

Support for Students Initiative

Survey of Northeast Florida Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,
Transgender, and Questioning Students

Do Northeast Florida's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and
Questioning students feel safe in their schools?

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Prepared for JASMYN, Inc.

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Survey of Northeast Florida Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Students

HIGHLIGHTS

- 77% of students report being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation in the past year. (Figure 5)
- 65% of students who reported being verbally harassed did not report it to adults at their school. (Figure 7)
- 48% of students reported being bullied on school property during the past year. (Figure 8)
- 73% of students hear anti-gay remarks often or frequently. (Figure 3)
- Nearly one in five students (19%) report that when staff or teachers are present they never intervene in anti-gay remarks. (figure 4)
- 15% lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning students reported they did not know one supportive teacher or staff member at their school. (Figure 8)

This survey was commissioned by the Jacksonville Area Sexual Minority Youth Network (JASMYN). JASMYN is a nonprofit center founded in 1994 for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth ages 13-23.

JASMYN's mission is to support and empower LGBTQ youth by creating safe space, providing youth development services and bringing people and resources together to promote diversity and human rights.

JASMYN offers youth development programs and support services including a drop-in center, case management, student support, HIV prevention and education, diversity trainings, and a health clinic where LGBTQ youth access free and confidential HIV and sexually transmitted disease testing, counseling, education, treatment and linkage with on-site medical staff.

www.jasmyn.org

INTRODUCTION

According to the Florida Department of Education, 27 percent of all public school ninth graders in Jacksonville do not graduate on time (JCCI, 2010). They earn a certificate of completion, take longer to graduate, and some just stop attending; they drop out. Few students wake up and decide to drop out of school. To the contrary, students are extraordinarily persistent, so when they stop attending school it is because they've lost a slow-motion struggle that began years before.

Jacksonville's *Learning to Finish* Collaborative identifies the early warning flags of a dropout as early as sixth grade. In a Jacksonville study of high school graduates that looked back at their middle school and high school performance, specific flags for dropping out appeared. One of those flags is chronic absenteeism. According to *Learning to Finish's* August 2009 report, "Excessive absenteeism – missing school 20% or more of the time-- is a risk factor, though most predictive in combination with other factors. Eleven percent of the 6th graders who did not graduate [from high school later] missed school 36 or more days in the 6th grade" (Education Briefing, 2009).

There are many reasons why students miss school. For many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students, it is because they are not protected from verbal and physical harassment (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz & Bartkiewicz, 2009). They do not feel safe at school, so they stop attending. All students who are chronically absent are more likely to fall behind in their work, make poor grades, which in turn leads to a weak connection to school and the adults there. The reasons a LGBTQ student engages in the slow-motion struggle beginning in middle school are unique to the conditions of their lives and schools.

According to the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) 2009 national survey of LGBT students, 86 percent report verbal harassment because of their sexual orientation; 44 percent were physically harassed. These results are from a survey of self-identified LGBT students. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) confirm these results. LGBT students identified by the 1999 Massachusetts YRBS were more likely to report being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property than their heterosexual peers. They were more likely to skip school because they felt unsafe (Goodenow, Szalacha & Westheimer, 2006).

Community organizations working with Northeast Florida's LGBTQ students know anecdotally that they are harassed, threatened, and injured at school. However, these facts are not immediately apparent to school personnel because many students' sexual identities are hidden.

PURPOSE

Community-wide emphasis on increasing the graduate rate in Jacksonville high schools has focused interest on groups of students who fall off the graduation track. One of the early warning flags of disconnecting from school is chronic absenteeism. Anecdotal knowledge of a particular group of students, those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning, suggests that they do not feel safe at school. As a result, they are at risk of disconnecting from school. However, no local survey of Northeast Florida LGBTQ students has confirmed that they feel safe or unsafe in school.

This is the first local school climate survey reporting on Northeast Florida LGBT students' perceptions of safety and school climate. In addition, it offers responses to students who are most vulnerable to harassment and violence on school property; a population that is also more likely to dropout. The American Psychological Association states that "precise statistics on dropout rates among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students are difficult to find, although some have estimated that almost a third of LGBT students drop out of high school, more than triple the national rate."

