

California State University, Long Beach

POLICY BRIEF



Models of Pride:

Supporting
LGBTQ+ Students
Through Culture
and Curriculum

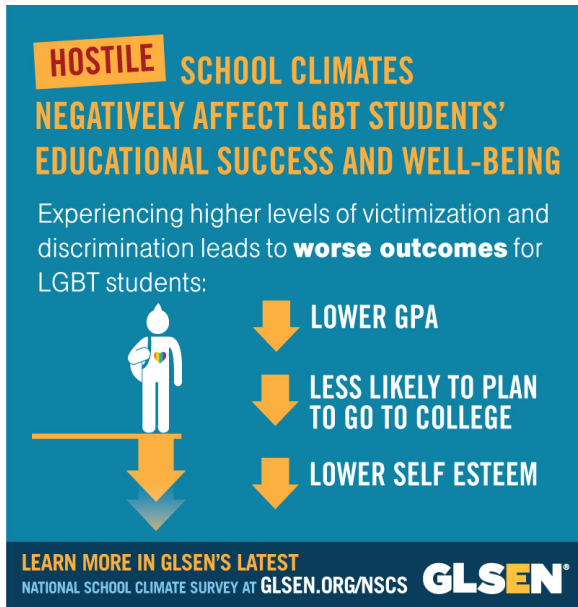


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Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) students and staff in California public secondary schools are likely to experience a lack of understanding about their sexual and/or gender identities, an increased risk of queerphobic bullying and microaggressions, lowered academic performance, and an onslaught of mental health issues. Through increased LGBTQ+ professional development for staff, mandated LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum for all students, and increased state funding for LGBTQ+ resources, schools can help subvert pervasively heteronormative cultural norms and begin to authentically serve, support, and uplift queer students.

Figure 1. Impacts of Hostile School Climates on LGBTQ+ Students



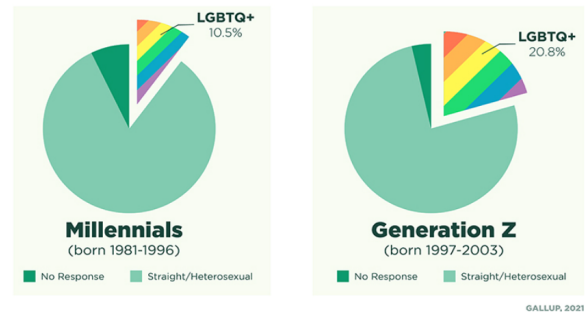
“A true ally, to me, is not someone who just accepts the queer community, but who takes action for the queer community.”

- LGBTQ+ Teacher Participant

Problem Statement

With the introduction of a mandated Ethnic Studies high school graduation requirement via Assembly Bill 101¹, the state of California has been a pioneer in increasing racial equity. This inclusion of Black and Latinx topics in History classes, as well as the celebration of Black and Latinx history months, have helped to promote a more positive and inclusive school culture surrounding students of color. Given these successes, the state would do well to also highlight and center the experiences of LGBTQ+ folks, especially as the percentage of queer-identifying students has risen to 20% of all students in secondary schools².

