Building Resilience, Reducing Risk: Four Pillars to Creating Safer, More Supportive Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth

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Abstract

In 2017 Delaware, LGBTQ+ Youth reported that almost 1 out of 3 were bullied on school grounds. Additionally, over 50% reported feeling sad/hopeless; and almost as many seriously considered suicide as an option, while 32% planned for suicide with almost 1 in 4 reporting having acted on their suicide plan at least once. Of all the students who reported a suicide attempt, 10% required medical treatment as a result of their attempt.[1] The Delaware Department of Education does not have comprehensive statewide protections in place to support some of our most vulnerable youth, yet school districts can make a positive difference in implementing policy/practices to build resilience and reduce risk.

This article will focus on four key areas where schools and school districts may implement changes toward creating safer, more supportive schools: (1) policy/procedures that protect LGBTQ+ students at the administrative level; (2) comprehensive cultural sensitivity training for serving LGBTQ+ students and their families; (3) incorporating inclusive curriculum on LGBTQ+ history into the classroom; (4) and creating, supporting, and sustaining gender sexuality alliances in both the middle and high schools.

Background

> **TW…**
>
> "TW" is short-hand for "trigger warning" and is used to warn the audience/listener that what is about to be shared may be triggering as it involves trauma in some form or fashion.

Every day in our schools, LGBTQ+ youth experience unkind words, hurtful actions, and harmful policies that put their lives at risk, yet it doesn't have to be that way.

What Do Delaware Lgbtq+ Youth Say?

> **TW…**
>
> *"That's Sooooooo GAY! What fa**ots!"* Two students are loudly discussing a recent event in the hallway as a teacher walks up to them and takes the time to explain to them how their words hurt. The teacher then shares with them other ways to express themselves that build up, rather than tear down others. An LGBTQ+ youth observes this public support and feels affirmed. (Incident Occurred in a Delaware High School)

The Delaware Youth Risk Behavioral Survey (DEYRBS) is conducted every other year in select classes within Delaware public high schools. The most recent data is from 2017, and for the first-time included questions asking about gender identity and gender expression (See Table 1).

Table 1. Delaware 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Questions

On Gender Identity

Question	Yes	No	Unsure	Not Sure What Question is Asking
Some people describe themselves as transgender when their sex at birth does not match the way they think or feel about their gender. Are you transgender?	1.4	95.7	1.0	1.8

On Gender Expression		
Question: A person's appearance, style, dress, or the way they walk or talk may affect how people describe them. How do you think other people at school would describe you?		
Response Options	Male	Female
Very Feminine	1.1	25.6
Mostly Feminine	1.3	38
Somewhat Feminine	2.3	16.2
Equally Feminine & Masculine	10.6	16.7
Somewhat Masculine	12.4	2.4
Mostly Masculine	37.9	.6
Very Masculine	34.3	.5

Youth today identify across a much broader spectrum of options including pansexual, asexual, bisexual, agender, non-binary, as well as transgender. The option "unsure" may be interpreted two different ways: (1) the young person completing the survey is still engaged in age appropriate identity formation and is, therefore, *unsure* of their own identity at time of completing the survey; or (2) the youth does not see an option that represents how they self-identify and so choose "unsure" as the closest option to their self-identity.

By accessing KidsCount.Org figures for 2017 in conjunction with DEYRBS 2017, we can calculate that there are approximately 986 (2.4%) Transgender/Non-Binary Youth and 4,824 (13.7%) Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Pansexual Youth in our High Schools. These same youth responded to the following questions on school safety (see Table 2).[2]

Table 2. Delaware 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Question on Sexual Orientation

Question: Which of the following best describes you?	
Choices	Total
Heterosexual	86.3
Gay or Lesbian	3.3
Bisexual	7.5
Not Sure	2.9

We find that Delaware LGBTQ+ Youth are twice as likely to be threatened or injured with a weapon on school property, bullied on school property, or felt so unsafe they didn't go to school at least once in the last 30 days compared to heterosexual youth (See Table 3). This unsafe environment leads to an accumulation of stressors over time creating a stress proliferation in LGBTQ+ youth that can exacerbate mental health problems and decrease an ability to cope.[3]

Table 3. School Safety Delaware High Schools

Question	Heterosexual	Gay / Lesbian	Bisexual	Not Sure

Were threatened or injured with a weapon on school property	5.4	9	9.5	11.1
Were in a physical fight on school property	8.3	9.9	9.5	11.8
Were electronically bullied	13.3	18.4	29.6	22
Were bullied on school property	17.1	28	34.4	24.3
Did not go to school because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to or from school	6.1	10.3	9.9	10.7
Were ever physically forced to have sexual intercourse	5.4	21.2	22.1	13.1

