



# Research Brief: Anti-LGBTQ+ School Policies and LGBTQ+ Young People

Attending a school with even one anti-LGBTQ+ policy is associated with higher rates of anxiety, depression, and past-year suicide attempts for young LGBTQ+ students.

August 2024

## Background

Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of anti-LGBTQ+ policies in state and local legislatures across the United States, many targeting schools and LGBTQ+ students' access to affirmation and support in the classroom. As of July 2024, seven states have laws censoring discussions of LGBTQ+ people or issues throughout all school curricula, six states require schools to provide advance notice to parents when LGBTQ+ issues will be discussed and offer parents the opportunity to opt their children out of these lessons, and four states have laws that restrict how "homosexuality" is discussed in certain settings (Movement Advancement Project [MAP], 2024). Policies protecting LGBTQ+ students from anti-LGBTQ+ bullying and harassment also vary widely; two states have laws preventing schools or school districts from adding LGBTQ+-specific protections to anti-bullying policies, while 25 states have no laws protecting LGBTQ+ students from bullying (MAP, 2024).

Transgender and nonbinary students have been targeted with a number of policies blocking them from playing on sports teams or using gendered facilities (e.g., locker rooms, bathrooms) that align with their gender identity. Other policies require school staff to out transgender youth to their families if they use a different name or pronouns at school, without considering how that outing may endanger the student (MAP, 2024). Many of these policies were only recently implemented and their impact cannot yet be measured. However, existing research has shown that laws banning transgender and nonbinary youth from gendered facilities are associated with poorer mental health among transgender and nonbinary young people (Price-Feeney et al., 2021).

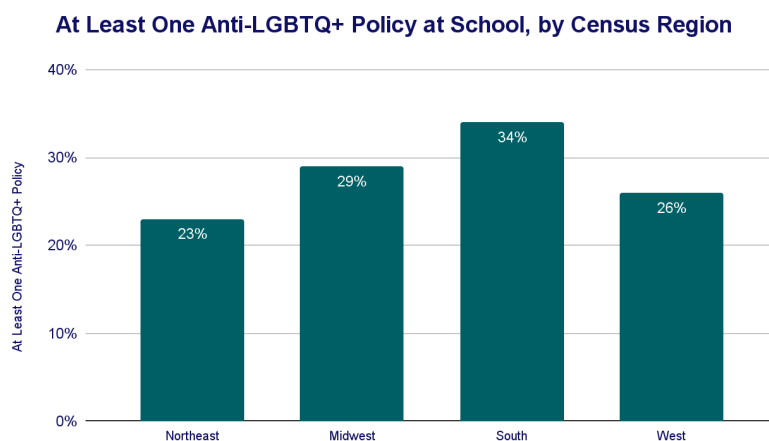
LGBTQ+ young people living in states with a larger proportion of schools using LGBTQ+-inclusive sexual education curricula report lower suicide risk, as well as fewer experiences of bullying than their peers living in states with less LGBTQ+-inclusive sexual education (Proulx et al., 2019). LGBTQ+ young people who have been outed to their parents report higher rates of depression and lower levels of LGBTQ+-specific support from their families (McCauley et al., 2024). Additionally, LGBTQ+ students in schools with more supportive

environments report lower suicide risk and fewer depressive symptoms, compared to their LGBTQ+ peers in schools with more negative environments (Ancheta et al., 2021). Using data from [The Trevor Project's 2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People](#), this brief examines the relationships between several anti-LGBTQ+ school policies and the mental health of LGBTQ+ young people attending school, as well as exploring school characteristics associated with the presence of anti-LGBTQ+ policies.

## Results

### Demographics and School Policies

Overall, 78% of LGBTQ+ young people reported being enrolled in school at the time of survey administration. Nearly a third of those enrolled in school (29%) reported attending a school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy. LGBTQ+ young people ages 13-17 reported higher rates of attending a school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy (43%), compared to their LGBTQ+ peers ages 18-24 (16%). In terms of census region, LGBTQ+ young people living in the South reported the highest rates of attending a school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy (34%), followed by LGBTQ+ young people living in the Midwest (29%), West (26%), and Northeast (23%).