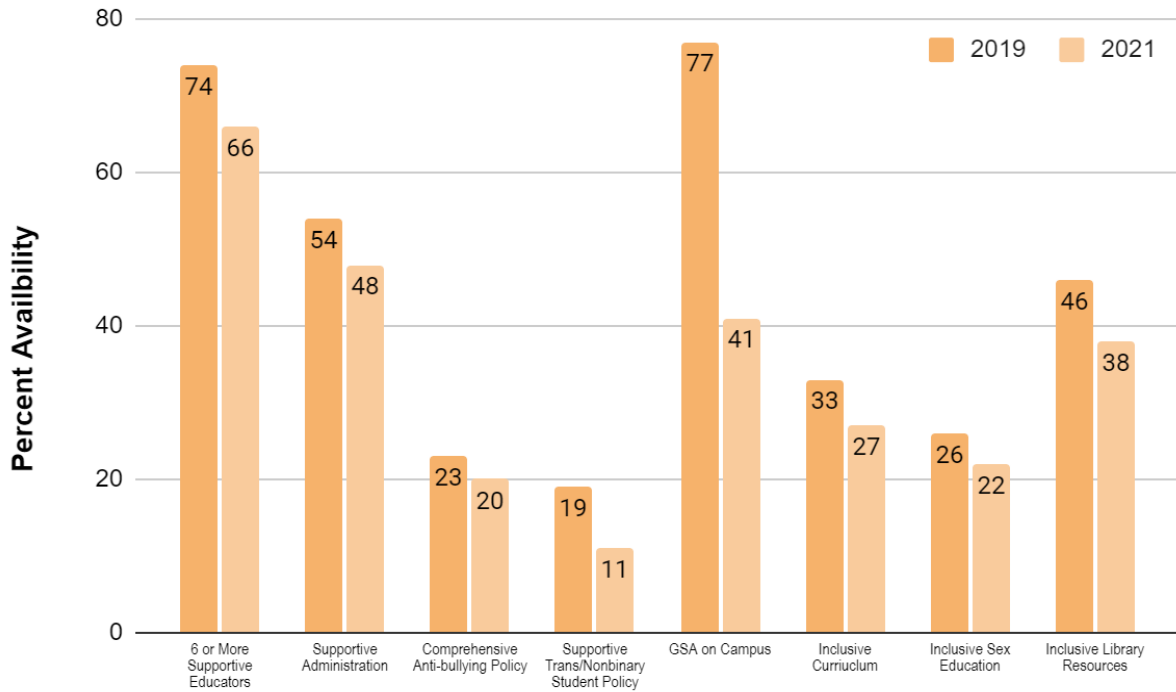
Figure 2. Percent of People Identifying as LGBTQ+, by Generation



Despite the increased presence of queer-identifying students, as well as the state passing legislation to uphold the teaching of LGBTQ+ topics in History and Health classes through the FAIR Education Act³ and the California Healthy Youth Act⁴, respectively, schools are seldomly held accountable in their implementation. Instead, curriculum and, by extension, overall school culture remains steadfastly traditional, resulting in many queer students and school staff members feeling marginalized or excluded from their larger school community. This includes experiencing disproportionately large amounts of bullying⁵, low academic performance related to chronic absenteeism⁶, and high rates of mental health issues⁷. With an onslaught of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation having passed, or attempting to be passed since the 2021 GLSEN study⁸, queer student support across the country is in a concerning state of regression.



Figure 3. Decline in Availability of LGBTQ+-Related Resources & Supports in California Schools, 2019² vs. 2021⁸



Major Study Findings

Outside of certain teachers’ classrooms, most LGBTQ+ students did not feel safe on campus, with participants feeling like queerphobic bullying incidents were overlooked by campus security and administration

Queer-identifying students and teachers want more LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum, both in pre-existing History and Health classes, as well as a stand-alone course (LGBTQ+ Studies)

While many queer-affirming resources do exist on this school’s campus, they are underutilized; this was attributed to a lack of accessibility and communication by school and district leadership

Study Approach

I conducted a case study analysis of a public high school in Los Angeles, in which I interviewed 14 LGBTQ+-identifying students and six LGBTQ+-identifying teachers about their experiences with school culture and curriculum as it related to their gender and/or sexual identities. I also collected qualitative data from the district’s website, allowing me to better understand their espoused values on the LGBTQ+ community, as well as their support of queer-identifying students and staff.

Study Results

Feeling Unsafe and Unsupported on Campus

When addressing perceptions of safety on campus, the majority of student participants indicated that outside of supportive teachers’ classrooms and clubs, they did not feel safe navigating the hallways with the general student population. In fact, many student participants and their friends incurred physical and verbal displays of homophobic bullying, with little intervention by school administration or campus security officers. One student opined:

“I hear students saying homophobic slurs in front of security guards and administrators quite often, and it’s so normalized they don’t even react.”