The Human Rights Campaign Report *Growing UP LGBTQ in America* surveyed over 10,000 students age 13-17 and national trends substantiate and affirm the challenges of Delaware LGBTQ+ Youth. Twice as likely as their peers to say they have been physically assaulted, kicked or shoved, 92% of LGBTQ+ youth also report they hear negative messages about being LGBTQ+. The top sources of this negative messaging are the school, their peers, and social media. The biggest problems our LGBTQ+ youth face in Middle School and High School is parents/family are not accepting (26%) and trouble at school/bullying (21%).[4]

The Effects of Trauma

TW…

"What's in your pants!" A teenager shouts this across the room at a transgender student. The aggressor continues to shout while moving toward the student when another classmate steps in between to intervene. The substitute teacher either didn't notice or didn't know how to intervene so they remained at the desk looking at papers. (Incident Occurred in a Delaware Middle School)

The historical ten identified "adverse childhood experiences" (ACE's) outlined in the original study from 1995-97[5] were not explicit to LGBTQ+ experiences yet illustrate a road map toward understanding the adverse impact of trauma on LGBTQ+ adolescents and adults (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. LGBTQ+ Adverse Experiences

Research on the impact of microaggressions toward LGBTQ+ adults[6] and adolescents[7] who recall school victimization highlight heightened psychological distress, higher substance abuse use, higher risk of depression, social anxiety, suicidality[8]; and may suffer long-term negative

effects which can contribute to increased rates of PTSD within the LGBTQ+ community.[9,10] Further exploration of the long-term outcomes on LGBTQ+ adults appear to show even higher levels of distress when race/ethnicity and/or transgender/non-binary are factored in to identify the compounded adverse impact often felt with intersectional minority identities.[11–13]

> "Actions which promote invisibility and deny a young person's
> right to exist as their authentic self is trauma" - author

By reviewing the DEYRBS 2017 data we can hear directly from our LGBTQ+ youth; and the findings are startling and disturbing. LGBTQ+ Youth are twice as likely to feel sad or hopeless compared to heterosexual youth. These same youth are 3-4 times as likely to consider suicide and make a suicide plan. Most unsettling is that 1 in 5 report attempting suicide with almost 10% of those youth requiring medical intervention (see Table 4).

Table 4. Effects of ACEs on High School Youth in Delaware

Question	Heterosexual	Gay / Lesbian	Bisexual	Not Sure
Felt Sad or Hopeless	27.5	53.1	66	46.4
Seriously considered attempting suicide	13.3	4.4	49.6	31.8
Made a plan about how they would attempt suicide	10.4	33.2	39.4	25.6
Attempted Suicide	5.4	18.6	24.2	14.3
Suicide attempt resulted in an injury, poisoning, or overdose that had to be treated by a doctor or nurse	1.7	9.6	6.9	5.6

Additionally, when homes are not safe and when schools are not safe, the research reflects higher rates of homelessness, higher rates of Juvenile Justice System use, higher rates in the Foster Care System, increased dropout rates, and increased high risk behaviors (including self-harm, drugs, alcohol abuse, and un-safe sexual activity.[11,14,15]

Our LGBTQ+ young people deserve better in our schools. We owe it to our children to have an affirming launch into adulthood. How might we begin to create safer, more supportive schools? How might we build resilience while reducing risk for our LGBTQ+ youth?

Microaggressions

Microassaults are small behaviors that are intentional and purposefully hurtful (e.g., using the wrong name or pronouns, name calling, making derogatory statements or threatening gestures).

Microinsults are rude statements that are usually unintentional or unconscious that indicate ignorance or bias (e.g., asking inappropriate questions, redirecting someone to another bathroom, or facial expressions that reveal confusion or disgust).

Microinvalidations are statements or actions that are usually unintentional or unconscious that ignore, minimize, or nullify a person's identity (e.g., having only two options for sex/gender on forms, classroom illustrations of famous people in history who are all white, all straight, and all cisgender).

Intersectional Microaggressions are microaggressions (of all types) that are connected to multiple parts of a person's identity (such as race and gender or religion and ethnicity)

Systematic Microaggressions & Discrimination are institutionally based microaggressions that cannot be attributed to one specific person but that affect many or most members of a group.

Green, E.R. & Maurer, L.M (2015). The Teaching Transgender Toolkit: A Facilitator's Guide to Increasing Knowledge, Decreasing Prejudice & Building Skills. Ithaca NY: Planned Parenthood of The Southern Finger Lakes: Out for Health.

