California safe schools coalition

GENDER NON-CONFORMITY AND SCHOOL SAFETY: DOCUMENTING THE PROBLEM AND STEPS SCHOOLS CAN TAKE

Students in California report significant harassment at school because they do not conform to gender expectations and stereotypes. Such harassment is reported by many students, and is more often reported by students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). Gender non-conformity harassment is more common in unsafe school climates – that is, in schools that lack:

- Clear, inclusive anti-harassment policies
- Regular teacher intervention when harassment occurs
- Curriculum attention devoted to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression

Finding 1: Harassment based on gender non-conformity is pervasive.

In a survey of over 2,400 California students, many reported harassment at school due to gender non-conformity. Figure 1 shows that 23% of California students reported being harassed because they were not "as masculine as other guys" or "as feminine as other girls." Gender non-conformity-based harassment is more pervasive for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students than for heterosexual students: 42% of students who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) and 62% of those who identify as transgender report harassment based on gender non-conformity. Furthermore, 14% of all students, 27% of LGB students, and 57% of transgender students report being harassed because of gender non-conformity more than once.
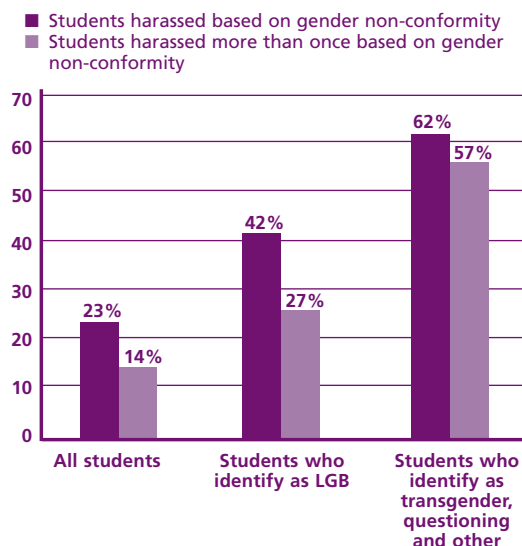
"Like, I would get called 'dyke,' or whatever, like some kind of name at least once...a week."

Finding 2: School climates are unsafe for gender non-conforming students, especially for gender non-conforming boys.

Results also show that students perceive that their schools are unsafe for gender non-conforming students – particularly for gender non-conforming boys. Figure 2 shows that 59% of all students surveyed, but only 47% of LGB students and 48% of transgender students, agree "pretty much" or "very much" that their school is safe for "guys who aren't as masculine as other guys." 72% of all students and only 65% of LGB students and 57% of transgender students agree "pretty much" or "very much" that their school is safe for "girls who aren't as feminine as other girls."

"…In my school, I don't know about girls who are masculine, but, like, for guys who are feminine, we get, pushed around, and, like, called names…"

Figure 1
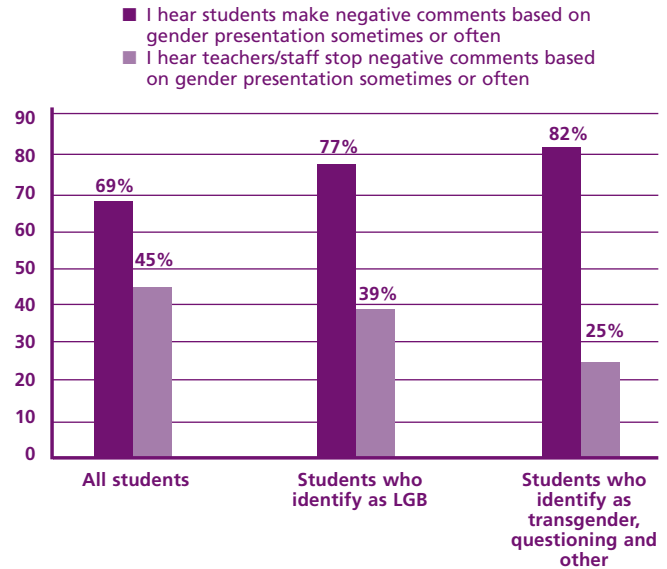HARASSMENT BASED ON GENDER NON-CONFORMITY IS PREVALENT

■ Students harassed based on gender non-conformity
■ Students harassed more than once based on gender non-conformity