Increasing graduation rates requires Northeast Florida schools to improve school climate so that all students stay connected to school, persist, and graduate on time. LGBT students are a bellwether of school climate as they face misunderstanding and hatred from peers as well as some educators. When LGBT students feel safe, then all students feel safe, and more students will remain on the path to graduation.

METHODOLOGY

This survey of 48 Northeast Florida students was commissioned by the Jacksonville Area Sexual Minority Youth Network (JASMYN). It was conducted online from April 8, 2011 through September 18, 2011 through SurveyMonkey. This survey was conducted in order to **determine whether Northeast Florida lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students feel safe in their schools**. Several survey items were taken from national climate surveys of students and LGBT students (GLSEN, 2009; Duval County, 2009).

Northeast Florida students were selected through a purposeful sampling method. This method is useful when a characteristic of respondents is relevant to the research being conducted. LGBTQ students shared the link to the online survey through email over a six-month period in order to gather the largest sample possible.

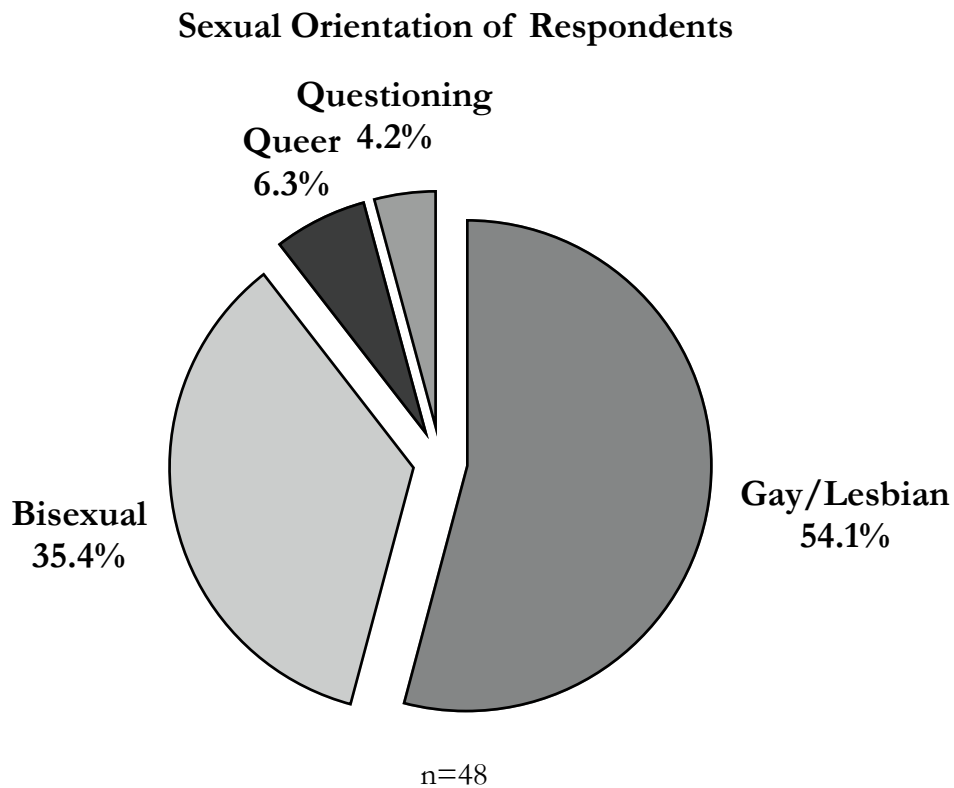
Identification of a representative sample is not possible. Stigma, fear, and confidentiality prevent a random sampling of the entire population of LGBTQ students in Northeast Florida. Therefore, the survey responses cannot be taken as representative of LGBTQ students in Northeast Florida.

RESULTS

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning students attend public and private schools throughout Northeast Florida. The 48 respondents attended 26 schools throughout the First Coast. The majority of survey respondents were between the ages of 13 and 17 years old.

More than half of the survey respondents identified their sexual orientation as gay or lesbian. More than one-third identified as bisexual. Three students identified as queer. Queer signifies sexuality that defies categories such as gay, straight, and bisexual. It is a re-claiming of a derogatory label used against sexual minorities.

Figure 1



A majority of the respondents identified as White.