What We Can Do To Make a Difference

I propose there are four key areas in which both immediate and lasting change can occur to improve the safety and support for all children. These four pillars are: (1) policy/procedures that protect LGBTQ+ students at the administrative level; (2) comprehensive cultural sensitivity training for faculty/staff serving LGBTQ+ students and their families; (3) incorporating inclusive curriculum on LGBTQ+ history into the classroom; (4) and creating, supporting, and sustaining gender sexuality alliances at both the Middle and High Schools.

Pillar One: School Administration / School Districts

Currently there is no unequivocal policy through the Delaware Department of Education that protects all youth across the spectrum of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression (SOGIE).[16] Yet, there is evidence on the positive impact such policies have toward creating a safer environment for LGBTQ+ youth. When the highest leadership position in the school system makes it clear that LGBTQ+ students are protected the results are astounding![17,18]

Resource: Model district anti-bullying and harassment policy by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network)

First and foremost, anti-bullying policies that are explicitly inclusive of SOGIE **and** enforced show a significant reduction in the risk of suicide attempts in LGBTQ+ youth in **both** Middle School and High School (see Figure 2). Additionally, LGBTQ+ youth who report a reduction in victimization at school more readily identify adult mentors/allies, which leads to LGBTQ+ youth being more likely to engage in school activities while reducing high risk behaviors.[19,20]

Hatzenbuehler and Keyes compared school district policies in Oregon based on inclusive to least inclusive policies and noted: (1) school districts that adapt inclusive anti-bullying policies see a decrease in rates of suicide attempts from previous years. The research noted:

> "Whereas 31% of lesbian and gay adolescents attempted suicide in counties where school districts were the least likely to adopt inclusive anti-bullying policies, only 17% attempted suicide in counties with the greatest proportion of school districts with inclusive policies."[21]

This is corroborated by Saewyc, et al., whose study illustrated that schools with anti-bullying policies for three or more years showed greater gains in reduced risk and increased safety than schools for fewer years/no policy. Equally significant, the studies demonstrated reduced risk for suicide among **both** LGBTQ+ youth and heterosexual youth![22]

Figure 2. Sexual Orientation Gender Identity/Expression Policies

Other Policy Suggestions: *De-gender rites of passage in a school. Change Homecoming King & Queen to Homecoming Royalty. Eliminate gendered graduation robes.*[23]

Pillar Two: Cultural Sensitivity Training of Faculty and Staff

A 2019 study entitled *Supporting Safe and Healthy Schools for LGBTQ Students: A National Survey of School Counselors, Social Workers, and Psychologists* reported the following findings:

- 37% of school mental health professionals had never received any formal training on LGBTQ+ student issues during their career
- 76% of school mental health professionals received little to no training on working with LGBTQ+ youth. [24]

> **May I call you friend?**
>
> A school administrator shared with me that school policy and parent demands prevented them calling the transgender student by their affirming name and pronouns. Each time the student was called their "dead name" and mis-gendered, the pain on their face was evident.
>
> The school administrator's heart is about affirming each child's inherent dignity and self-worth. Found between a proverbial rock and hard place they looked at the student and said, "May I call you friend?" The student smiled because in that moment they knew they were seen and affirmed. (This act of compassion and mentoring occurred in a Delaware School)

Another study noted "teachers' own prejudice against sexual minorities may prevent them from being positive role models for sexuality minority youth"[25]

When our school's staff/faculty are ill-prepared and ill-trained to support LGBTQ+ youth, microaggressions go unaddressed and support for these same youth decrease. The most effective way to create culturally competent supportive staff/faculty is to require excellent professional development for all staff/faculty that: (1) centers on evidence-based research on challenges/opportunities of LGBTQ+ youth across the full SOGIE spectrum; (2) brings in the significance of intersectionality in relationship with ACE's; and (3) through didactic exercises,

trains staff to become aware of and know how to effectively intervene when microaggressions occur; (4) while providing insight on how to build resilience within these same youth.[26]

Transitions Delaware, llc has provided trainings to school administration and faculty ranging between sixty minutes to a full day based upon the identified needs and goals of the school or district. One of the frequent benefits noted by those who attend the trainings is the small group, didactic exercises that afford participants the opportunity to ask clarifying questions and practice affirmation exercises geared at building resilience in youth. The other benefit extolled by participants is having a greater understanding on the differences between sexual orientation **and** gender identity **and** gender expression in relation to greater insight on the ever-expanding vocabulary and pronoun usage of LGBTQ+ youth in their identity formation. It is advisable that consultation be provided by trainers to those requesting a training in advance to ensure the materials provided and delivered are relevant content to the school making the request.