Figure 2
SCHOOL CLIMATES ARE UNSAFE FOR GENDER NON-CONFORMING STUDENTS, ESPECIALLY BOYS

■ All students
■ Students who identify as LGB
■ Students who identify as transgender, questioning or other

Finding 3: Although negative comments based on gender non-conformity are pervasive, teachers rarely intervene.

In spite of the fact that gender non-conformity harassment is common, and students say that their schools aren't safe for students based on gender non-conformity, teachers and other school personnel rarely intervene in harassment based on gender non-conformity. Figure 3 shows that 69% of all students surveyed, 77% of LGB students, and 82% of transgender students reported that they "sometimes" or "often" hear students make negative comments based on gender non-conformity. Unfortunately, only 45% of all students, 39% of LGB students, and 25% of transgender students hear teachers or staff stop negative comments based on gender non-conformity.

Figure 3

NEGATIVE COMMENTS BASED ON GENDER PRESENTATION ARE COMMON, AND TEACHER OR STAFF INTERVENTION IS UNCOMMON

■ I hear students make negative comments based on gender presentation sometimes or often

■ I hear teachers/staff stop negative comments based on gender presentation sometimes or often
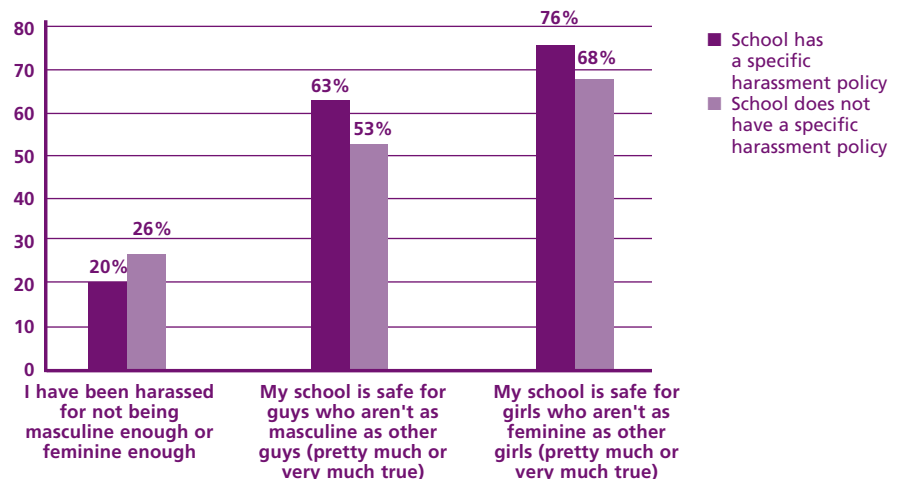

Gender Non-conformity: Steps Schools Can Take

Step 1: Establish and publicize a school policy that specifically prohibits harassment on the basis of gender, including gender identity and gender-related appearance and behavior.

Implementing policies that prohibit discrimination based on gender identity and expression is an important first step for creating positive school environments. However, policies alone are not enough - the policies must be enforced. Previous research conducted by the California Safe Schools Coalition found that only 40% of districts have policies that explicitly prohibit harassment based on gender identity, appearance, or behavior. Figure 4 shows that, of students who reported that their schools did not have a specific gender identity and expression and harassment policy, 26% had been harassed for "not being masculine enough" or "not being feminine enough." Meanwhile, among students who said that their schools <u>did</u> have gender-inclusive anti-harassment policies, only 20% were harassed based on gender identity and expression. Further, students reported feeling that their school was safer for gender non-conforming students if their schools had harassment policies that specifically included gender identity and expression.