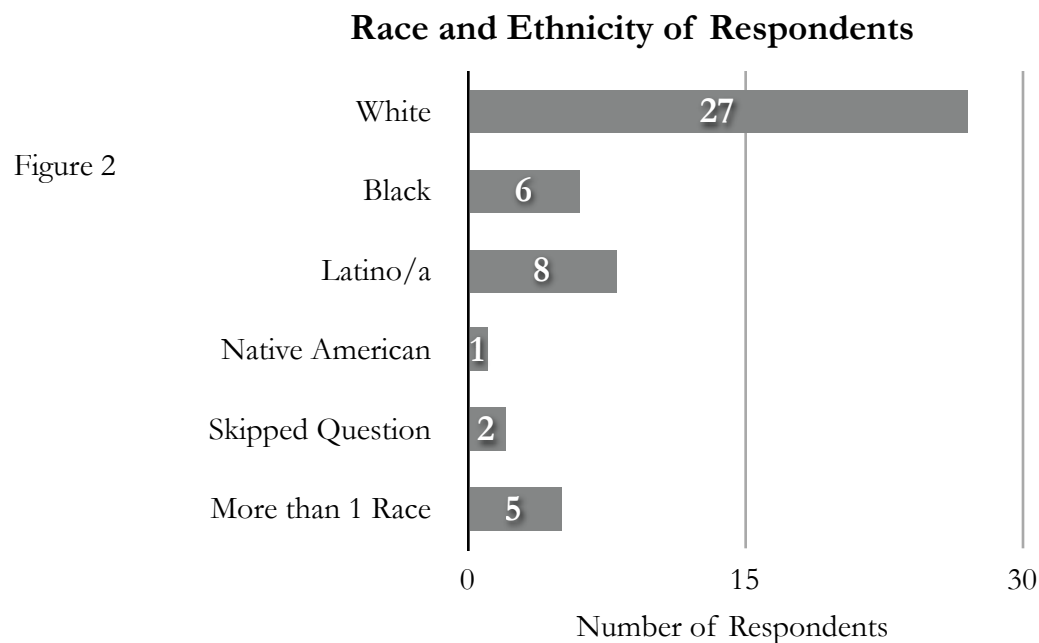


Figure 2

All respondents were enrolled in either a middle or high school in Northeast Florida in 2011. Three respondents attended middle school, and the remaining 45 were in high school.

The respondents were living in 30 different zip codes through Northeast Florida, suggesting they attended rural, urban, and suburban schools.

For many LGBTQ students, finding a safe place to socialize was a priority. Some students found the Jacksonville Sexual Minority Youth Network (JASMYN), a youth drop-in center and services provider. More than two-thirds (68.7% or 33 students) reported they had not attended a JASMYN event or gone there. This suggests that many of the respondents were not familiar with JASMYN at that time.

Twenty-nine students responded that their school had a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) or Diversity Club. Nineteen indicated that their school lacked a similar club. Of the 29 students who had had the opportunity to participate in a GSA or Diversity Club, 23 (79.3%) took part in club activities.

