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Name
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1234 Street Name
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Dear Mr. Smith,

I am a student at Central Oregon Community College as well as the mother of a seventh-grade student attending *Middle School Name*. Last year my son and his friends brought to my attention that they regularly hear anti-LGBTQI+ remarks and homophobic slurs at school and on the school bus.

A review of academic studies and articles has made salient that school climates are negative for most LGBTQI+ students, even though acceptance of LGBTQI+ people has grown in the last several years. Negative school climates are associated with ill effects for all students. When I spoke with LGBTQI+ community advocates in Central Oregon, I was told that the local school climate had declined in the last year in terms of acceptance and tolerance of minorities.

The following proposal offers to bring a program called Safe Zone to *Middle School Name* using a combination of two curricula, one designed by The Safe Zone Project and the other one by GLSEN. Many studies show that having such a program can improve school climate for all students, and is associated with positive effects which will be discussed.

Thank you for taking the time to read my proposal. I hope that you will find it beneficial for your school and will work with me to implement it. I look forward to working with *Middle School Name* to improve school climate and reduce bullying.

Sincerely,

Delphine A. Lumen



Creating Safe Zones In Bend Schools

Delphine A. Lumen

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The majority of LGBTQI+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and other sexual minorities) students experience a negative school climate. Many studies have documented the harassment and abuse that sexual minority students have to face, from name calling to physical assaults. The effects of such negative school climates include depression and anxiety, missed days of school, lower GPA, and even suicide.

This proposal takes essential quantitative and qualitative data from eighteen studies and uses it to explain and illustrate what the issues are in a simple and clear way. It then offers an empirically supported way of improving school climates for all students. Several studies show that having a Safe Space program can greatly improve school climates.

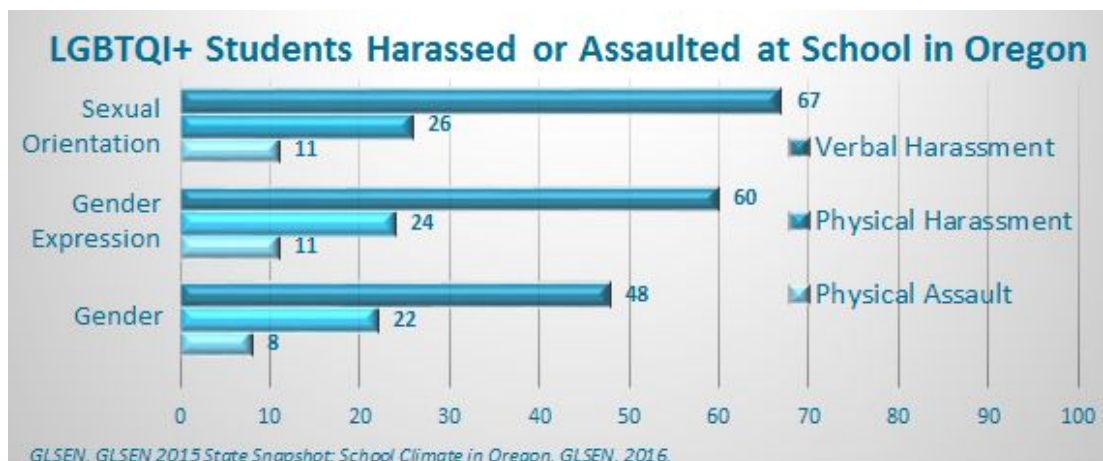
SCHOOL CLIMATES ARE NEGATIVE FOR MANY STUDENTS

Many studies show that school climates are negative for most sexual minority students throughout the U.S.

LGBTQI+ STUDENTS

GLSEN’s bi-annual 2015 National School Climate Survey paints a grim image of school climates for LGBTQI+ students. The “State Snapshot: School Climate in Oregon” shows that the majority of LGBTQI+ students in Oregon have to endure high levels of harassment and assaults related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Figure 1 on this page shows those numbers.