This suggested to students that the comprehensive anti-bullying policy was performative. With a seemingly apathetic adult response to homophobic bullying, LGBTQ+ students felt a lack of belonging on campus. LGBTQ+-identifying teachers echoed the students’ perceptions, with most claiming that they had experienced microaggressions from district or site leaders leading them to feel unsupported or tokenized on campus. The dissonance between the espoused allyship found on the district’s website and what was actually experienced was pointed out from both student and teacher participants.

The Need For More LGBTQ+ Curriculum

LGBTQ+-identifying students and teachers spoke highly of an ongoing queer-inclusive course entitled Introduction to LGBTQ+ Studies (*see appendix for syllabus*). The course, while optional in its original design, would provide students with queer-inclusive curriculum on topics related to History, Sex Education, and popular culture. There was unanimous agreement among the participants about the high likelihood of the course cultivating empathy among cisgendered heterosexual, or *cishet* students (Human Rights Campaign, 2019), while also amplifying queer excellence for LGBTQ+ students. When student participants recalled learning queer-inclusive content in their History classes, they spoke of the importance of this material in helping them cultivate a more positive self-concept. As one student articulated:

“It’s aspirational, learning about LGBTQ+ historical figures in school gives you the confidence as a queer person to see who you can be and do once you leave school.”

Great Queer-Affirming Resources on Campus, But Poor Accessibility to Them

The school possessed a large array of artifacts of support for queer students. However, LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum, including within sex education, was lacking according to participants’ testimonies. This resulted in many students seeking out information about their sexual and/or gender identities from other resources, including their friends and the internet. Additionally, students expressed concerns about the lack of communication of, or access to, queer-affirming resources, like LGBTQ+ therapy groups on campus, access to gender neutral restrooms, and gender transition services that the school provides. These had primarily been articulated in a grassroots, word-of-mouth, style, leading to a lack of knowledge of the resources by both student and teacher participants. With the absence of effective resource dissemination, the aforementioned resources were being underutilized by students who needed them.

Table 1. List of Identified Campus LGBTQ+ Resources

School Resource	Description
Gender-Neutral bathrooms	Two single-stall, bathrooms on campus
Individualized Transition Plan (ITP)	Student can change name/pronouns on official school documents
LGBTQ+ Therapy Groups	Two groups on campus meeting weekly, one group is specifically for trans students
Social Science and Health Classes	Queer-inclusive content covered by some teachers
Genders and Sexualities Alliance (GSA) Club	Founded in 1992, meets weekly, also referred to as the “Tolerance Club”
Audiovisual Performing Arts (AVPA) Program	Founded in 1997, robust after school program with 200+ participants in theater, dance, & fine arts



Recommendations

Increased LGBTQ+ Training (District Staff)

While the study took place on a single high school campus, it is likely that teachers at other schools around California experience similar discomfort. Consequently, I recommend that the state mandate LGBTQ+-inclusive professional development for all administrators, teachers, and campus security officers in California public schools. These trainings should focus on queer-affirming language, contemporary issues facing LGBTQ+ students, and methods to identify even relatively inconspicuous incidents of homophobic bullying. Findings suggest that even at schools that do not offer queer-inclusive curriculum, appropriate professional developments will enable adults to serve as necessary allies in helping improve the overall culture of their campuses⁹. It also helps districts authentically move toward their goals for more equity on campus. As one student participant expressed:

“If school leaders are for equity, they should be trained not just in racial struggles, but in queer ones as well.”