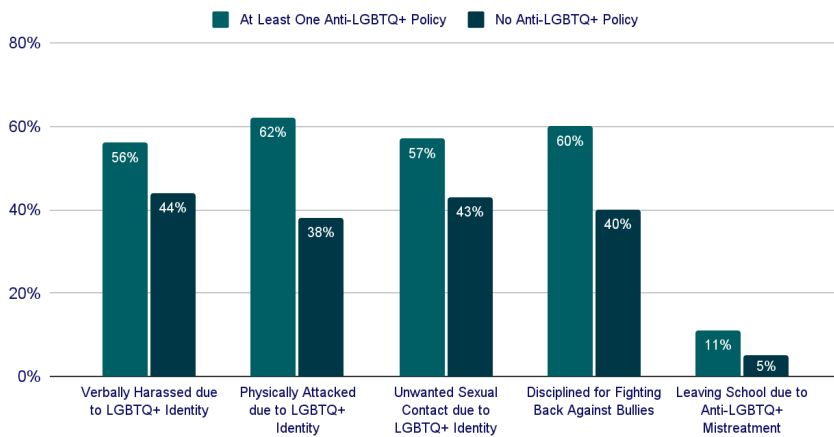
Transgender boys and men reported the highest rates of attending school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy (43%), followed by nonbinary young people (31%), transgender girls and women (31%), gender-questioning young people (29%), cisgender girls and women (24%), and cisgender boys and men (17%). There were no significant differences in rates of attending school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy between LGBTQ+ young people of color and their White LGBTQ+ peers. However, Native and Indigenous LGBTQ+ young people reported the highest rates of attending school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy (36%), followed by multiracial young people (33%), White young people (29%), Latinx young people (29%), Asian-American and Pacific Islander young people (26%), and Black young people (26%).

### School Characteristics and School Policies

Nearly half (44%) of LGBTQ+ young people who reported attending a school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy also reported attending school only sometimes. This was higher than for LGBTQ+ young people who

reported attending schools with no anti-LGBTQ+ policies, where 38% reported attending school only sometimes. In terms of school level, LGBTQ+ young people who reported being in a dual enrollment/combined high school and college program reported the highest rates of attending a school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy (51%), followed by those in middle school (49%), technical school (47%), high school (43%), GED program (42%), community college (29%), four-year university (25%), and graduate school (25%). LGBTQ+ young people who attended private schools that were religiously affiliated reported the highest rates of attending a school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy (64%), followed by those who were homeschooled (47%), attended public schools (43%), and attended private schools that are not religiously affiliated (37%).

**Anti-LGBTQ+ Experiences in School, by Anti-LGBTQ Policy**



LGBTQ+ young people who reported attending a school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy reported higher rates of several types of anti-LGBTQ+ experiences in school, compared to their peers at schools with no anti-LGBTQ+ policies. These experiences included being verbally harassed because people thought they were LGBTQ+ (56% vs 44%), being physically attacked because people thought they were LGBTQ+ (62% vs 38%), experiencing unwanted sexual contact because people thought they were LGBTQ+ (57% vs 43%), being disciplined for fighting back against bullies (60% vs 40%), and leaving school due to anti-LGBTQ+ mistreatment (11% vs 5%).