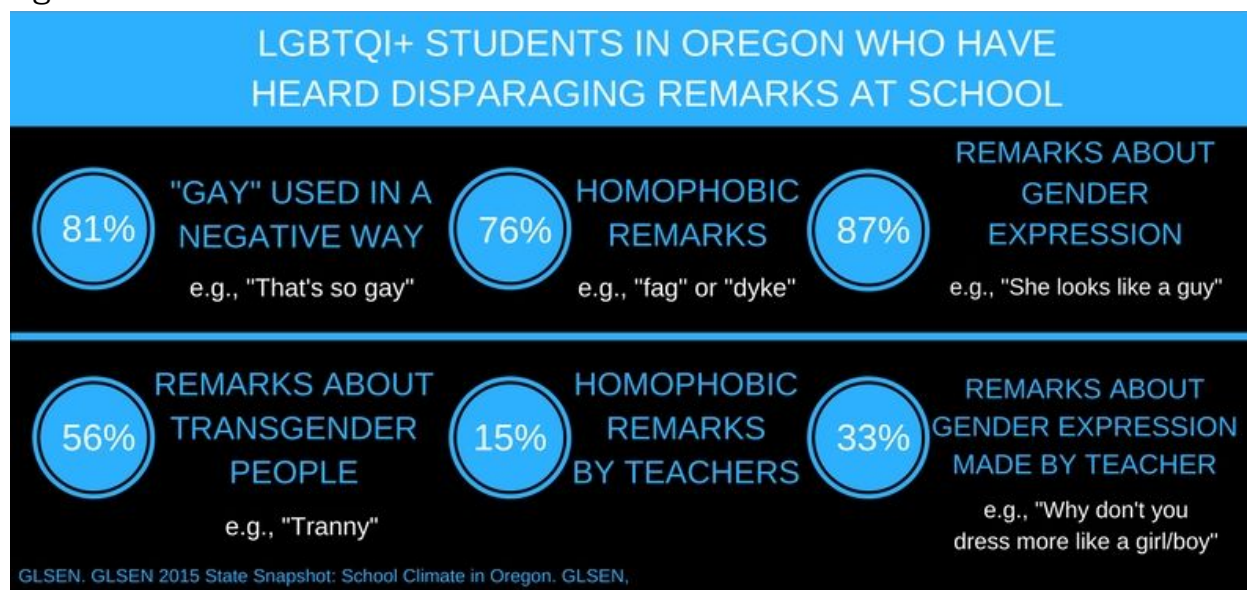
Figure 1



Two-thirds of LGBTQI+ students in Oregon reported verbal harassment and as many as 11 percent reported getting assaulted for being a sexual minority.

A large majority of LGBTQI+ students also report hearing negative comments about their sexual orientation or gender identity by both students and by school personnel. Figure 2 on the next page illustrates those statistics.

Figure 2



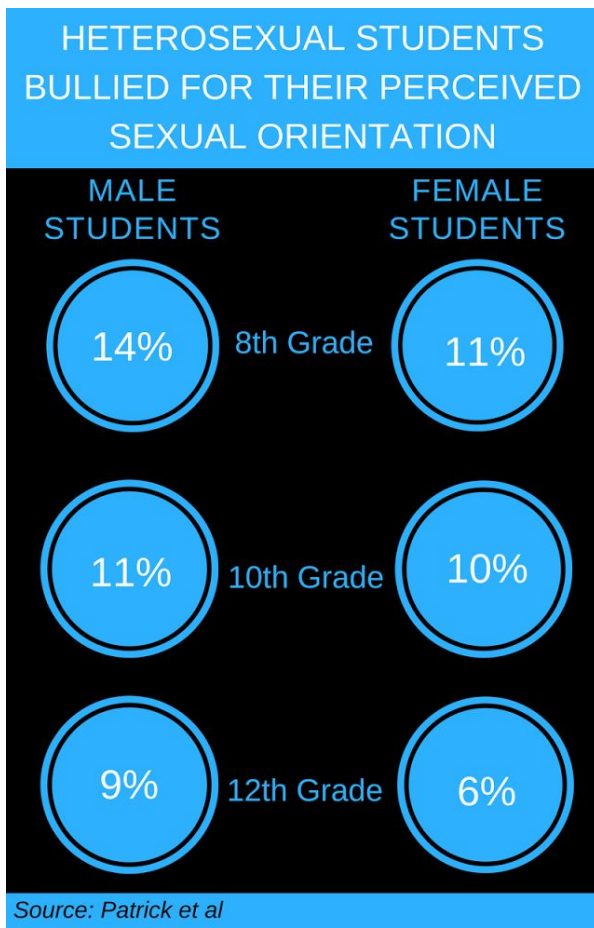
Hearing homonegative language like this daily can only have negative effects for LGBTI+ Students.

Many studies have shown that a hostile school climate can have profoundly negative effects on LGBTQI+ students and that being bullied or harassed at school is linked with lower self-esteem, lower grades, and higher absenteeism, among other symptoms.

