

BeLonG To  
Youth Services

The 2019 School  
Climate Survey

## Key Findings

The experiences of lesbian, gay,  
bisexual and trans young people  
in Ireland's schools.

Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual &  
Trans Young People in Ireland

belong<sup>TO</sup>

**TEACHERS COLLEGE**  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

This groundbreaking study is a first for Ireland, shining a light on the experiences of 788 lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans young people in schools across the country.

The landscape of Ireland has changed for the LGBTI+ community over the past three decades. We have celebrated significant milestones including the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993, the introduction of the Employment Equality Act 1998 and Equal Status Act 2000 and, more recently, Marriage Equality and Gender Recognition for over 18s in 2015. With this research, we wanted to discover if the lived experiences of LGBTI+ young people at school mirror these legislative and constitutional changes.

Conducted by BeLonG To Youth Services and the Teachers College, Columbia University, the School Climate Survey 2019<sup>1</sup> is the largest research sample of LGBTI+ young people in schools in Ireland ever. The research examines indicators of a negative school experience, the effects of school climate on students, and school-based supports that can improve the lives of LGBTI+ young people.

This study and our recommendations draws directly on our LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools Toolkit co-developed with the HSE<sup>2</sup>. The study paints a bleak picture of the reality of school life for LGBTI+ students in Ireland. Findings indicate that in the 2018-2019 school year, an alarming 73% of LGBTI+ students felt unsafe at school, with the majority of students experiencing homophobic remarks, many experiencing harassment and some experiencing physical and sexual assault. For many LGBTI+ young people in Ireland, school is an unwelcoming environment that excludes their experiences. The results show increased levels of absenteeism since the LGBTIreland Report<sup>3</sup> which plays a part in how students negotiate their educational outcomes and their ambitions for the future.

From our frontline work, we have heard stories of anti-LGBTI+ bullying, from students being violently kicked and punched to being thrown down the stairs at school. One student described going home from school with the feeling of 1,000 paper cuts following a day of hearing homophobic remarks in succession. The heart-breaking reality is that for many LGBTI+ students, school is an isolating, unsafe place.

While there is much to do to improve the experiences of LGBTI+ young people in school, it is important to note the positive outcomes when staff members, school curriculum and school policies are inclusive of LGBTI+ identities. There are remarkable teachers and school staff across Ireland saving lives by creating safe, supportive spaces for LGBTI+ students. Findings indicate that such support means LGBTI+ students were more likely to feel accepted by their peers, had an increased sense of belonging and were less likely to miss school to avoid victimisation.

This research must act as a wake-up call for all of us passionate about learning and education: students, parents, schools, politicians and the government. LGBTI+ young people need to feel equal, safe and supported at school so that they can live healthy lives and thrive at school.

Moninne Griffith, CEO



1. Pizmony-Levy, O. (2019). *The 2019 Irish National School Climate Survey Report*. Research Report. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.
2. Barron, M. and O'Hagan, L. (2019) *LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools*. 2nd Ed. Dublin: HSE, BeLonG To Youth Services.\*
3. Higgins A. et al. (2016) *The LGBTIreland Report: national study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland*. Dublin: GLEN and BeLonG To Youth Services.

\*This citation was omitted from the original print run and this error has been rectified in this reprint of the report.

## Key Facts



**788 LGBTI+ young people** took part in the research.



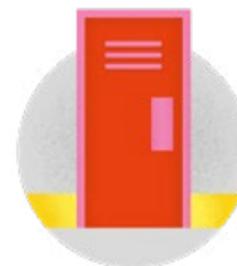
**73% of LGBTI+ students** feel unsafe at school.



**Rise in LGBTI+ students** skipping school to avoid treatment due to being LGBTI+.



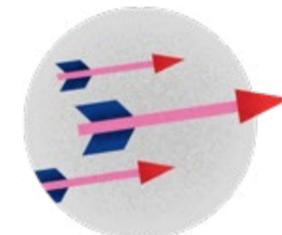
**77% of LGBTI+ students** are verbally harassed based on their sexual orientation, gender, gender expression or ethnic origin.