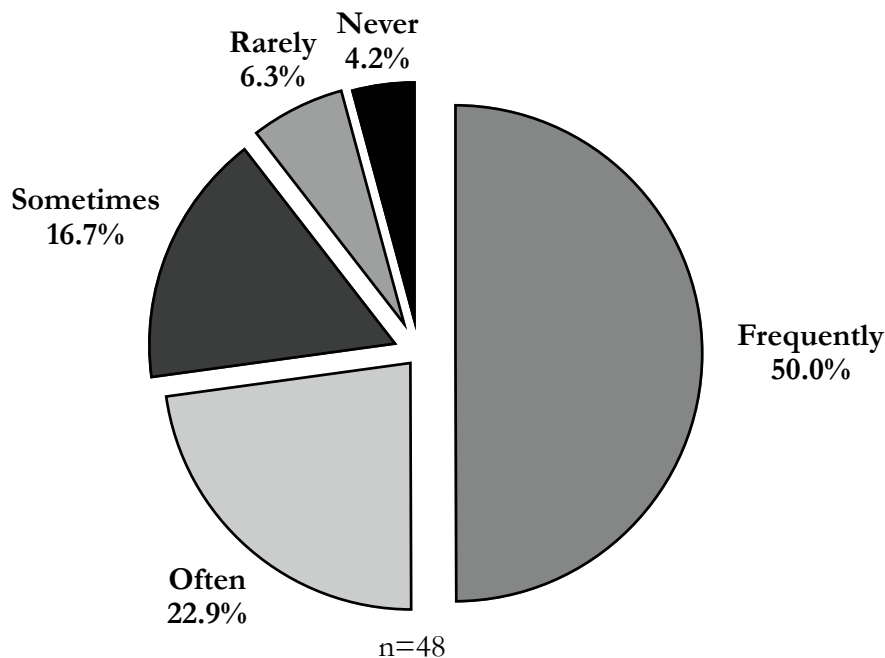
SCHOOL CLIMATE

Students were asked to describe the frequency of anti-gay remarks such as “fag,” “faggot,” “dyke,” and “queer.” Fifty percent of respondents hear anti-gay remarks “frequently,” while 22.9% reported hearing anti-gay remarks “often.” Nearly three-quarters (72.9%) of the respondents hear anti-gay remarks “often” or “frequently.”

Research conducted by Gay Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in 2009 asked the same question of 377 LGBT students in schools throughout Florida. In that survey, 92% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks “frequently,” “often,” and “sometimes.” In Northeast Florida, 89.6% of respondents reported hearing anti-gay remarks “frequently,” “often, and “sometimes.”

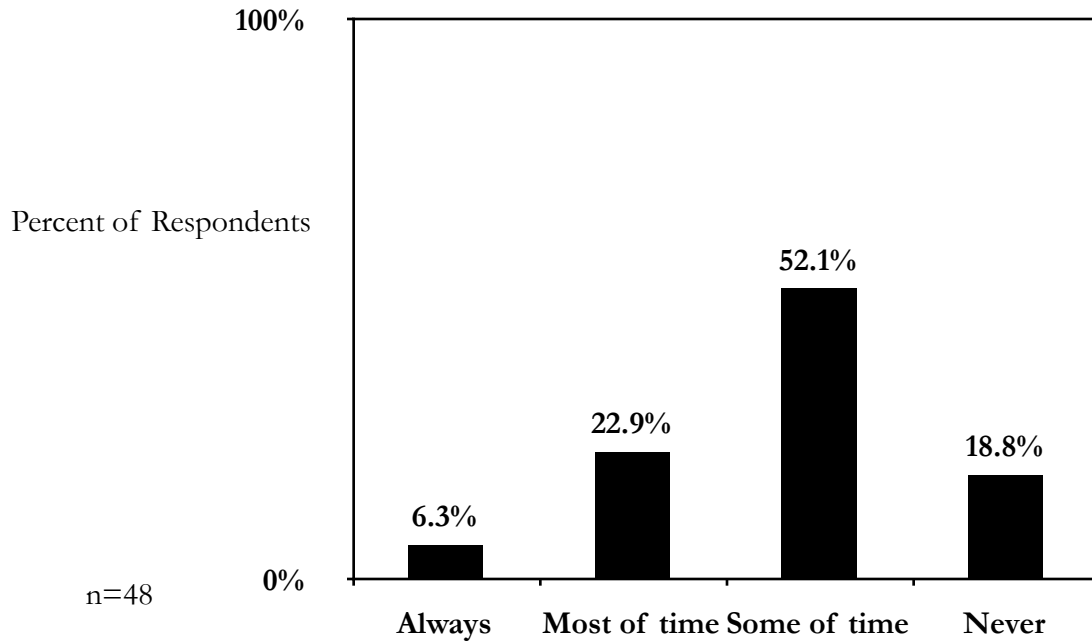
Frequency of Anti-gay Remarks Heard at School

Figure 3



Over 80 percent of LGBTQ students reported that teachers and staff intervened when anti-gay remarks were made. However, 18.8 percent of respondents said that adults never intervened when they heard anti-gay remarks. Nearly one in five respondents perceived adults as not caring about anti-gay remarks or unable to intervene, or both.