STUDENTS PERCEIVED TO BE GAY

A large number of heterosexual/cisgender students get bullied because of their perceived sexual orientation (PSO). Figure 3 on the next page illustrates statistics about students perceived to be gay.

Figure 3



Although male students are more likely to get bullied because of POS, female students are more negatively affected by it. An average of 26 percent of male and 42 percent of female high school students who are bullied because of their PSO consider suicide¹ (Patrick 1258).

The adolescent years are a very sensitive time period when identities, including sexual identity, are formed. Being subjected to negative comments, jokes, and threats, while being devalued and discredited daily, can have serious ramifications on self-esteem and cause internalized homophobia (Johnson 57).

In “You Can’t Break When You’re Already Broken” Tracy Peter writes

“Our findings create a picture of school climates in which LGBT students are routinely exposed to . . . verbal and physical discourse practices that insult them and threaten their safety. They are also unlikely to be exposed to a corresponding set of positive discourse practices to counteract the impact of their experience of negative practices. (205)”

It is clear that LGBTQI+ and heterosexual/cisgender students are affected by negative and LGBTQI-phobic school climates.

¹ As compared to “never bullied” and “bullied for other reasons”: (males) 7%, 16% and (females) 12%, 25%.

EXISTING LGBTQI+ STUDENT RESOURCES

There are five main existing school resources for LGBTQI+ students, and many studies show that the more of those resources interact together, the more effective they are.

GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES (GSAs)

GSAs have been around since 1998. There are over 900 clubs throughout the U.S. and their positive effects have been documented numerous times. They provide support, educate and raise awareness about LGBTQI+ issues, and increase visibility of and empower LGBTQI+ students. Sexual minority students attending schools with GSAs feel that their school is more supportive and are more likely to be “out of the closet” (Peter 206). Having a GSA at school has been found to lower the levels of victimization and reduced absenteeism (Greytak 51). Joseph Kosciw et al. confirmed those findings but found that regarding academic achievements and missing school,

“Having a GSA was not significantly related to an individual’s self-esteem or the two educational outcomes studied. One function that a GSA may serve is identifying a supportive school staff person, given that student clubs typically have an adult sponsor (58).”

Having a GSA can provide great support and affirmation, and that support and affirmation gets amplified when students can identify eleven or more supportive staff (GLSEN 23). Pat Griffin and Matthew L. Ouellett believe that in order for the transformative power of GSA to achieve their full potential, widespread organizational changes must happen (3). Moreover, Griffin and Ouellett have found that many LGBTQI+ students do not participate in their school’s GSA because they fear being identified as LGBTQI+ by other students (208).

ANTI-BULLYING / ANTI-HARASSMENT POLICIES

Anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies are found in most schools, but not all of them specifically name and address sexual minority students. Studies have found that having a well-implemented, comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-harassment policy has many positive effects. It is a predictor of positive self-esteem (Kosciw 55) and is related to reduced absenteeism in LGBTQI+ students, especially transgender ones. However, studies show different results when examining whether those kinds of policies can reduce instances of victimization. One study found that they did not reduce the number of transgender students that got bullied and victimized (Greytak 57), while another found that LGBTQI+ students were significantly less harassed, bullied, and assaulted in schools that have the policies discussed here. The difference in those results may lie in whether or not those policies are well-implemented, as well as whether the policies focus on preventing the problem or dealing with it after the fact.

SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL PERSONNEL AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT

One of the most positive school resource for LGBTQI+ students is having supportive school personnel. In one study, Kosciw found that the presence of many supportive school staff is linked to a decrease in bullying, a decrease in absenteeism because of safety concerns, a healthier self-esteem, and higher grades for LGBTQI+ students (55). When Alexandra Marshall interviewed LGBTQI+ teenagers attending high school, she found that “The lowest point in these participants’ experiences was when they felt that they were without support” (337). Students noticed which teachers intervened when they saw bullying, and which teacher didn’t (Marshall 338). Many sexual minority students have described how school personnel made a difference in how safe they felt as well as provided them with everyday support, and have said they wish that there were a greater number of supportive school personnel (McGuire 1183).

As shown above, neither of the LGBTQ+ school resources solve all the problems that sexual minority students face. Together, they can create a positive school climate for all students. Peter says, “When educators and school system

officials actively engage in creating school environments that are safe and respectful for LGBTQI+ people, they can provide the necessary ingredients for transformative social change within school culture” (207). R. Bradley Johnson adds that “Diversity trainings allow for the empowerment of participants to produce change in their organization” (62).

