

Opportunities for State Leaders to Safeguard LGBTQ+ Students' Learning, Connection, and Safety

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Introduction

Approximately [2 million young people identified as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and additional identities \(LGBTQ+\) community](#) in 2020, and federal data from 2021 show that [1 in 4 high school students](#) identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual or are questioning their sexual identity.^{i,ii} In recent years, education and other policy leaders across the country have engaged in fierce debate over the role of schools in supporting LGBTQ+ youth. According to the [Movement Advancement Project \(MAP\)](#), as of December 2024, seven states have laws that explicitly require LGBTQ+ inclusion in state standards while eight states have laws that explicitly prohibit the discussion of LGBTQ+ topics, people, and issues.ⁱⁱⁱ These laws garnered recent media attention and raised questions among educators and other adults working with schools about how best to serve LGBTQ+ students.

To support state leaders—and the communities and youth they serve—amid policy change, this guide reviews the factors that shape LGBTQ+ students' perceptions of safety and support, as well as the implications for their academic and health outcomes. Further, the guide provides state agencies with a process for understanding their state's policy environment around LGBTQ+ topics and the supports that local education agencies (LEAs) and organizations that work with schools may need to support student learning, connection, and safety.

How LGBTQ+ Safety and Connection to Schools Support Academic and Health Outcomes

Schools are tasked with developing the knowledge and skills of the students in their care and fostering academic achievement. Historically, efforts to improve student academic outcomes targeted instructional leadership—improving how teachers delivered content and managed classrooms. In recent decades, however, advancements in the science of learning have clarified how school factors beyond instruction and curriculum influence students' opportunities to learn.

To support state leaders in understanding this link and its implications for LGBTQ+ youth—and to assist state leaders in communicating this link to local leaders and communities—we provide a simple summary of the research that ties student learning to student's feelings of connection and safety below.



- **Neuroscience and research on cognitive development have linked positive student learning outcomes with student feelings of safety and connection with others.**^{iv,v} In this context, safety refers to students' belief that they are not at risk for physical or emotional harm at school, while connectedness refers to students' belief that both teachers and peers care about their emotional well-being and academic success.^{vi}
- **LGBTQ+ students have unique experiences within schools that lead them to feel less safe and connected.**^{vii} As an example, LGBTQ+ youth are far more likely to experience bullying and mental health challenges than their cisgender, heterosexual peers.^{viii}
- **Creating safe schools where LGBTQ+ students feel connected can remove obstacles that harm LGBTQ+ students' health and opportunities for academic achievement.**^{ix} In some states, a recent policy change may restrict some options schools have to support student safety, while leaving other options available. A 2021 review of research literature highlights four strategies supportive of LGBTQ+ students' safety:^x
 - Anti-bullying policies that protect LGBTQ+ students
 - Student-led clubs and spaces, such as Gay-Straight or Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs)
 - Open access to resources and curricular materials on LGBTQ+ topics
 - Professional development (PD) for teachers and staff, particularly training on LGBTQ+ issues and identities
- **Creating supportive school environments for LGBTQ+ students and other students with unique needs improves emotional and educational outcomes for all students.**^{xi,xii} For example, students who participate in GSAs are likely to have higher grade point averages (GPA) compared to their peers who are not involved in such activities.^{xiii} In fact, having a GSA on campus has benefits for all members of the student body, not just those who are members.^{xiv}

Engaging parents, caregivers, and communities

[Parents and caregivers are an important part of a school community](#), and they are essential to supporting student health and academics. Respectful and authentic engagement can build up partnerships between schools, parents, and caregivers to maximize support for students. Here are three considerations when talking to parents and caregivers:

- Topics like sexual health, sexual orientation, and gender identity are historically sensitive topics, shaped by culture and values.
- Based on their own experiences, parents and caregivers may be distrusting of schools and the education system. Further, recent policy discourse may have heightened community concerns about how parent preferences are respected, which can affect how parents receive communications.
- Schools serve children across a wide developmental span. Like any other topic, discussions about sexual health, sexual orientation, and gender identity must take into consideration the development of young people and how that shapes their understanding, ability to engage, and level of agency around a topic.

A Process for Navigating Changing Policy Landscapes Around LGBTQ+ Youth

This guide will enable state health and education agency officials to reflect on how they can give LEAs guidance on how to foster student safety and connection in the midst of policy shifts that directly influence students' classroom experience. State agency leaders can use this guide with their respective team members to facilitate a more effective understanding of how policies may impact the ways LEAs serve students. Specifically, this guide outlines three steps in processing changes in legislation, planning and providing supports for LEAs, and monitoring impact.