When comprehensive training is well delivered, research illuminates that staff/faculty become effective supporters of LGBTQ+ youth:

(1) LGBTQ+ students with supportive school staff, were less likely to feel unsafe (40.6% vs. 78.7%);

(2) were less likely to miss school because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (16.9% vs. 47.2%);

(3) had higher GPAs than other students (3.3 vs. 2.8); and

(4) were less likely to say they might not graduate high school (1.7% vs. 9.5%).[11]

Pillar Three: Inclusive Curriculum

An inclusive curriculum validates LGBTQ+ youth. Hidden rainbows are as important as hidden figures![27] Visibility of LGBTQ+ historical figures from math/science, the arts, political/social justice, etc. provide the LGBTQ+ young person mentors and role models while also "normalizing" the value and importance of LGBTQ+ contributions to society to heterosexual and cisgender students.[28–30] In one study it was noted that

> "by infusing relevant transgender content into lectures and reading materials, instructors contribute to normalizing transgender issues for an inclusive curriculum."[31]

The Center for Disease and Control (CDC) reports LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to have poor health outcomes than their heterosexual (straight) peers.[32] Yet, only 4% of LGBTQ+ students were taught positive information about LGBTQ+ people or issues in their health classes.[18]

Through direct interactions with LGBTQ+ youth in the Delaware public schools, there is a common refrain heard from the students who say sexuality education is "heteronormative and cisnormative." The Delaware DHHS Division of Public Health identified in the Delaware Adolescent Sexual Health State Plan (January 2011) that

> …services must be strengthened to better serve sexual minority youth (i.e., students who either identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or reported any same-sex sexual contact). And inclusive policies will strengthen the capacity of youth-serving organizations to prevent risk behaviors and improve health

outcomes among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and
Questioning (LGBTQ) youth.[33]

Yet, upon informal interviews with parents, students, and health teachers, an inclusive health and
sex education for Delaware LGBTQ+ youth does not appear to be evident despite there being the
January 2011 Delaware Adolescent Sexual Health State Plan which states *services must be
strengthened to better serve sexual minority youth*.

In February 2019, New Jersey became the second state to require that schools teach LGBTQ+
history.[34] When LGBTQ+ students were interviewed on the value of inclusive curriculum, they
shared:

> "learning about LGBTQ+ issues in my school helped stop
> bullying;" and "people in my class became more aware of
> things…were simply more educated afterwards, and had a little bit
> of an easier time talking about LGBTQ+ issues;" and another
> student explained "that when LGBTQ+ youth see themselves
> reflected in the curriculum they can feel hopeful about their own
> future."[35,36]

From library books to lesson plans, it is important to incorporate LGBTQ+ into the curriculum
because the visibility gives LGBTQ+ students hope while educating and fostering compassion
among their peers. In fact, 75.2% of LGBTQ+ students in schools with an inclusive curriculum
said their peers were accepting of LGBTQ+ people, compared to 39.6% of those without an
inclusive.[18]

Pillar Four: Gender Sexuality Alliances (GSAs)

GSAs are one of the primary ways for middle and high school administration, faculty, and staff
to offer safe, affirming space for LGBTQ+ youth. The interplay of the four pillars of support
creates a school environment where a GSA moves from crisis management of daily
microaggressions to affirming informal/formal mentoring, as well as leadership development
through a school sanctioned club.

GSAs are in a key position to foster youth resiliency through mentoring. The historical three
primary purposes of GSAs are social, support, and advocacy.[37] GSA Advisers are often school
teachers or counselors; and research supports that having "mentors—especially teacher-
mentors—are positive forces in the educational resilience of sexual minority youth ... [and]
provide the biggest boost to the chances that sexual minority youth will attend college."[24]

When GSAs are *active* in the school, research has demonstrated time and again that there were
fewer homophobic comments from peers, less victimization related to SOGIE, greater school
connectedness, and more instances of teacher intervention in homo/transphobic harassment.

Additionally, and as significantly important, youth who can *be present* in a GSA experience a
more positive impact on their emotional/mental health through both peer and adult mentoring.[38]
Through peer mentoring, LGBTQ+ students are able to share experiences and stories of
affirmation and support which displace and replace the negative messages encountered in homes
or in hallways. When a GSA is scheduled on a day/time that makes it difficult for LGBTQ+
youth to attend, the result is a poorly attended GSA that is often erroneously interpreted by

faculty/administration as meaning there are no LGBTQ+ students in need of this support at that school. This is a false narrative. Equally important, if the GSA Adviser is not recognized by the LGBTQ+ youth as an ally, they will not attend. Trust is essential for youth to risk disclosing their identity to a representative of the school. Christian Rummel, of the American Institute for Research writes:

> In-person mentoring relationships may serve an important protective role for [LGBTQ+] youth, helping them to confront challenges…informal mentoring relationships with adults may promote positive educational outcomes…mentors appear well-positioned to offer ongoing support that can attune to the needs of youth as they navigate through phases of exploring, accepting, and sharing their identity with others.[14]

Big Brothers Big Sister of Delaware is the only formal mentoring program in state that has a targeted LGBTQ+ Mentoring Program for both Middle/High School GSAs, as well as traditional Big Brother/Sister/Sibling matches with Little Brother/Sister/Sibling matches.