CREATING SAFE ZONES IN BEND SCHOOLS

The good news for Oregonian students is that they are more likely than national students to be able to identify six or more supportive educators (GLSEN). The majority of students want more supportive school personnel, and having so can have a powerful impact on LGBTQI+ students.

WHAT ARE SAFE ZONES AND SAFE ZONE WORKSHOPS?

A Safe Zone can be a person, a classroom, or an entire organization. People displaying Safe Zone symbols have participated in a workshop and try to be understanding and supportive of people of all sexual orientations, genders, and gender presentations. Safe Zones are free of homophobia and heterosexism.

Safe Zone workshops aim at providing safe spaces, educating people about and increasing understanding, awareness, and support of sexual minority people and issues, thus increasing and enhancing conversations around LGBTQI+ issues, well as reducing homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, and creating a positive school climate for all students.

The first Safe Zone program was created in 1992 at Ball State University. It was run by the Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Student Association and was known by the name "Staff, Administration, and Faculty for Equality (SAFE) on Campus". Other universities soon followed; Iowa State University implemented its first Safe Zone in 1997. Many schools, organizations, and some businesses now have similar programs under names such as "Safe Zone" and "Safe Space. Workshops touch topics including terminology, sexual orientation, gender identity, how to be supportive to someone coming out, and how to be an ally.

When a workshop is completed, participants receive a laminated placard and/or a button with the Safe Zone symbol. Participants are asked (but not required to) to display the symbol somewhere visible, such as an office window or a backpack.

WHY IS TRAINING SO IMPORTANT?

Some of the earlier programs didn't require any training to receive a Safe Zone symbol. However, there are many reasons as to why training is an integral part of any Safe Zone program. Firstly, although displaying a Safe Zone symbol is a great visual way of communicating support, it doesn't mean that the person displaying it is knowledgeable about LGBTQI+ issues. Even with good intention, someone who means to be supportive can inadvertently be insensitive or invalidating. Secondly, someone may want to be supportive but be unsure how to do so. Having a training ensures that whoever displays a Safe Zone sign has at least a minimal knowledge of LGBTQI+ issues, as well as the ability to provide a safe space for participants to ask questions, practice communication techniques, and identify and address mistakes. Thirdly, Kerry John Poynter points out that having a training ensures that people displaying a Safe Zone symbol are doing so for the right reasons, as someone may otherwise post the symbol to attempt to "save" LGBTQI+ people (125).

Research shows that although a one-time training has a positive impact on school climate, follow-up training is crucial if a long-term school culture change is desired. Without follow-up training, the effects of the training tend to fade away (Payne 32).

BENEFITS OF SAFE ZONES IN SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

Just like evidence from many studies shows that most schools in the U.S. have a negative climate for LGBTQI+ students, it also shows that there are ways to improve negative climates and diminishes instances of bullying and harassment. A study found that displaying Safe Zone symbols was linked to students' perception of school climate as more positive (Evans 522). Those findings were reiterated when a study found that seeing a Safe Zone symbol on campus gave students a feeling of increased positive climate at school (Katz 370).

There are many positive outcomes to having Safe Zone Programs in schools, and they can be categorized into three categories: psychological, social, and physical outcomes. Some of those outcomes are discussed below.

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

Many studies have linked school climates for LGBTQI+ students to GPA. GLSEN reports that sexual minority students attending schools where they could identify eleven or more supportive staff had an average GPA of 3.3, compared to a GPA of 2.8 for those who didn't (71) Those findings were strengthened when a study demonstrated that students attending schools with more positive school climates and with LGBTQI+-supportive school personnel have a greater school engagement, which is in turn strongly related to higher grades (Seelman 14).

INCREASED SCHOOL ATTACHMENT AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Several studies have found strong associations between school climate, school engagement, and school attachment among LGBTQI+ students. Peter's findings show that 44 percent of LGBTQI+ students don't feel accepted at their school. That feeling is linked to lower school attachment, which is in turn linked to higher risk of suicidality (205). Another study found that sexual minority students attending supportive schools had a higher level of school engagement, which was associated to a higher GPA and to a reduced number of missed school days (Seelman 14). It is reasonable to think that feeling safer at school can lead to greater engagement, as it can be difficult to be engaged at school when not feeling safe. For

example, a student is more likely to participate in school sports if they aren't being victimized in the locker rooms.