For such professional development to be implemented successfully, queer-affirming information should be presented in a small group environment, not in large, all-faculty meetings¹⁰. The intimate atmosphere of a small group gives educators more opportunities to ask questions they might otherwise be uncomfortable expressing in a room of people they do not know. Though improving school culture for LGBTQ+ students requires more than inclusive professional development, such training is a necessary part of the equation. Though the training could be provided by outside groups, findings indicate that teachers had not been receptive to such groups in the past¹⁰. Consequently, I recommend that professional development be carried out by educators from the school or district, specifically district or site administrators or teachers who are knowledgeable about or trained in

queer-inclusive practices. Schools that have used a similar protocol when they updated their sexual education curriculum, which led to increased buy-in from teachers at their sites¹⁰.

Table 2. Educator Training Resources

Resource	Description
<u>Project Youth Affirm</u>	Integrating identity affirmation with cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) to improve well being for LGBTQ+ youth <i>(For: Teachers, Counselors, School Psychologists, and Administrators)</i>
<u>The Safe Zone Project</u>	Curricula, activities, and other resources for educators facilitating Safe Zone training (sexuality, gender, and LGBTQ+ education sessions) <i>(For: GSA Advisors, Administrators, Counselors, and Teachers)</i>
<u>The PRISM Project (LACOE)</u>	Online courses in bullying identifiers/procedures, local LGBTQ+ agencies, mental health supports <i>(For Administrators, Counselors and Teachers, starting in 2025)</i>

Mandated LGBTQ+-Inclusive Curriculum, Including LGBTQ+-Specific Classes

I recommend that the LGBTQ+ community be designated a major group in the Ethnic Studies framework¹. If secondary school students could take LGBTQ+ studies or similar “rainbow curricula¹¹”, they would fulfill the new Ethnic Studies graduation requirement and concurrently allow schools to stay in compliance with the FAIR Education Act³. In addition, this would increase the amount of inclusion at schools, opening up the possibility of improving school culture as a whole. This can be done through pre-existing social and health classes or, better yet, the inclusion of a new LGBTQ+-specific course. See the appendix for a syllabus.

Figure 4. An LGBTQ+-Specific Course at West LA CC



Given that many colleges in California already offer courses in LGBTQ+ Studies, high schools partnering with their local colleges or universities through dual enrollment opportunities is a pragmatic approach. Not only can students earn college credit for passing these courses, but it also helps foster important partnerships between high schools and their local community colleges or universities. Additionally, since the courses have already been approved by the higher education institution, it circumnavigates the bureaucracy of public secondary school districts. Below is a list of some universities already offering courses in LGBTQ+ Studies in California:

Table 3. LGBTQ+ Courses in California Colleges (See Appendix for Syllabus Currently in Use)

Course	College
ANTH 130: Introduction to LGBTQ+ Studies	West Los Angeles College (Culver City, CA)
ANTH 20: Queer Anthropology	City College of San Francisco (San Francisco, CA)
QS 201: Race and Ethnicity in Queer Studies	California State University, Northridge (Northridge, CA)

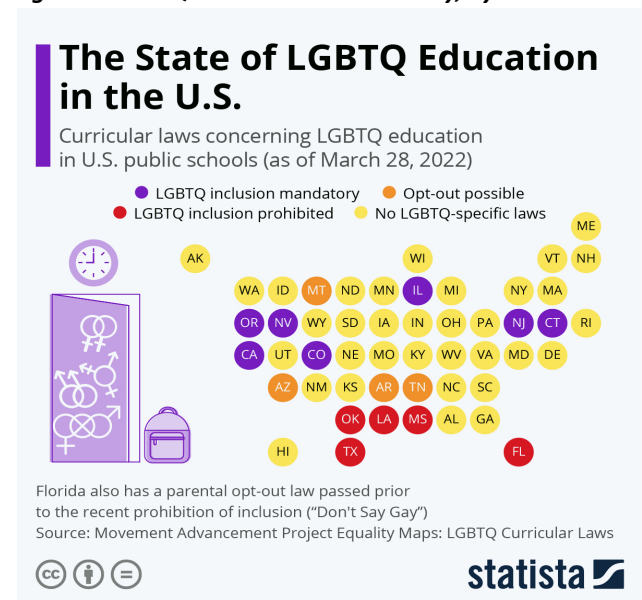
The inclusion of LGBTQ+ curriculum in schools can have remarkable impacts. Recently, in a study of 2,400 students from California public schools, incidences of harassment among sexual- and gender-minority youth were found to have dropped from 66% to 53% in a single year after LGBTQ+ issues were included in school curriculum². The magnitude of this survey makes it a compelling argument for promoting more inclusivity. Queer students stand to benefit from inclusion into mainstream curriculum as much as their peers of color, especially in feeling they are represented and a valued part of the school community.

