



Free to Be Youth Project

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Finding Safe Space in New York City Public Schools: A Road Map

Dear Friend,

Today, LGBTQ+ youth face a variety of social-emotional and academic challenges in school as a result of interpersonal harassment, discriminatory school practices and policies, and limited access to resources. This is particularly true for LGBTQ+ youth of color, unhoused, and runaway youth, who experience greater barriers to accessing support. Independent research has demonstrated the positive impacts of LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum and affinity spaces, such as Genders and Sexualities Alliances¹ (GSAs), for both LGBTQ+ students and their cisgender, heterosexual peers. And yet, according to some data from the New York City Department of Education (DOE), less than a quarter of public schools reportedly have a GSA.

A robust and clear policy that supports GSAs across city schools, with accurate reporting, would safeguard LGBTQ+ students' right to an equitable school environment, and ensure that marginalized queer and trans students have the necessary resources to access their education.

Challenges Faced by LGBTQ+ Students in New York Schools

Anti-LGBTQ+ Remarks, Discriminatory Policies & Practices, and Resource Disparities

The New York City public school system is the largest in the country with over 1.1 million students. According to the CDC's 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, approximately 72.5% of youth in New York City identify as heterosexual, suggesting over 300,000 non-heterosexual students attending the city's public school system. This number is likely considerably higher, given that many youth are not feel comfortable disclosing their sexual preference or gender identity in school, which would make the number considerably higher.

¹ These groups are often also referred to as gay-straight alliances. For the purpose of this letter, the term "GSA" will include gender and sexuality alliances as well as groups with similar structure and mission, like gay-straight alliances.



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From anti-LGBTQ remarks to physical attacks, the scope of LGBTQ+ mistreatment in New York schools is deeply alarming. Most LGBTQ+ youth in New York grapple with pervasive interpersonal harassment within their public schools. The 2021 GLSEN National School Climate Survey reveals that a staggering 55% of LGBTQ+ students endure verbal harassment, 17% experience physical harassment, and 6% are even physically assaulted due to their sexual orientation.² Similarly, based on gender expression, 51% of LGBTQ+ students face verbal abuse, 16% experience physical harassment, and 6% endure physical assault. Further, many educators perpetuate the issue with homophobic comments; 53% of LGBTQ+ students report regularly hearing school staff make homophobic remarks.³

LGBTQ+ students also experience discrimination on an institutional level, with many such students in New York reporting discriminatory policies or practices at their schools. Most notably, 16% faced discipline for expressing LGBTQ+ affection, 10% were silenced on LGBTQ+ topics in both extracurricular and classroom settings, and 7% were unjustly restricted from wearing supportive clothing.⁴ These unequal measures extended further for transgender and nonbinary students, with 35% prohibited from embracing their chosen names/pronouns, 34% denied bathroom access, 30% barred from locker rooms, 17% subjected to clothing restrictions, and 17% blocked from joining sports teams aligned with their true gender, exposing a deeply troubling pattern of discrimination. This stigma and discrimination towards students' actual or perceived sexual and/or gender identity raises health risks for LGBTQ+ students.⁵

The struggles faced by LGBTQ+ youth have profound effects on their mental health. A recent national survey found that LGBTQ+ youth reported higher rates of depression, hopelessness, and

² "School Climate for LGBTQ Students in New York." GLSEN. https://maps.glsen.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/GLSEN_2021_NSCS_State_Snapshots_NY.pdf.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*



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suicidal thoughts than that of their peers.⁶ Moreover, the challenges extend to social isolation and alienation, particularly for LGBTQ+ youth who are homeless or part of other marginalized groups. In New York City schools, an alarmingly high one-in-three high school students that experienced homelessness also reported inflicting self-harm, twice the rate of their housed peers.⁷ Of those homeless teenagers living in shelters, there is the gravest of mental health challenges as many as two out of every five homeless teens reported purposefully hurting themselves (41%), and half reported that they attempted suicide (50%).⁸ These startling statistics speak for themselves — LGBTQ+ students need support.

Promoting Inclusivity and Well-Being for LGBTQ+ Students

The Case for Mandatory GSAs in New York City Public Schools

GSAs in public K-12 schools are groups dedicated to fostering safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ students. These groups offer spaces for students to socialize, self-actualize, and find support for unique concerns not shared by their peers.⁹ Not only do GSAs provide far-reaching benefits to LGBTQ+ youth, but they also have been linked to increased positive outcomes for their non-LGBTQ+ peers. Through a survey of student outcomes in schools with GSA programming, it was revealed that both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students had higher grade point averages, a greater sense of belonging and safety in school, and better mental health

⁶ Luk, J. W., Gilman, S. E., Haynie, D. L., and Simons-Morton, B. G; “Sexual Orientation and Depressive Symptoms in Adolescents.” (2018). *Pediatrics*, 141 (5). <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article-abstract/141/5/e20173309/37851/Sexual-Orientation-and-Depressive-Symptoms-in?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

⁷ “Mental Health Challenges Facing NYC’s Homeless High School Students.” (2019, May 20). Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness. <https://www.icphusa.org/commentary/mentalhealth19/>

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Support Student GSAs. GLSEN. <https://www.glsen.org/support-student-gsas>.



