Over the past few decades acceptance for and inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community has grown tremendously but there is still much work to be done. LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly children still experience high levels of discrimination and stress especially in the school setting where they spend most of their time. LGBTQ+ youth face higher levels of stress, rejection and bullying than their heterosexual peers. High levels of childhood stress can impact life-long mental, emotional and physical health issues in addition to academic performance. This issue is compounded for youths who also experience other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) like physical trauma, poverty and systemic racism. Disproportionately high rates of LGBTQ+ youth contemplate and carry out suicide compared to their heterosexual peers. Clearly, providing support to this vulnerable population should be a priority.

According to the 2018 LGBTQ+ Youth Report, published by HRC foundation and the University of Connecticut, LGBTQ+ youth experience oppressive levels of stress, anxiety, depression and overwhelmingly feel unsafe in their school environment. Nine out of ten young people report having been harassed at school because of their sexual orientation. In addition to harassment, many LGBTQ+ students experience family and peer rejection, bullying, and isolation. Studies have shown that compared to their heterosexual peers, LGBTQ+ youth report much higher rates of depression, anxiety, alcohol and drug use, and lower self-esteem. Transgender and gender-expansive youth face additional serious challenges in schools. They may not feel safe using restroom facilities that match their gender identity and they may not feel safe asking peers or teachers to use their correct pronoun.

LGBTQ+ students of color face compounded stress as they experience racism in addition to their sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTQ+ students who are not native English speakers face compounded stress as well.

Mental health care should be a priority for LGBTQ+ youth. Although counseling proves extremely helpful, many LGBTQ+ students do not feel safe asking for this help and many are not aware of how to access such resources in their communities. Locating welcoming, LGBTQ+ trained mental health professionals can be a challenge in many areas. Transportation, cost and fear of being 'outed' to family members or peers are other valid concerns faced by this population.

All children in North Carolina are entitled to a high-quality, equitable, and safe education. Bias, discrimination and institutional barriers prevent LGBTQ+ youth from accessing crucial educational resources and opportunities. Because kids in grades K-12 spend the majority of their time in school, it is imperative they experience their school environments as safe, affirming and inclusive. Parents, educators and other adults who serve children have a key responsibility to create safe affirming spaces so that students can thrive, be successful, experience a high level of well-being and mature into their full potential. We owe it to our children, ourselves and our future.

LGBTQ+ Youth by the Numbers

- 95percent of LGBTQ+ youth report they have trouble getting to sleep at night
- Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual high school students were more than twice as likely as their straight peers to have attempted suicide. Little research has been conducted on transgender youth, but health experts estimate numbers are even higher for this population
- 77percent of LGBTQ+ youth surveyed reported being down or depressed in the last week

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- 41percent of LGBTQ+ youth reported receiving psychological or emotional counseling to address feelings of sadness or depression in the previous week
- The majority of LGBTQ+ students experience negative and even hostile environments in their schools
- 70 percent have been bullied because of their sexual orientation
- LGBTQ+ youth of color and transgender teenagers experience unique challenges and elevated stress- only 11 percent of youth of color surveyed believe their racial or ethnic group is regarded positively in the U.S.
- Over 50 percent of trans and gender expansive youth said they can never use school restrooms that align with their gender identity
- More than 70 percent report feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness in the past week
- Only 26 percent say they always feel safe in their school classrooms -- and just five percent say all of their teachers and school staff are supportive of LGBTQ+ people
- 67 percent percent report that they've heard family members make negative comments about LGBTQ people
- 58 percent of transgender youth do not feel safe using the bathroom that best reflects their gender
- Only 19 states and the District of Columbia have enacted anti-bullying laws to protect LGBTQ+ students from being bullied by students, teachers and school staff on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity
- Only 12 percent of LGBTQ+ youth received information about safe sex that was relevant to them as an LGBTQ+ person

It should be noted that having unaccepting homes/families can significantly impact LGBTQ+ student outcomes. Much of the negative data listed above is alleviated when families are supportive.

What can schools and educators do?

As with other adverse childhood events, parents, caregivers, and educators can offer vital support to LGBTQ+ students who are experiencing bullying, rejection or other forms of stress. The greatest source of resilience for LGBTQ+ students experiencing stress is the presence of a supportive adult. A teacher may indeed be the only source of support some of these students have, especially those who are rejected at home, in their communities and by their peers. Educators can quite literally serve as a lifeline for LGBTQ+ youth. In addition to providing individual support, teachers can help create a safe, welcoming, inclusive and supportive environment.