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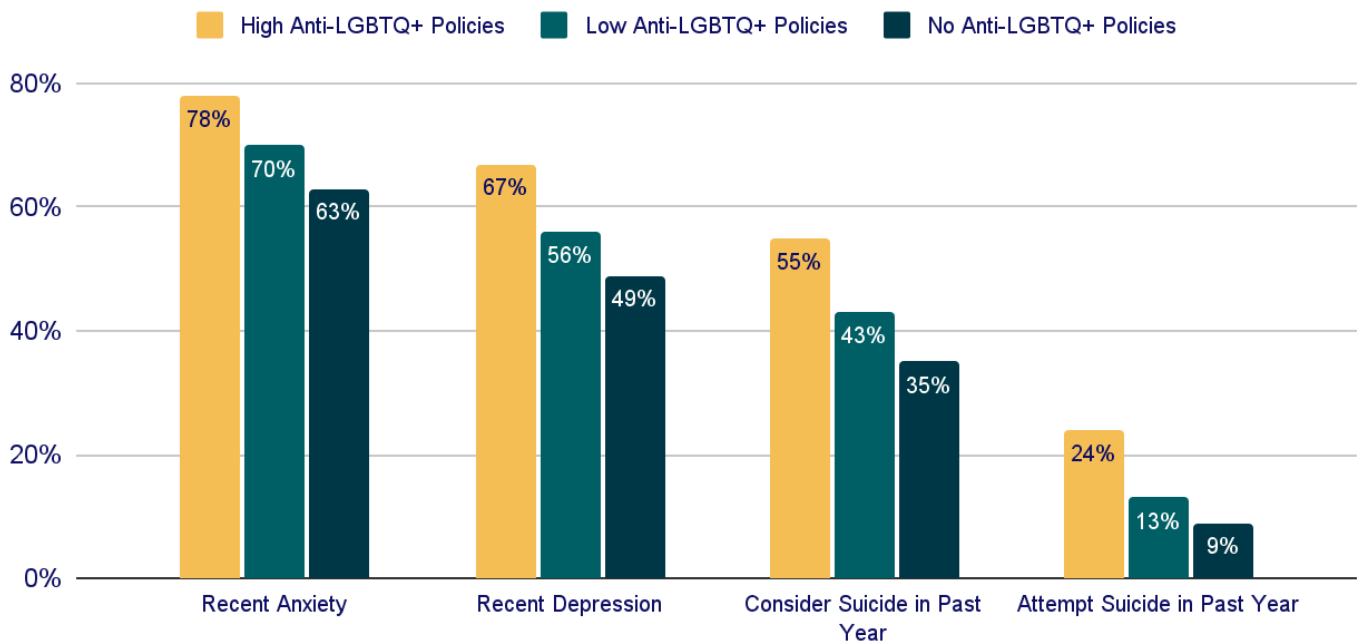
LGBTQ+ young people who attended schools with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy reported lower rates of LGBTQ+-related support at school. For instance, 49% of LGBTQ+ young people at these schools reported having a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), compared to 68% at schools with no anti-LGBTQ+ policies. Additionally, 7% reported that their school previously had a GSA but was taken away, compared to 2% at schools with no anti-LGBTQ+ policies. LGBTQ+ young people at schools with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy also reported lower rates of having a gender-neutral bathroom (30%), compared to their peers who attended schools with no anti-LGBTQ+ policies (48%). Among transgender and nonbinary young people who reported attending a school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy, 13% reported that none of their teachers respected their pronouns, compared to 5% of their peers who attended schools with no anti-LGBTQ+ policies. Furthermore, LGBTQ+ young people who reported attending a school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy were less likely to report knowing at least one adult who supports their LGBTQ+

identity at their school (78%) than their peers at schools with no anti-LGBTQ+ policies (79%). This small but significant difference shows that over 75% of LGBTQ+ young people who attend schools with anti-LGBTQ+ policies are still able to access supportive adults at school.

### Mental Health Outcomes and School Policies

Attending schools with anti-LGBTQ+ policies was associated with poorer mental health and higher suicide risk among LGBTQ+ young people, with more policies correlating with worse mental health outcomes. LGBTQ+ young people who reported attending a school with a high number of anti-LGBTQ+ policies reported higher rates of recent anxiety (78%), compared to their LGBTQ+ peers at schools with fewer (70%) or no anti-LGBTQ+ policies (63%). They also reported higher rates of recent depression (67%), compared to their LGBTQ+ peers at schools with fewer (56%) or no anti-LGBTQ+ policies (49%). Additionally, LGBTQ+ young people at schools with a high number of anti-LGBTQ+ policies reported higher rates of seriously considering suicide in the past year (55%), compared to their LGBTQ+ peers at schools with fewer (43%) or no anti-LGBTQ+ policies (35%). Furthermore, they reported higher rates of attempting suicide in the past year (24%), compared to their LGBTQ+ peers at schools with fewer (13%) or no anti-LGBTQ+ policies (9%).

### Mental Health Symptoms Among LGBTQ+ Young People, by Anti-LGBTQ+ School Policy



## Methods

Data were collected through The Trevor Project's [2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People](#). In total, 18,663 LGBTQ+ young people between the ages of 13 to 24 were recruited via targeted ads on social media.