“It should be the school’s responsibility to teach students how to be mindful and respectful of different identities, including queerness.”

This recommendation may also benefit the cisgender, heterosexual population of a school community, who could gain empathy from discovering different life experiences than their own. This has been shown to occur with the inclusion of curriculum surrounding people of color¹². If queer-inclusive coursework was part of a graduation requirement in California public schools, all students could be exposed to a curriculum that validates and affirms the existence of LGBTQ+ people.

Admittedly, a semester-long course would not be able to encompass all LGBTQ+ stories. Nonetheless, the passage of AB 101 proves it is possible to highlight the experiences of people of color, including those of Black and Indigenous people; therefore, this law could eventually lead to mandated courses specifically regarding LGBTQ+ folks. The mandation of this curriculum is imperative, as it allows for all students, not just those inherently interested, to learn more about the LGBTQ+ experience.

Figure 5. LGBTQ+ Curriculum Availability, by State





Increased Funding for (and Communication of) LGBTQ+ Resources

With student and teacher participants expressing the lack of authentic school and district support for LGBTQ+ folks, I recommend state-allocated funding of LGBTQ+-specific anti-bias grants to help foster a stronger sense of community between the district and its queer stakeholders. Similar to the California Department of Education’s Anti-bias Education Grants¹³, interested school districts would apply for funding specifically to support LGBTQ+ stakeholders. This can manifest as anti-bias training for school staff, but it can also emphasize holding events that celebrate the LGBTQ+ community, rather than simply focusing on the traumas they experience. As one teacher posited:

“The LGBTQ+ community doesn’t do enough celebrating [in this district]. While fighting for our rights is important, why don’t we celebrate as well? Our district is legally tolerant, but we should move toward embracing and uplifting.”

Events such as district-organized drag shows, galas for LGBTQ+ parents, and LGBTQ+ family meetups/playdates in local parks can help to connect members of the queer community together, which can consequently help them feel genuinely a part of the larger school and district culture. Additional uses of funding can include library resources, which studies have shown can be immensely beneficial for students in their own identity discovery¹⁴, as well as hiring more mental health professionals that are trained in LGBTQ+-related issues. Student participants spoke highly of the two LGBTQ+ therapy groups on campus, but expressed their limited accessibility due to the schedules of the counselors who ran them.

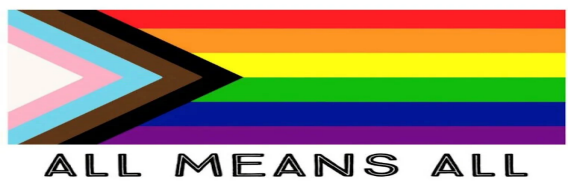


Table 4. List of LGBTQ+ Library Resources

Resource	Description
<u>GLSEN’s of LGBTQ+ Fiction Stories</u> (Various Authors)	Books that are focused on diverse stories and LGBTQ+ characters. Geared towards High School students, but can be enjoyed by anyone.
<u>This Book is Gay</u> (Juno Dawson)	Candid, funny, and uncensored exploration of sexuality and what it’s like to grow up LGBTQ. Includes real stories from people across the gender and sexual spectrums
<u>Queer: The Ultimate LGBTQ+ Guide for Teens</u> (Kathy Belge & Marke Bieschke)	A humorous, engaging, and honest guide that helps LGBTQ teens come out to friends and family, navigate their social life, figure out if a crush is also queer, and challenge bigotry and homophobia
<u>LGBTQ: The Survival Guide</u> (Kelly Madrone)	Includes current information on LGBTQ terminology, evolving understandings of gender identity and sexual identity, LGBTQ rights, and much more