**PE, bathrooms, locker rooms and lunch areas** are spaces LGBTI+ students avoided due to feeling unsafe.



**1 in 3 LGBTI+ students** reported that other students are not accepting of LGBTI+ identities.



**68% of LGBTI+ students** hear homophobic remarks from other students.



**Subjects with the most positive representation** of LGBTI+ topics include SPHE, English and History.

## About This Survey

The 2019 School Climate Survey was conducted online from May to August 2019. To obtain a representative national sample of LGBTI+ young people, we conducted outreach through national, regional and local organisations that provide services to or advocate on behalf of LGBTI+ youth and liaised with our education partners, network of parents/guardians, professionals and young people. We utilised social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, to advertise and disseminate the survey.

The final sample consists of 788 students between the ages of 13 and 20. Students were from all 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland and all four provinces. Participants are an average age of 15.9 years old. Half of the sample is female, about one-fifth is male (21.9%), with the rest choosing other gender identities (trans –12.4%, non-binary –7.8%). Two-fifths of the sample identifies as bisexual (45.2%); one-fourth identifies as gay; and one-fifth identify as lesbian (26.4% and 21.1% respectively). The rest identifies as queer, pansexual or questioning (17.1%, 15.4%, and 12.1% respectively).

# The Problem

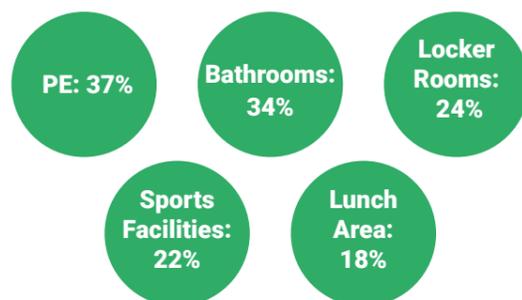
Anti-LGBTI+ bullying is rife throughout second-level schools in Ireland. This alarming reality results in a hostile school environment for many LGBTI+ students and poses a significant threat to their wellbeing, mental health and welfare.

## SCHOOL SAFETY

73% of LGBTI+ students felt unsafe at school. 47% because of their sexual orientation and 27% because of their gender expression.

3 in 10 LGBTI+ students missed at least one day in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

LGBTI+ students avoided certain spaces and activities due to safety concerns:



## ANTI-LGBTI+ REMARKS

68% of LGBTI+ students heard homophobic remarks from other students, with these comments bothering and distressing over 50% of LGBTI+ students.

Nearly 50% of LGBTI+ students hear negative remarks about trans people.

48% of LGBTI+ students reported hearing a homophobic remark from a teacher or staff member.

55% of LGBTI+ students reported hearing a transphobic remark from a teacher or staff member.

## HARASSMENT AND ASSAULT

The majority of LGBTI+ students (86%) felt deliberately excluded by peers with 74% experiencing being the focus of rumours or lies.

77% of LGBTI+ students were verbally harassed (eg name calling or being threatened) based on their sexual orientation, gender, gender expression or ethnic origin.

38% of LGBTI+ students were physically harassed (eg being shoved or pushed), 25% because of their sexual orientation and 18% based on gender expression.

11% of LGBTI+ students were physically assaulted (eg punched, kicked or injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation, 8% because of their gender expression.

43% of LGBTI+ students were sexually harassed (eg unwanted touching or sexual remarks).

39% of LGBTI+ students experienced cyberbullying via social media, telephone and email over the past year.



I was sexually abused by the guys in the PE changing room age 14 to 17 on a weekly basis. They would slap my ass, put their fingers up my ass, grope me and pull at my penis. I was terrified of PE and this affected my attendance on PE days.

# The Impact

Feeling unsafe and unaccepted effects both academic performance and mental health. LGBTI+ students who experience bullying and harassment at school have lower self-esteem, higher levels of isolation and poorer educational outcomes.

