed “in the context of instruction concerning sexually transmitted diseases.” (Nottage)

Research shows that LGBT students in these jurisdictions where there is no inclusion of positive LGBT topics in sex ed curricula are

- more likely to engage in behaviours that put their health at risk
- more than half as likely to have access to medical, mental health and social services specific for LGBT people
- less likely to have access to health professionals with training in LGBT issues

(GLSEN, “Promotion of Homosexuality”)

## **Conclusion**

The negative effects of a hostile school climate and the exclusion of LGBT students from relevant sexual education in public schools are well-documented. A school environment and a sexual education curriculum that includes LGBT people not only promotes the health of the LGBT school population, but encourages their full integration into society, while at the same time promoting understanding, tolerance and inclusion. This ultimately benefits not only LGBT people, but society as a whole.

As governments respond to pressure to re-examine the content of sexual health curricula in public schools, LGBTory Canada advocates an approach that fully examines the needs of LGBT students, relies on an evidence-based approach that acknowledges their unique needs, and balances the demands of parents with the obligation to provide a safe and tolerant learning environment for LGBT school populations which still are the targets of serious harassment and abuse in public schools.

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