Conclusion

While my study did indicate that participants had concerns regarding authentic district and school support of the LGBTQ+ community, things are hopeful in the near future. With the right resource allocation, district leadership, and stakeholder buy-in, schools across California can lead the charge in providing a safe and supportive school environment for their LGBTQ+ students. The policy recommendations summarized here can help to advance discussions and further research for how to address the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ in public schools across California.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A: Introduction to LGBTQ+ Studies Course Information

General Information

Course	Anthropology (ANTH) 130: Introduction to LGBTQ+ Studies
Location	West Los Angeles College
Time	February 6th - June 2nd, 2023
Where	Hybrid (Online and In-Person)

Textbook Information

Primary Textbook	Finding Out: An Introduction to LGBT Studies, 4th Edition <i>(Alexander et al., 2022)</i>
Supplementary Textbook	Queer: A Graphic History <i>(Barker & Scheele, 2016)</i>

Course Description





This introductory course examines a broad range of contemporary gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer issues in various contexts including the bio-medical, sociological, political, racial and sexual.

Course Outline




Module 1: Before Identity - Ancient Queer History	Module 7: Intersectionality of Race, Gender & Sexuality
Module 2: Gender and Sexual Identity	Module 8: Queer Literature
Module 3: Toward Liberation - Queer History	Module 9: Visual and Performing Arts
Module 4: Queer Normalization and Beyond	Module 10: Film and Television Representation
Module 5: Nature, Nurture, and Identity	Module 11: Queers and the Internet
Module 6: Queer Diversities	Module 12: Queer Culture and Counterculture

Appendix B: Additional LGBTQ+-Inclusive Resources

LGBTQ+ Curriculum Inclusion for Pre-Existing Courses

Resource	Site	QR Code	Description
GLSEN <i>General Inclusive Curriculum Guide</i>	glsen.org/activity/inclusive-curriculum-guide		One way that educators can promote safer school environments is by developing lessons that avoid bias and that include positive representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people, history, and events.
GLSEN <i>Comprehensive Sex Education Guide</i>	glsen.org/sexed		Health education resources that help to ensure all students, including LGBTQ students, are receiving the information they need to lead safe and healthy lives.
The Trevor Project <i>Health Education Resources</i>	thetrevorproject.org/resources/?s=Health		Health education resources that help to ensure all students, including LGBTQ students, are receiving the information they need to lead safe and healthy lives.
Teaching LGBTQ History <i>Social Science Resources</i>	lgbtqhistory.org/lgbtq-educational-resources/ and lgbtqhistory.org/lesson-plans/		This site serves as a comprehensive reference hub for information regarding the FAIR Education Act, as well as for History Framework Lesson Plans and General LGBTQ Lesson Plans, and resources to support teachers as they work with the new content required by the FAIR Education Act.

Genders and Sexualities Alliances (GSA)

Resource	Site	QR Code	Description
Genders & Sexualities Alliance Network	gsanetwork.org/		Genders & Sexualities Alliances, or GSAs for short, are student-run organizations that unite LGBTQ+ and allied youth to build community and organize around issues impacting them in their schools and communities. GSAs have evolved and have emerged as vehicles for deep social change related to racial, gender, and educational justice.
The Dru Project	thedruproject.org/		The Dru Project is an LGBTQ+ advocacy organization on a mission to spread love across the nation and promote gay straight alliances. We are doing this by creating a curriculum for high school GSAs to use, should they wish to adopt our program.
GLSEN	glsen.org/support-student-gsas		GLSEN's GSA Registration provides you an opportunity to receive resources, and for your GSA to be counted as one of the thousands of student clubs across the country working to make schools safer and more affirming for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.