A recent survey by GLSEN found that 62,2% of LGBTQ+ students reported experiencing LGBTQ+-related discriminatory practices at school including being disciplined regarding clothing choice and prevented from discussing or writing about LGBTQ+ topics in school assignments. A hostile school environment negatively impacts LGBTQ+ students' academic success and mental health. LGBTQ+ students who experience victimization and/or discrimination at school have worse educational outcomes. Conversely, LGBTQ+ students who feel supported report better mental health, school experiences and higher academic achievement.

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The following steps can help schools become equitable environments for everyone and ensure that all students and school staff feel respected regardless of sexual orientation.

To create a safe community at school, individual educators can implement the following steps:

- **Provide safe spaces for students including setting clear guidelines for classroom behavior.** Children in public schools are part of a diverse community. Households headed by same-sex couples are reported in virtually every U.S. county according to the U.S. Census. Teachers and schools can help create environments that respect the diversity present within a community. Respect can be fostered by teaching kindness and empathy within the classroom and school community. Teachers can create classrooms by establishing clear and inclusive policies that support LGBTQ+ youth. LGBTQ+ children feel more secure in environments where they know they are safe.

- **Establish Safe classroom spaces and policies.**
  - Establish zero-tolerance bullying policies and make sure all students are given respect and treated with kindness. Bullying is one of the largest contributors to stress, anxiety and depression for LGBTQ+ youth. Research has shown a strong correlation between anti-LGBT messages and actions, and a young person's mental health.
  - Treat anti-LGBTQ+ language just like any other type of harassment or bullying. According to www.welcomingschools.org , Anti-LGBTQ+ and gender-related put-downs are among the most common slurs in school environments, and addressing these slurs is essential for the physical, emotional, and academic well-being of all students.
  - Have signs in the classroom that mark it as a safe space. To order a safe space kit for your classroom, visit https://www.glsen.org/safespace
  - Respect students' privacy
  - Model inclusive pronouns
  - Be out as an ally
  - Use missteps as teachable moments. If you hear negative language being used, take the time to point it out
  - Give students the opportunity to understand LGBTQ people instead of learning about them through negative myths and stereotypes.
  - Teach students about sexual diversity in age-appropriate terms.
  - For even more ideas on creating safe classroom spaces, please visit www.safeschools.org

- **Join an educator network.** To receive support and find ideas for teaching respect and inclusivity, educators can join support networks like GLSEN

- **Use representative texts, lesson plans.** When children see representations of themselves or their families in the curriculum they are studying and in the media they encounter, they feel more accepted and their experiences are normalized. Educators have a pivotal role in preparing students to live and work in a diverse world in which they are likely to encounter people from varied backgrounds. For curriculum ideas visit here, here and here.

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- **Be a visible advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusion and equality.** Teachers are role models for many of their students. Use the opportunity to model inclusive, respectful attitudes towards the LGBTQ community. Allow students to understand what respect looks like.

- **Talk about LGBTQ+ role models in class.** Teach students about how LGBTQ+ people have made incredible contributions to this world. Help them understand that often, in the past people felt compelled to hide their identities to stay safe. For a list of resources on LGBTQ+ icons visit www.lgbthistorymonth.com

- **Recognize the unique challenges that transgender and gender-non-conforming youth experience.** Transgender children face even more stress and strain than their peers, even within the LGBTQ+ community. Educators should ask students what their correct pronouns and correct names are early in the school year. Make sure to use the appropriate pronouns and make sure other students comply as well. When you have a substitute, make sure the roster includes students' preferred names. For a comprehensive list of do's and don'ts please refer to this fact sheet.

- **Address questions and concerns of other educators and administration.** Many teachers are concerned with what they are "allowed" to discuss in the classroom regarding LGBTQ+ issues. While it is true that some states require guardian consent when school curricula address sexuality, when educators discuss family diversity, they are not talking about sexuality, they are talking about differences regarding family and personal identities.

- **Educate students about suicide risks and prevention.** Studies show LGBTQ+ youth are at higher risk for suicide. Educators can provide referrals and educate students about warning signs and risk factors. Provide students with 24/7 suicide hotline numbers that can be accessed from anywhere.