The presence of anti-LGBTQ+ policies at respondents' schools was assessed via a question which asked, "The following questions are about policies and practices at your school that may discriminate against LGBTQ students. For each item, please indicate whether or not you have experienced each policy/practice at your school." Some example policies included: "Prevented from using chosen your chosen name and pronouns," "Disciplined for public affection that is not disciplined if it does not involve LGBTQ students," "Prevented from using the locker room that aligns with your gender," and "Prevented from discussing or writing about LGBTQ topics in extracurricular activities." Response options for each policy included: "No," "Yes," and "Does not apply to me." A mean variable was calculated for each case, excluding policies which were indicated to not apply to the respondent from the numerator. For most analyses two categories were used: cases with a mean of zero were categorized as "No anti-LGBTQ+ policies" and cases with a mean greater than zero were categorized as "At least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy." For some analyses three categories were created. Cases with a mean of zero were categorized as "No anti-LGBTQ+ policies." The remaining cases which had at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy were categorized so that those below the median were categorized as low, and those above median were categorized as high. The median was 0.23, meaning that students categorized as attending low anti-LGBTQ+ policy schools reported the presence of at least 1 anti-LGBTQ+ policy, but fewer than 23% of applicable anti-LGBTQ+ policies.

School attendance was assessed via the question, "Are you currently enrolled in school (either online, in person, or a combination of both)?" Response options included, "No, I graduated high school," "No, I graduated from college," "No, I dropped out of high school," "No, I dropped out of college," "No, I was expelled," "No, I obtained my GED," "Yes, and I attend always or almost always," "Yes, and I attend sometimes," and "Yes, and I'm suspended." Respondents who indicated that they were not currently enrolled in school were not asked questions about school policies or characteristics and were not included in this analysis. Level of education was assessed via the question, "What type of school are you enrolled in?" with response options: "Middle school," "High school," "Dual enrollment/concurrent enrollment," "GED," "Technical school," "Community/junior college," "4-year university," "Graduate school," and "Something else." School type was assessed by asking, "Is the middle or high school you're enrolled in..." with response options including: "Private, religious-affiliated," "Private, not religious-affiliated," "Public (including public charter and magnet schools)," and "Homeschool." Anti-LGBTQ+ experiences at school were assessed via a question, "In the past 12 months, did any of these happen to you while in school? If any of these things were done to you in school by classmates, teachers, or school staff, please answer "Yes."" Examples included: "I

was verbally harassed because people thought I was LGBTQ,” and “I was physically attacked because people thought I was LGBTQ.” Response options included “No,” and “Yes.” The presence of a GSA was assessed via a question which asked, “Did the school that you attended during the most recent school year have a Gender and Sexuality Alliance, or a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), or another type of club that focuses on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) issues?” with response options, “No,” “Yes,” “My school had one before, but it was taken away,” “I am not sure what this is,” and “I know what a GSA is, but do not know if my school had one.” The presence of a gender-neutral bathroom was assessed via a question which asked, “Is there a gender-neutral bathroom at your school?” with response options, “No,” “Yes,” and “I don’t know.” Respect for pronouns was assessed via a question which asked, “How many of your teachers/professors respect your pronouns (as in, use the pronouns you want them to use for you)?” with response options, “None of them,” “A few of them,” “Some of them,” “A lot of them,” “All or most of them,” and “I am not out about my pronouns.” The presence of a supportive adult at school was assessed via a question which asked, “Do you have at least one adult at your school who is supportive and affirming of your LGBTQ identity?” with response options, “No,” and “Yes.”

Recent anxiety was assessed using the GAD-2 (Plummer et al., 2016), recent depression was assessed using the PHQ-2 (Richardson et al., 2010), and seriously considering suicide and suicide attempts in the past year were assessed using questions from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Johns et al., 2020).

Chi-square tests were used to determine whether there was a significant association between categorical variables. All reported comparisons are statistically significant at least at  $p < 0.05$ . This means there is less than a 5% likelihood these results occurred by chance.

## Looking Ahead

Our findings show that recent anti-LGBTQ+ policies in school have the potential to negatively impact the mental health of LGBTQ+ students. Overall, nearly a third of LGBTQ+ students in our sample reported the presence of at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy at their school. Younger LGBTQ+ students ages 13-17 reported higher rates of attending a school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy, compared to their LGBTQ+ peers ages 18-24. These findings highlight the need to tailor school policies and interventions to the developmental needs of students at every level of education: middle school, high school, and post-secondary. Transgender and nonbinary students also reported higher rates of attending a school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy than their cisgender peers, which may reflect both the disproportionate targeting of transgender students’ rights and transgender and nonbinary students’ increased awareness of these policies. LGBTQ+ students in the South reported the highest rates of at least one anti-LGBTQ+

policy at their school, compared to LGBTQ+ students living in other regions. This aligns with the fact that many of the states passing state-level anti-LGBTQ+ policies are concentrated in the South.