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outcomes.¹⁰ Furthermore, GSAs have been linked to an increased sense of agency and a decreased risk of illicit substance abuse for both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students.¹¹

While there is a surplus of evidence supporting the effectiveness of GSAs, the DOE has failed to accurately implement and report on the presence of these programs. FYP undertook a review of the DOE's data on GSAs and found it to be critically flawed, failing to even list each school within the domain of the DOE – only 922 schools, less than half of the city's schools, are listed as responding "yes" or "no" to a question about having a GSA on campus.¹² Upon investigation it was revealed that some schools misrepresent their own status, sometimes listing "yes" to having a GSA without maintaining any GSA infrastructure or membership.¹³

FYP is further concerned by the data which found that only 481 of the 921 surveyed NYC schools reported "yes" to having a GSA – a mere 52%.¹⁴ State-wide data collected by the CDC shows that only 66.5% of New York secondary schools reported having a GSA in 2020.¹⁵ The failure of the DOE to collect accurate data on GSAs is hurting students, particularly those struggling with access to resources, such as homeless, at-risk, and runaway youth.

The intersection of youth homelessness and GSAs is better understood when contextualized with data that shows approximately 25% to 40% of NYC youth experiencing homelessness identify as

¹⁰ Russell, S. T., Bishop, M. D., Saba, V. C., James, I., & Ioverno, S. (2021). Promoting school safety for lgbtq and all students. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 8(2), 160–166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23727322211031938>

¹¹ Heck, N. C., Livingston, N. A., Flentje, A., Oost, K., Stewart, B. T., & Cochran, B. N. (2014). "Reducing risk for illicit drug use and prescription drug misuse: High school gay-straight alliances and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth." *Addictive Behaviors*, 39(4), 824–828. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2014.01.007>.

¹² "LGBTQ+ Supports." NYC Public Schools. <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/school-life/school-environment/LGBTQsupport>.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ "GSA Report." NYC Department of Education. <https://infohub.nyced.org/reports/government-reports/gsa-report>.

¹⁵ "School Health Profiles: Characteristics of Health Programs Among Secondary Schools." (2020). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/profiles/pdf/2020/CDC-Profiles-2020.pdf>.



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LGBTQ+.¹⁶ These estimated 25,000 to 40,000 students who identify as LGBTQ+ and experience homelessness are disproportionately impacted by health risks like substance use, suicidal ideation, and social isolation.¹⁷ As a result, unhoused LGBTQ+ youth experience compounded injustices like criminalization, harassment, and abuse. Despite the clear need to support these students, research has shown that schools with a higher percentage of students on subsidized meal plans and schools with GSAs are inversely correlated, indicating that GSAs are more commonly found in wealthier communities.¹⁸ NYC youth homeless populations are largely concentrated in lower income neighborhoods, meaning that these students have comparably less access to LGBTQ+ affinity spaces than students living in wealthier areas.¹⁹

To date, there is no mandate or clear policy on the establishment of GSAs. The current process to establish a GSA relies on an obtusely worded Chancellor's Regulation with guidance on how to start a club (with faculty involvement) at a school. For those youth experiencing hostility and anti-LGBTQ discrimination from school officials, as well as other students, this practice makes creating a GSA nearly impossible. A policy that sets out a clear mandate to establish GSAs in all public K-12 schools would provide ensure safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ students, helping to address the challenges they face and promote their well-being.

LGBTQ+ youth deserve better. The Free to Be Youth Project has a unique relationship with students facing these challenges. While carrying out our mission to provide direct legal and social services to LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness, we too often hear stories of harassment and social isolation in schools. The New York City Department of Education should require that all public schools establish GSAs to serve and uplift these members of our

¹⁶ Nolan, T. C. (2006). "Outcomes for a Transitional Living Program Serving LGBTQ Youth in New York City." *Child Welfare*, 89(2) 385-406, 388. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/45398770.pdf>.

¹⁷ Kulik, D. M., Gaetz, S., Crowe, C., & Ford-Jones, E. L. (2011). "Homeless youth's overwhelming health burden: A review of the literature." *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 16(6), e43–e47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/16.6.e43>.

¹⁸ Fetner, T., & Kush, K. (2008). "Gay-Straight Alliances in High Schools: Social Predictors of Early Adoption." *Youth & Society*, 40(1), 114–130, 125. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X07308073>.

¹⁹ "Basic Facts About Homelessness: New York City." Coalition for the Homeless. <https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/basic-facts-about-homelessness-new-york-city/>.



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community. By not requiring schools to have genders and sexualities alliances, the NYC Department of Education is refusing to take important steps proven to increase the health and safety of students. NYC students deserve better from their public officials.

With a profound sense of urgency,
The Free to Be Youth Project