In summary, the positive outcomes of GSAs are a reclaimed sense of hope, a stronger sense of school connectedness, and an increased sense of well-being, educational attainment, and positive self-esteem. The positive impact of GSAs at both the middle & high schools translates into a reduction in high-risk behaviors and increase in resiliency in LGBTQ+ youth.

Building Resilience in Today's LGBTQ+ Youth

> "When all Americans are treated as equal, no matter who they are or whom they love, we are all more free."--Barack Obama

In the note he left behind when Eric James Borges engaged in death by suicide, he said, "my pain is not caused because I am gay. My pain was caused by how I was treated because I am gay."[39] How best can we counter pain caused by a community that treats LGBTQ+ youth differently because they are LGBTQ+? The four pillars briefly highlighted in this article provide a road map toward changing the school culture by creating community of inclusion and cultivating mentoring relationships which can inspire LGBTQ+ youth to discover their dreams and live into their potential.

By engaging the metaphor of four pillars in relation to a school building, if one pillar is missing, the structure will become unstable, and unstable buildings risk collapse, often resulting in injury or even death. In K. Asakura article entitled *Paving Pathways Through the Pain: A Grounded Theory of Resilience Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer Youth*, they write:

> "On the one hand, it courageous that these LGBTQ+ youth actively paved their **own** pathways to resilience. On the other hand, there are potential personal costs on youth when they individually assume and carry responsibilities to cope with external adversities put on them."[40]

Today, as evidenced by the Delaware Youth Risk Behavioral Survey, many Delaware schools operate without any or with minimal efforts in helping LGBTQ+ youth pave a pathway to resilience.

Shifting a school climate from exclusion to inclusion requires an intentional and transparent plan! The actionable steps for District School Boards, Superintendents, and School Administration require changing the policies and procedures to include SOGIE; and to allocate funds for training culturally competent and equipped faculty and staff to be better able to engage intersectional, appropriate formal and informal mentoring of LGBTQ+ youth in the classroom, on the stage, court, field, and through GSAs at the middle and high school.

The personal cost on LGBTQ+ youth cultivating their own resilience often involves the adverse effects of ACEs and long-term medical/mental health complications as outlined in the beginning of this article. Therefore, it is beholden upon school boards, superintendents, school administration, faculty and staff to "… have the responsibility to share the burden carried by these youth and envision and actualize the kind of social climates that pave smoother pathways on which LGBTQ+ youth can march on with less pain and more joy."[41]

Summary

Twenty years ago this year, I graduated from Columbia Theological Seminary (CTS) with a master's in divinity. I was told during my entrance interview that I was the first LGBTQ+ person to openly apply to the seminary. I did not walk into a welcoming community, and my experience fluctuated from welcoming to tolerated to hostile. This was a difficult environment for my then 28-year-old self. I had access to family, friends, and community support as I walked through this stressful time. Sadly, we do not afford that same level of encouragement and support to children who come out as young as ten (and even younger).[42] Through my own lived experience, I can "testify" on the importance of bringing LGBTQ+ curriculum into the classroom setting as a means for creating positive change. I can "preach" about the value of having faculty and administration engage in cultural sensitivity training.

During my senior year, I preached a sermon entitled "Let the Little Children Come unto Me, Do Not Stop Them" referencing the words ascribed to Jesus in the Gospel of Mathew 19:14. My message was about creating safer, more supportive churches and schools for LGBTQ+ youth. The day after I talked about the risks LGBTQ+ youth face, the world learned about Mathew Shepperd; and a year after I graduated, the student body started a gender sexuality alliance called Imago Dei, which means 'image of God'.

This GSA remains active at CTS as a positive influence in the community, and the southern seminary now celebrates diversity across sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Meaningful and lasting change takes time. This kind of change calls forth leaders who are willing to risk public scrutiny and criticism.

May you, the reader, be inspired and encouraged to be the change we need today in our Delaware schools. May we, together, create safer, more supportive schools for LGBTQ+ youth.

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