Figure 4

GENDER IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION SPECIFIC HARASSMENT POLICIES: HARASSMENT PREVALENCE AND FEELINGS OF SAFETY

■ School has a specific harassment policy

■ School does not have a specific harassment policy

Step 2: Teacher intervention in harassment makes a difference: train teachers and staff to stop slurs and harassment.

Harassment is less common when teachers step in to stop negative comments and slurs based on gender non-conformity. As shown in Figure 5, 64% of students who said that teachers <u>never</u> or <u>rarely</u> step in reported being harassed based on gender non-conformity; in comparison, for students whose teachers sometimes or often stepped in, only 36% reported being harassed.

"[Teachers] should actually speak up, because I've been in a lot of classrooms where stuff is said, and the teachers don't do [anything]. And if they did, it would stop right there if the teacher actually did something."
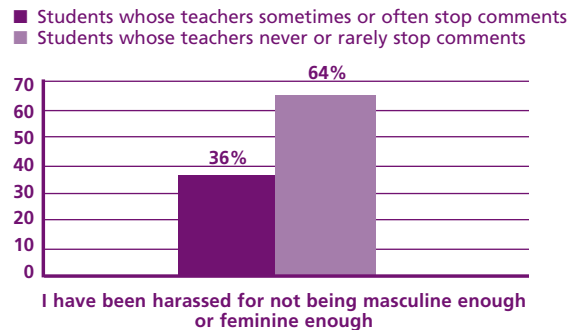
Step 3: Ensure that students know where to go for information and support related to gender identity and expression.

Knowing where to get information and support related to gender identity and expression is linked to feelings of safety for students. Feelings of safety at school are stronger among students who know where to get information and support about sexual orientation and gender identity. Figure 6 shows that 56% of students who felt that their school was safe for "guys who aren't as masculine as other guys," did not know where to go for information related to gender identity and expression compared to 61% of students who knew where to obtain this information. Likewise, 68% of students who felt that their school was safe for "girls who aren't as feminine as other girls," did not know where to go for this information as compared to 74% who did know where to obtain information.
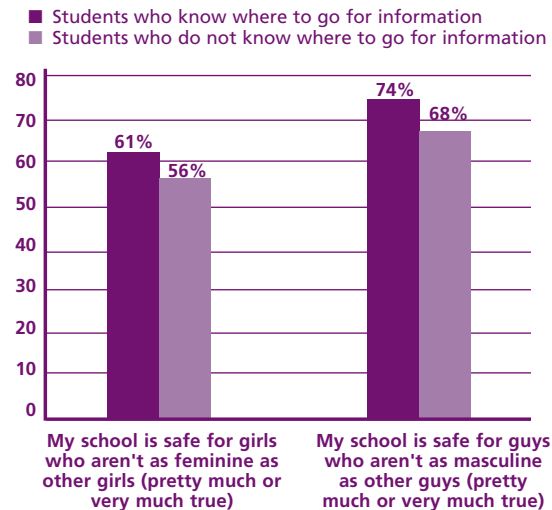
Step 4: Introduce curriculum that includes LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity.