LGBTQ+ students who reported less frequent school attendance at the time of taking the survey reported higher rates of attending a school with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy, compared to LGBTQ+ students who reported attending school almost all of the time. Other scholarship has found that LGBTQ+ students who report high rates of anti-LGB victimization report higher rates of truancy than their LGBTQ+ peers who experience lower rates of victimization (Kosciw et al., 2010). Given this, our finding may reflect the impact of anti-LGBTQ+ policies, with LGBTQ+ students having fewer protections against victimization, feeling less comfortable at school, and attending less often, or experiencing higher rates of discipline from school administration due to their LGBTQ+ identity.

LGBTQ+ students who attended religiously-affiliated private schools reported the highest rates of at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy, likely reflecting the influence of anti-LGBTQ+ religious beliefs. Our findings also suggest that the presence of anti-LGBTQ+ policies is related to school environment and school-based support. LGBTQ+ youth who attend schools with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy reported higher rates of various anti-LGBTQ+ experiences, such as harassment, violence, unwanted sexual contact, and discipline. They also reported lower rates of access to school-based LGBTQ+ supports, such as a GSA or gender-neutral bathroom, compared to their LGBTQ+ peers who attended schools with no anti-LGBTQ+ policies. Fortunately, 78% of LGBTQ+ students attending schools with at least one anti-LGBTQ+ policy reported having at least one adult at school who was supportive of their LGBTQ+ identity. These findings underscore the fact that while anti-LGBTQ+ policies may negatively influence LGBTQ+ students' safety and access to support, there are still many adults working to support and affirm LGBTQ+ students in a potentially hostile political environment, sometimes at personal or professional risk for themselves. This adult support is associated with better mental health and lower suicide risk (The Trevor Project, 2023), highlighting the need to support LGBTQ+-affirming teachers doing important work in anti-LGBTQ+ environments.

Finally, our findings align with existing literature on the relationship between anti-LGBTQ+ policies and poor mental health among LGBTQ+ students (Ancheta et al., 2021; McCauley et al., 2024; Price-Feeney et al., 2021; Proulx et al., 2019). LGBTQ+ students in our sample who attended schools with a higher number of anti-LGBTQ+ policies reported higher rates of recent anxiety, recent depression, seriously considering suicide in the past year, and attempting suicide in the past year, compared to both their peers at schools with fewer anti-LGBTQ+ policies and those at schools with no anti-LGBTQ+ policies. These findings highlight the risk that anti-LGBTQ+ school policies may pose to LGBTQ+ students' mental health.

These findings have implications for teachers, school counselors, school staff, parents, and community members advocating for LGBTQ+ students in their local schools. LGBTQ+ students deserve the right to feel

safe in school, to openly discuss their LGBTQ+ identity with peers and adults without fear of being outed to potentially unsupportive families, and to see themselves reflected in school curricula. The Trevor Project is committed to supporting LGBTQ+ young people in schools. Our advocacy team encourages schools to implement the Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention, which was developed by The Trevor Project, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). The Trevor Project's website provides resources for educators and school officials, including the [Is Your School LGBTQ-Affirming?](#) checklist and [Creating Safer Spaces in Schools for LGBTQ Young People](#), which can help determine whether a school is adequately supporting LGBTQ+ students. Our website also offers several educational guides for adults working with LGBTQ+ young people, including the [Guide to Being an Ally to Transgender and Nonbinary Youth](#), [How to Support Bisexual Youth](#), and [Preventing Suicide](#). Our TrevorSpace social media platform connects young people with supportive peers, and our 24/7 crisis services are available in three different modalities – phone, chat, and text – for LGBTQ+ young people to connect with affirming counselors when they are in crisis.

**Recommended Citation:** The Trevor Project. (2024). Anti-LGBTQ+ School Policies and LGBTQ+ Young People.

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The Trevor Project. (2023). Acceptance from adults is associated with lower rates of suicide attempts among LGBTQ young people.

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