

Health Considerations for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer or Questioning Student

The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) was developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to track youth health behaviors. YRBSS conducts national surveys including the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) which includes data regarding sexual identity of participating youth nationally. While many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) youth may have supportive systems in place, it is important to acknowledge the impact of societal norms and community culture on student health and well-being. LGBTQ+ students often experience unsafe school climates due to anti-LGBTQ+ behavior (GLSEN, 2016). This environment stigmatizes, silences, and targets students who are, or who are perceived to be, LGBTQ+. This stigma may be increased for students who have multiple marginalized identities such as race, disability, and immigration status.

According to data from the 2021 North Carolina Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), nearly 1 in 4 LGBTQ+ students experienced sexual violence and were bullied at school. They were 4 times as likely as their heterosexual peers to attempt suicide.

School climate affects how students experience school, their academic outcomes, and well-being. When compared to their peers, LGBTQ+ students disproportionately face the impacts of being in negative school climates. Experiences that contribute to this include hearing homophobic or transphobic remarks from students and staff, feeling unsafe in school, experiencing violence, or being threatened. Transgender students are also at higher risk for negative sexual health outcomes compared to their cisgender counterparts.

North Carolina has taken steps to create affirming and safe school environments for LGBTQ+ youth. For example, the School Violence Prevention Act (2009) and an updated policy from the North Carolina High School Athletic Association (2019) was created as a pathway for transgender athletes to join teams aligning with their gender identity. NC General Statute 115C. Article 29C now incorporates the language from the School Violence Prevention Act. The purpose of this Act is to define bullying and harassment in schools, at a school function, or on the school bus and define a hostile environment. Enumeration is key to protecting those with marginalized identities and the School Violence Prevention Act enumerates several protected groups. Sexual orientation and gender identity are two of the noted classes in this policy. Enumeration protects every student, not just those listed, and demonstrates to students in those marginalized communities that they are welcome in the school community. Schools that adopt local policies and provide professional development for staff are more likely to see decreased bullying among all students.

School nurses have an ethical responsibility to support and provide care to all students equally regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression [NASN Position Statement \(2021\)](#). They are uniquely qualified to recognize that health risks are disproportionately higher for LGBTQ+ students and provide culturally competent care, make referrals to healthcare professionals knowledgeable about the healthcare needs of LGBTQ+ youth, take an active role in

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creating safe and supportive environments in schools and provide support and information for families about resources available to help and support children.

The American Academy of Pediatrics addresses care and support for the mental and physical health risks of LGBTQ+ youth in the 2018 position statement [Ensuring Comprehensive Care and Support for Transgender and Gender-Diverse Children and Adolescents](#). The school nurse should be observant for symptoms associated with risk for depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm, and suicide.

School climate is heavily influenced by the policies, practices, and resulting connectedness students feel. This influences the health, academic achievements, and overall wellbeing of each student throughout their lifetime. LGBTQ+ students can experience disparities in each of these categories due to a hostile and harmful school environment. School nurses and other school staff establishing themselves as allies for LGBTQ+ students, with an emphasis on LGBTQ+ students with multiple marginalized identities, foster a climate in which every student can succeed.

References

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