Step 1: Review the legislation.

First, start by reading the legislation fully and thoroughly. It may be particularly helpful to connect with your legal department, who can provide insights on any potential risks or grey areas. Your legal department may also be helpful as you respond to specific LEA inquiries. It is important to be very familiar with the language used, as well as specific terms and phrases. Note key provisions, particularly those that impact LEAs.

Just as it is important to clearly understand what may be prohibited by new legislation, it is also important to understand what is not affected. On divisive topics, rumors and inaccurate interpretations about what is and is not impacted can spread through the school community quickly. Having a solid grasp on what the bill mandates will be critical in helping LEAs navigate potential changes and provide accurate information to their communities.

As you build your knowledge around the content of the legislation, it will be helpful to consult with others at and across the state level to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the bill, specifically state education, health, and youth and family service agencies.

Step 2: Assess activities.

Several school-based activities meant to promote positive health outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth may be affected by legislation. As a result, some LEAs may wonder which specific activities are most likely to be impacted or could potentially face restrictions. Because they provide administrative guidance and PD, state education agencies (SEAs) are one of the primary supports for LEAs in assessing and modifying activities when legislation changes.

SEAs should support LEAs in identifying which activities they believe might be affected by legislation, and help to clarify whether these activities are indeed impacted once legislation is enacted. Facilitating this dialogue allows SEAs to understand the real implications of the legislation and further provide robust support to LEAs. With this support, LEAs are afforded an opportunity to adapt their programming and curriculum, rather than abandoning them altogether.

SEAs can further assist LEAs by working with them to modify programming for compliance. For example, if a certain activity becomes prohibited in a school setting, SEAs can suggest or help the LEAs select other activities

to promote positive youth health outcomes. Through collaboration with the state health department or other agencies, SEAs may also be able to suggest to LEAs partnerships that could support alternate delivery of programs.

SEAs may also consider offering other supports to help LEAs implement new legislation, such as guidance documents (e.g., FAQs, annotated legislation breakdowns) and PD sessions for educators. When SEAs provide informative and timely support to LEAs, LEAs are empowered to navigate implementation of vague laws effectively while maintaining a focus on fostering an LGBTQ+ inclusive school environment.

Step 3: Monitor implementation.

In the wake of new policy implementation, it is important to monitor the impact of legislation on students, as well as the larger school community. It is helpful to keep in mind that while new policy is being implemented, it may be hard to gauge impact; shifts in behavior and health outcomes take time to occur. Despite the possibility that the impact of legislation might not be immediately obvious, SEAs nevertheless have a critical role in helping LEAs to assess the impact of legislation on student academic and health outcomes, as well as student feelings of safety and trust at school. SEAs might encourage LEAs to consider the following:

- **How can we assess students' reactions in the midst of policy shifts?** Youth advisory boards (YABs), school health advisory councils (SHACs), or other advisory groups may be particularly helpful in keeping a pulse-check on affected students.
- **What types of data and data sources are accessible to monitor adolescent health outcomes (e.g., pregnancy or HIV/STD rates) or academic outcomes (e.g., high school dropout rates)?** Some of this data may be housed within other agencies at the state and local level (e.g., the state or local health department).
- **How can we ensure messaging about legislative changes is prompt, consistent, and meeting the right audience?** It will be critical to communicate with students, parents and caregivers, and your larger community how these legislative movements will impact school programming, and what steps are being taken to mitigate any harm (e.g., what alternative activities or supports are being offered to students and families). This may also be a key opportunity to connect with YABs and SHACs to understand who the best messenger is to deliver this information.

Conclusion

While the current education landscape is a complex patchwork of laws and policies, state leaders can work with local educators to approach these challenges with a steady hand. The rapid shifts in policies may provoke anxiety and concern, but they also present an opportunity for proactive engagement and problem solving. By fostering collaboration across state agencies and LEAs, educators can work together to navigate shifting terrains and implement practices that maximize support for LGBTQ+ students. It is through these collective efforts—focused on understanding, adaptability, and a commitment to student well-being—that we can create safer and more inclusive environments for all learners.

LEAHP mission statement: The Leadership Exchange for Adolescent Health Promotion, or LEAHP, is a learning collaborative of multi-sector, state-level leadership teams working to improve adolescent health in their respective states.

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