Teaching about LGBT issues is linked to feelings of safety at school. Figure 7 shows that 67% of students who had learned about LGBT issues in school reported feeling that their school was safe for "guys who aren't as masculine as other guys," while only 51% of students who had not learned about LGBT issues in school felt the same way. Similarly, 78% of students who had learned about LGBT issues in school reported feeling that their school was safe for "girls who aren't as feminine as other girls," while only 68% of students who had not learned about LGBT issues in school felt the same way. Students who have not learned about LGBT issues in school are also more likely to be harassed for not being masculine enough or feminine enough. According to the students surveyed, 28% of students who did not learn about LGBT issues were harassed based on gender identity and expression, compared to 19% of students who had learned about LGBT issues in school.
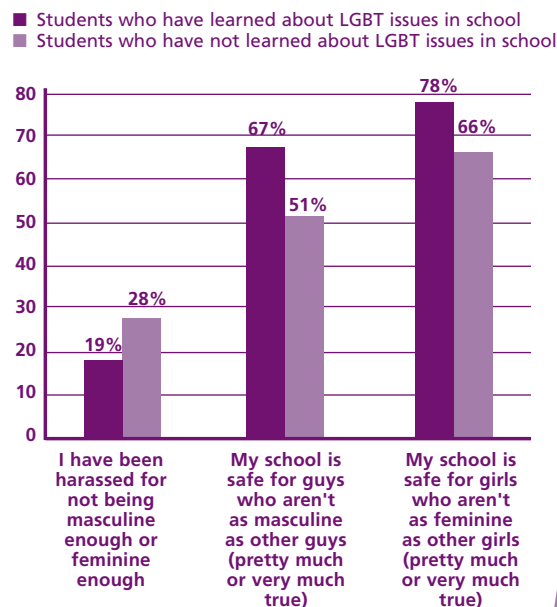
Figure 5
TEACHER INTERVENTION: HARASSMENT AND FEELINGS OF SAFETY

■ Students whose teachers sometimes or often stop comments
■ Students whose teachers never or rarely stop comments

I have been harassed for not being masculine enough or feminine enough

Figure 6
IMPORTANCE OF AVAILABLE INFORMATION: FEELINGS OF SAFETY

■ Students who know where to go for information
■ Students who do not know where to go for information

Figure 7
LGBT CURRICULUM: HARASSMENT & FEELINGS OF SAFETY

■ Students who have learned about LGBT issues in school
■ Students who have not learned about LGBT issues in school

Recommendations for teachers and school site staff

Teachers and school personnel who have the most contact with students are able to help create a positive and safe school climate and help students achieve their full potential. Teachers and staff should:

1. Work with your school district to adopt the model policy regarding transgender and gender non-conforming youth published by the California Safe Schools Coalition on its website.

2. Intervene when you hear bias-related comments and slurs. Use each comment as an opportunity to provide education and reaffirm school policy.

3. Request training on preventing harassment and discrimination, including bias-motivated harassment due to gender identity and gender non-conformity. Ask to help publicize school policies on prohibiting harassment based on gender identity and gender-related appearance and behavior.

4. Identify and recognize the unique needs of transgender youth. Make special efforts with the transgender and gender non-conforming youth at your school to ensure that their unique safety needs are met.

5. Set the climate in your classrooms early and as often as necessary, letting students know that bias-related harassment and slurs are not acceptable.

6. Treat all forms of bias-related harassment and slurs as serious and preventable.

7. Find out about community resources and information related to gender identity and expression.

8. Integrate representations of LGBT people and discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity into existing curricula.

Recommendations for students

If students feel safe, they can actively participate in making their schools safer. Students can:

1. Speak out when you hear slurs or negative comments related to gender non-conformity.

2. Find out if your school harassment policy covers harassment based on gender (including gender identity and gender-related appearance, and behavior or "gender identity and expression") and advocate for changing the policy if it doesn't.

3. Find out how to make a complaint when harassment towards a transgender or gender non-conforming individual occurs. You can make a complaint about harassment even if you aren't the target of it.

4. Speak out in support of specific steps school districts and schools can take: publicizing and enforcing anti-harassment policies, providing resources to students, training teachers and other staff, measuring bias-related harassment in your local school district, and including LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity in the curriculum.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Data are from the 2003, 2004 and 2005 Preventing School Harassment (PSH) survey. The survey was designed to study the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning high school students in California, and the steps schools can take to make schools safer. The PSH survey was developed by the California Safe Schools Coalition, and administered by the Gay-Straight Alliance Network. Data from over 2,400 students were collected in schools and on the internet. Students were asked about their experiences of safety at school and about the steps schools can take to make schools safer. Student quotes come from a project supported by a grant from The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues to J. K. McGuire.

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