LOWER ABSENTEEISM

All studies that examined the relation between school climates and absenteeism saw a strong correlation. GLSEN's research found that sexual minority students who experienced high levels of victimization and harassment were three times as likely to miss school days (45). In her study's fear-based truancy model, Kristie L. Seelman found that the biggest factor in diminishing absenteeism in sexual-minority students was having school personnel that they trusted, in regard to their sexual or gender identity (15). A more positive school climate for LGBTQI+ students as well as a higher number of openly supportive educators could relate to reduced absenteeism.

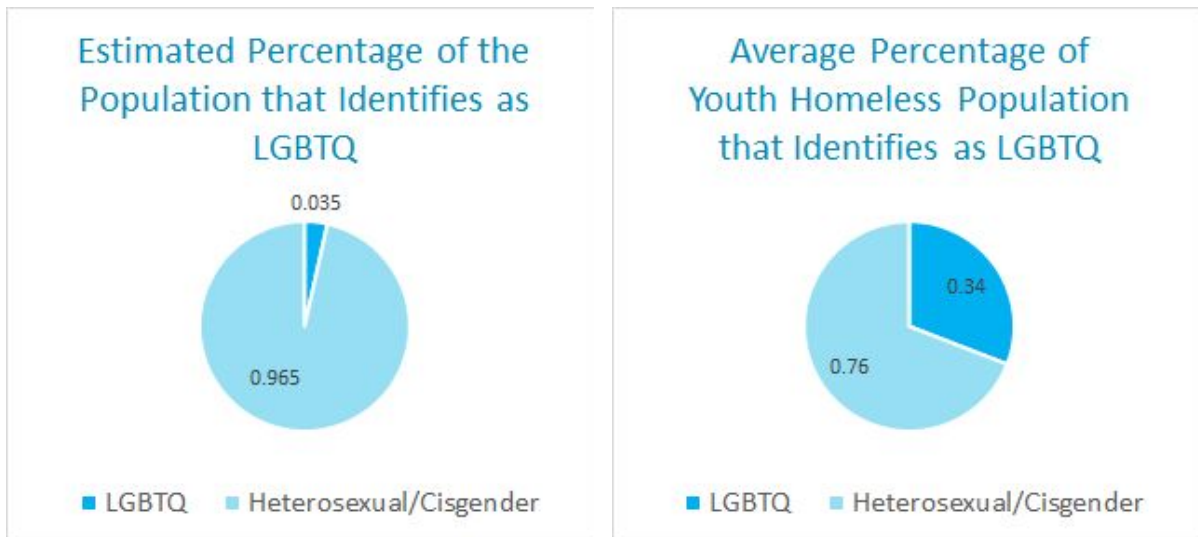
REDUCTION IN DRINKING FOR ALL STUDENTS

In a study, Robert W.S. Coulter et al. examined the drinking behaviors of teenagers in relation to whether their school districts were supportive of LGBTQI+ students or not. They found that sexual minority students drank more often, at school or outside of school, and in larger quantities than heterosexual/cisgender students. The findings also showed that having an affirmative school climate correlated with fewer drinking days for both LGBTQI+ and heterosexual/cisgender students. The positive effects of having an affirmative school climate became even more apparent when they examined the number of days that students drank at school as well as the number of days when students drank heavily, and saw much lower numbers. Additionally, attending a school that is LGBTQI-affirmative was associated with fewer heavy drinking episodes for both and heterosexual/cisgender students as well.

REDUCED HOMELESSNESS IN LGBTQ+ YOUTH

Although openly gay and bisexual individuals make up about 3.5 percent of the U.S. population², and transgender people ~0.5 percent of the U.S. population (Gates 1), findings from a recent show that sexual minorities make up about one-third of homeless youths (Durso 3). Figure 4 below illustrates those numbers.

Figure 4



Source: Durso, Laura E., and Gary J. Gates.

The abovementioned study also tells us that four of the top five reasons why LGBTQI+ youths are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless come from having serious problems at home. These problems include family rejection, abuse at home, and being neglected at home, all due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