## ABSENTEEISM AND ACADEMIC ASPIRATIONS

Compared to the OECD (2017)<sup>3</sup> LGBTI+ students who experience frequent verbal harassment because of their sexual orientation are:

8% less likely to pursue third-level education (66% vs 74%)<sup>4</sup>.

27% more likely to have missed school in the past month (40% vs 13%).

LGBTI+ students who experience victimisation based on their gender identity are 24% more likely to have missed school in the past month (43% vs 19%).

## SENSE OF BELONGING

Experiencing victimisation and discrimination impacts LGBTI+ students sense of self-esteem and belonging at school.

1 in 3 LGBTI+ students reported that other students were not accepting of LGBTI+ people.

LGBTI+ students who experienced victimisation based on their sexual orientation felt less accepted at school compared to those who did not (38% vs 56%).

In the past year:

- 70% of LGBTI+ students felt that other students do not like them.
- 49% of LGBTI+ students felt lonely at school.
- 49% of LGBTI+ students were unable to make friends.
- 44% of LGBTI+ students felt like an outsider at school.

4. OECD (2017), *PISA 2015 Results (Volume III): Students' Well-Being*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris.



I felt deeply suicidal for a large portion of the year and I still do.



Literally everyone hates me at my school. I'm stupid. I'm annoying. I'm just worthless.

## ISOLATION

Students often rely on the intervention of peers, family and school staff in instances of LGBTI+ bullying and harassment, all of which contribute to the creation of a hostile school climate when left unaddressed.

In the past year:

- 64% of LGBTI+ students said their peers never intervened.
- 86% of LGBTI+ students felt deliberately excluded or "left out" by other students.
- 74% of LGBTI+ students had mean rumours or lies told about them.
- 60% of LGBTI+ students never reported incidents of LGBTI+ bullying to school staff and 54% never reported to a family member.
- 60% of LGBTI+ students felt school staff intervention was ineffective.

# The Solution

Safe and supportive schools with inclusive staff, representation of LGBTI+ identities in the curriculum and explicit anti-bullying policies results in reduced levels of anti-LGBTI+ bullying and a student body with a higher sense of belonging and better educational outcomes.

## SEEKING SUPPORT

Almost all LGBTI+ students (97%) identified at least one school staff member supportive of LGBTI+ students.

75% of LGBTI+ students in Leinster identified more than six supportive teachers in their school, compared to 64% in Munster, 62% in Ulster and 54% in Connacht.

63% of LGBTI+ students felt more comfortable talking to other students about LGBTI+ issues than talking to a staff member.

## EFFECT OF SUPPORT

Students who reported a higher level of staff who support LGBTI+ students were:

- 45% more likely to feel accepted by the student body (64% vs 19%).
- 34% more likely to feel that they belong in their school (57% vs 23%).
- 20% less likely to miss days of school due to feeling unsafe (24% vs 44%).

## STAFF INTERVENTION

45% of LGBTI+ students reported that staff did not intervene if present when homophobic remarks were made.

When staff members intervened in homophobic remarks, LGBTI+ students were:

- 5% more likely to feel accepted by the student body (28% vs. 33%)
- 15% more likely to feel that they belong in their school (47% vs 32%).
- 8% less likely to miss days of school due to feeling unsafe (31% vs 39%).

## CURRICULUM

68% of LGBTI+ students were not taught anything positive about LGBTI+ identities in school.

LGBTI+ students identified positive representations of LGBTI+ topics in the following subjects: SPHE (23%), English (7%) and History (6%).

78% of students are never taught about LGBTI+ bullying in school.

Including LGBTI+ related issues in the curriculum means students are 26% more likely to feel accepted by the student body, 20% more likely to feel they belong at school and 9% more likely to not miss days of school due to feeling unsafe.

## SCHOOL POLICIES

Although 88% of LGBTI+ students have an anti-bullying and harassment policy in their school, only 29% of students reported that the policy explicitly mentioned sexual orientation or gender identity and expression.



