

COMMENTARY

Policies on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Pay Off for Schools

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PUBLISHED: February 2, 2016

It is now well-known that LGBTQ students often have a hard time in school, including feeling unsafe and being bullied, and those experiences are strongly linked to academic, mental health, and other problems for LGBTQ youth. For over a decade now, schools have been trying strategies to create safer schools for LGBTQ and all students.

It's been more than 15 years since [AB537](#), the [Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act](#) was passed, making California one of the first states to have a comprehensive non-discrimination law to provide protection based on actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI) in schooling. The legislature recognized that bullying and harassment were significant problems in schools, and that having inclusive policies was a first step in creating safe schools. Since then, schools in California and around the country have trained teachers, expanded inclusive curriculum, supported school clubs like gay-straight alliances (GSAs), and provided information, resources, and support for LGBTQ and all students.

A number of researchers have been studying these approaches in schools, and for years we have found convincing evidence that these strategies are associated with improved safety and positive adjustment for all students. Most of that research, however, has relied on studies of students' perceptions of their schools and experiences, and most of it has been based on relatively small local or regional samples.

Our new [study](#), published in the *Journal of School Psychology*, is exciting because it provides one of the first examinations of these questions using state-wide data from teachers and principals in California. It represents an important shift to move beyond the nearly exclusive focus on students' experiences: We analyzed over 3,700 teachers (from the [California School Climate Survey](#)) and their reports of bullying and school safety, linked to policy data independently reported by nearly 100 school principals (from the [School Health Profiles](#)). What we find confirms that policies and programs that focus on sexual orientation and gender identity make a difference to reduce bullying. Specifically, in schools that need it the most—those judged as least safe by teachers—reports of bullying are lower when principals reported more policies to address and support sexual orientation and gender identity. Even more striking, general bullying prevention policies were not associated with lower bullying.

Seeing these results in independent data from teachers and principals is a strong confirmation that including sexual orientation and gender identity in school policies and practices is effective for improving school climate, and ultimately for promoting student achievement and other positive outcomes.

In doing the study we also learned that these data, which were collected by different agencies for different reasons, are not easy to access or combine for research purposes. Yet together they provide a much richer picture of what's going on in schools. It

underscores how useful these studies are for assessing statewide and local education priorities.

Finally, the results help shift attention to creating positive school climate, and away from seeing bullying and LGBTQ issues as issues for individual students. Because research on bullying and school safety has historically focused on data from individual students, efforts have logically focused on changing students' behaviors or experiences. By focusing on individual students we risk "blaming the victims" or trying to "fix" them or their problems, rather than focusing efforts on policies and practices that will create positive overall school climates.

It is encouraging to see that some schools are working hard to create safe and supportive school climates for all students—and those efforts are paying off.

*The [full study](#) is in Stephen T. Russell, Jack K. Day, Salvatore Ioverno and Russell B. Toomey, "Are school policies focused on sexual orientation and gender identity associated with less bullying? Teachers' perspectives," *Journal of School Psychology*, forthcoming.*

Suggested citation Russell, Stephen. (2016, February). *Policies on sexual orientation and gender identity pay off for schools* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/policies-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-pay-schools>



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