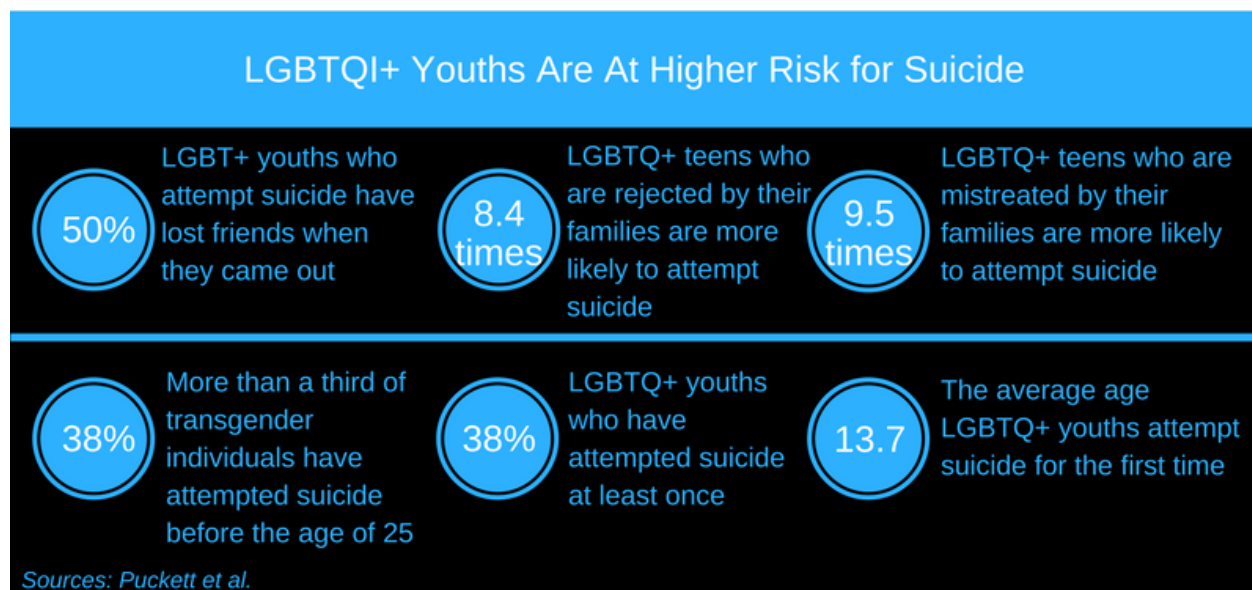
Having school personnel that are supportive of and with whom sexual-minority students feel comfortable with and trust can help prevent them from becoming homeless because they may be more likely to talk about problems that they have at home with an adult who can help them.

² Or more, according to certain studies. 3.5% is a conservative estimate.

LOWERED DEPRESSION AND SUICIDES RATES

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among people aged 10-24, after unintentional injuries (e.g., car crashes). It has been widely documented that bullying is one of the main factors in youth suicide. The CDC reports that LGBTQI+ youths are more than two to three times as likely to attempt suicide as heterosexual youth are. Johnson explains that “the LGBT population is more at risk for mental health issues, not because they are members of a sexual minority group, but as a result of “environmental responses to their sexual orientations” (56). In other words, sexual minorities are more likely to suffer from mental health issues not because they are gay or trans but because of the way they are treated for being so. Figure 5 below illustrates some grim statistics on LGBTQI+ youths and suicide.

Figure 5



Experts have linked this higher incidence of attempted suicide with the high rate of bullying and harassment that sexual minority youths have to deal with often on a daily basis, as well as to a lack of social support (Puckett 698). Additionally, having a friend or family member who has attempted suicide (regardless if they succeeded or not) increases the risk of suicide by 29 times (Puckett 706), and LGBTQI+ youths are more likely to have this friend who has attempted suicide than heterosexual/cisgender youths (Johnson 58).

As sad as those statistics are, a 2014 study shows that schools can help improve the situation. Mark L. Hatzenbuehler found that sexual minority students attending schools that have more protective and affirmative school climates reported fewer suicidal thoughts and attempts than those attending schools with less protective and affirmative school climates (282).

FINAL THOUGHTS

If the statistics discussed in this proposal are applied to *School Name's* student population (~700), they indicate that there approximately twenty-eight LGBTQI+ students attending *School Name*. That makes approximately nineteen students who regularly get verbally harassed and three students who have been or will get physically assaulted for their sexual orientation or gender expression. Another eighty-eight students are likely being harassed for their perceived sexual orientation.

One study showed that over close to 60 percent of heterosexual students were bothered by hearing homophobic language and comments (Peter 207), and another found that male students tend to use homophobic language and slurs as insults whether they are homophobic or not. Those students would likely try to use it less if they knew how damaging it is to everyone.

All of the positive outcomes discussed in this proposal will contribute to a more positive school climate at *School Name* and hopefully will not only counteract the negative experiences that most LGBTQI+ students encounter every day, but will create a long lasting climate of understanding, tolerance, and acceptance.

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