School districts and state leaders can contribute to a safe school environment for LGBTQ+ students when they:

- **Provide nationally recommended levels of mental health staff.** LGBTQ+ students often benefit from counseling support related to issues surrounding their sexual orientation. LGBTQ+ students are more likely to experience anxiety and depression and mental health support can help mitigate the effects of bullying and exclusion from peers. Currently, school mental health staff are overburdened from inappropriate ratios of staff to students stemming from inadequate funding levels. Make sure legislative leaders understand the critical need for adequate funding of mental health staff in schools.

- **Provide LGBTQ+ inclusive training for school staff.** Training for staff helps improve school climate, decreases bias-based bullying in school, helps transgender and non-binary students to thrive, and helps create classrooms that welcome all families.

- **Provide LGBTQ+ inclusive training specific to school mental health care staff.** Age restrictions, an inability to pay for treatment, and transportation problems prevent many

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teenagers from being able to reach out to mental health service providers. Young adults struggling with their sexual orientation or gender identity, in particular, need the support mental health professionals provide, but might fear that their search for help may reveal their LGBTQ+ status. Mental health staff that are trained in LGBTQ+ issues and located within a school would provide critical, accessible care.

- **Educate staff on the additional stressors experienced by LGBTQ+ students of color and English language learners.** Students who belong to more than one marginalized group experience compounded stress. Alert staff to these challenges.

- **Develop an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum.**-Schools and administrators can work with local organizations like Equality NC and Safe Schools NC to implement some great resources into curricula. Trained staff at these organizations can answer questions and concerns about dealing with these topics in class.

- **Educate staff and students about rights for LGBTQ+ students.** LGBTQ+ students face discrimination and harassment at school all too often. Many school officials and staff know little about how the law requires them to protect LGBTQ+ students. Refer staff to the ACLU and Equality NC.

Resources

2018 LGBTQ Youth Report, Human Rights Campaign https://www.hrc.org/resources/2018-lgbtq-youth-report

About Suicide, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention https://afsp.org/

Birkett, M., Newcomb, M.E., & Mustanski, B. (2014). Does it Get Better? A Longitudinal Analysis of Psychological Distress and Victimization in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth. Journal of Adolescent Health, 56 (3), 280-285

Do's and Don'ts for Working with Transgender Students. Safe Schools NC.

Durham Crisis Response Center, www.durhamcrisisresponse.org

Equality NC's Youth Policy, Equality North Carolina, https://equalityncfoundation.org/our-youth

Gender Spectrum, www.genderspectrum.org

Get Help, It Gets Better Project, https://itgetsbetter.org/get-help/#/united-states/

GLSEN, The 2017 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Youth in Our Nation's Schools

How Classroom Educators Can Create Safe(r) Spaces. Safe Schools NC. 2018. https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/2b269b_afa3bf08d066405a941668c99bcbdb42.pdf

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How to Improve Mental Health Care for LGBT Youth, American Progress, https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/reports/2010/12/09/8787/how-to-improve-mental-health-care-for-lgbt-youth/

Inclusion and Respect: GLSEN Resources for Educators, GLSEN, https://www.glsen.org/

Know Your Rights! A Guide for LGBT High School Students, ACLU, https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/know-your-rights-guide-lgbt-high-school-students

Lesson Plans for Elementary, Middle and High School Teachers, Safe Schools Coalition, http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/RG-lessonplans.html

Lesson Plans. http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/lesson-plans-home

LGBT Center of Raleigh, www.lgbtceterofraleigh.com

LGBTQ Center of Durham, www.lgbtqcenterofdurham.org

LGBT History Month, lgbthistorymonth.com, https://lgbthistorymonth.com/resources

LGBT National Health Center www.glbthotline.org

LGBT Training Curricula for Behavioral Health and Primary Care Practitioners, SAMHSA, https://www.samhsa.gov/behavioral-health-equity/lgbt/curricula

Professional Training for Your School, Welcoming Schools, http://www.welcomingschools.org/training/request-a-training/

Respect, Resilience and LGBT Students, ASCD, http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Respect,-Resilience,-and-LGBT-Students.aspx

SafeSchools NC Resources, SafeSchools NC, https://www.safeschoolsnc.org/resources.html

The Trevor Project-Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention for LGBTQ students, The Trevor Project, https://www.thetrevorproject.org/

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