Overall my school community is extremely accepting, and the staff play a major role in enforcing the positive attitude.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

This research presents the harsh reality of the lived experiences of LGBTI+ students in second-level schools in Ireland.

The findings capture the diversity of the LGBTI+ community within second-level education and the intense and indisputable discrimination, harassment, isolation and stigmatisation that LGBTI+ students are subjected to.

Each student who participated in this survey had the opportunity for the first time to narrate in their own words the difficulties they face as an LGBTI+ student on a regular basis. While positives were identified in the context of staff support, access to resources and inclusive curriculums, the vast majority of LGBTI+ students are eagerly awaiting leaving school in the hope of a more inclusive environment.

LGBTI+ students are in every school in Ireland. We owe these students more than fear, anxiety, loneliness and harm – they deserve a school experience that not only includes their identities but celebrates and values the diversity of their experiences and lives.

We can do better. We have included the following recommendations to ensure the future protection of LGBTI+ students. We will conduct this research every two years to assess the progression of the school climate for LGBTI+ students. We will not stop until LGBTI+ students are equal, safe and valued within their school. The following recommendations from the LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Toolkit<sup>2</sup> are fully supported by the findings of this report.

## THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

1. Implement the actions from Objective 1 in the LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy (2018)<sup>5</sup>: Create a more supportive and inclusive environment for LGBTI+ young people in formal education settings including. This includes actions such as:

- Review and update professional development supports for teachers.
- Encourage schools to develop whole-school LGBTI+ inclusion policies.
- Develop and pilot a student-centred peer support for LGBTI+ and their allies within post-primary schools (gender-sexuality alliances).
- Conduct a thematic evaluation of Social Personal Health Education (SPHE) including Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).
- Provide specific prevention initiatives for LGBTI+ identity-based bullying in schools.
- Review the feasibility of provision for gender-neutral/single stall bathrooms and changing rooms in the design guidelines for schools

2. Provide resources to schools across Ireland to engage in a whole-school community model of LGBTI+ inclusion.

3. Review the National Action Plan on Bullying (2013)<sup>6</sup> informed by recent policy, research and legislative developments in the area of anti-LGBTI+ bullying.

## SCHOOLS SHOULD:

Develop and implement effective school LGBTI+ inclusion policies and plans.

Implement a curriculum that supports diversity and respect for LGBTI+ people.

Ensure that staff are LGBTI+ aware and equipped to address LGBTI+ issues and support vulnerable students.

Provide direct supports to LGBTI+ young people through the appropriate school structures including responding appropriately and supportively when an LGBTI+ young person comes out.

Signpost LGBTI+ young people as appropriate to outside agencies and supports.

Work with the community outside the school gates, including any local LGBTI+ youth projects/groups, parents and community organisations to promote a wider LGBTI+ inclusive community.



5. Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2018) *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020*.

6. Department of Education and Skills (2013) *National Action Plan on Bullying: Report of the Anti-Bullying Working Group to the Minister for Education and Skills*.

“You’re better off being quiet in the corner – after sixth year, in college, you can be yourself.”

## LGBTI+ Student in Ireland, 2019

BeLonG To Youth Services is a national organisation supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex young people. Since 2003, BeLonG To has worked with LGBTI+ young people to create a world where they are equal, safe and valued in the diversity of their identities and experiences. The organisation advocates and campaigns on behalf of young LGBTI+ people and offers a specialised LGBTI+ youth service including crisis counselling, information and the provision of LGBTI+ youth groups across Ireland.

BeLonG To supports educators and schools across Ireland. Stand Up Awareness Week is an opportunity for educators and schools across Ireland to avail of teacher training and second-level school resources. BeLonG To’s Safe and Supportive Schools initiative supports second-level schools by helping them create environments that are fully inclusive of LGBTI+ identities.

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An Roinn Leanaí  
agus Gnóthaí Óige  
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