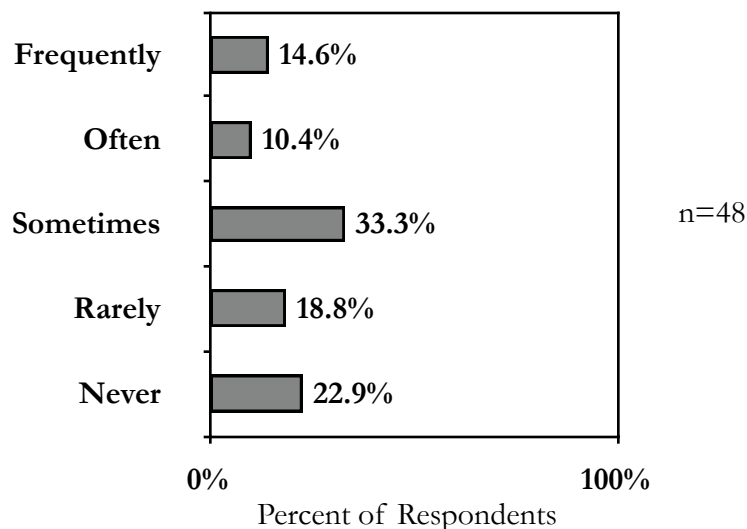
How Often Do Teacher or Staff Intervene?



Anti-gay remarks are heard by LGBTQ students and their heterosexual peers alike. These remarks are spoken and heard without identifying a LGBTQ student. More intimidating is verbal harassment, which is name-calling and threats targeting a LGBTQ individual or individuals. Verbal harassment based on perceived sexual orientation during 2011 was recalled by more than three-quarters of respondents (77.1%). Fifteen percent of respondents, or 7 students, dealt with frequent verbal harassment. The same question was asked of 377 Florida LGBT students in 2009, with 82% reporting verbal harassment based on sexual orientation.

Verbal Harassment in 2011

Figure 5



Students reported two kinds of harassment: verbal and physical. Verbal harassment is name calling and making threats while physical harassment is shoving and pushing. Students also distinguished between harassment based on their sexual orientation and harassment based on their gender identity. Respondents were asked about the frequency of different types of harassment during the past year, so in Figure 6 the total number of responses exceeds the number of respondents.

Figure 6

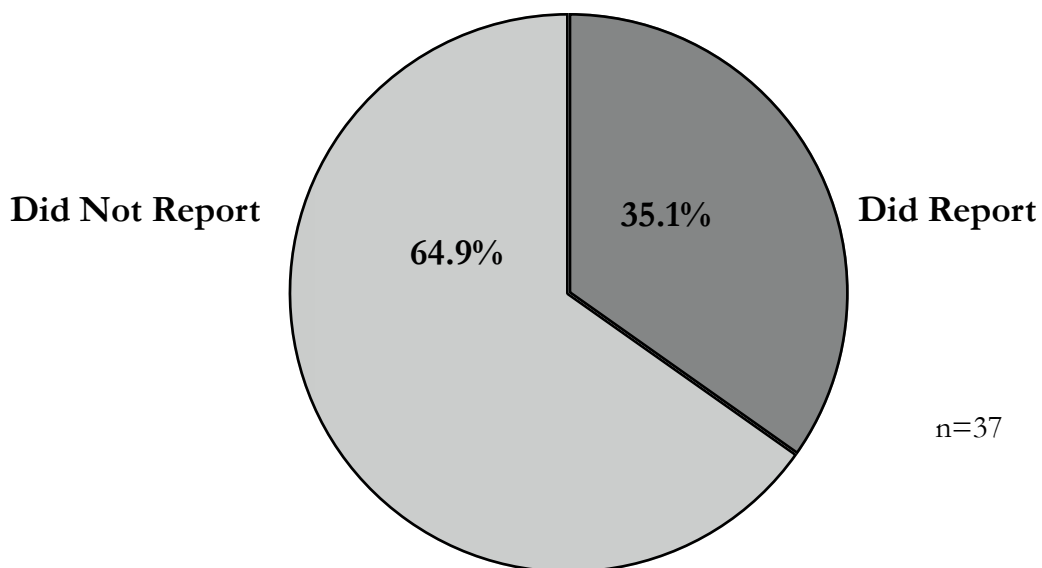
LGBTQ Students and Harassment, 2011

	Number of Responses
Harassment Based on Sexual Orientation	
Verbal harassment	37
Physical harassment	13
Harassment Based on Gender Identity	
Verbal harassment	21
Physical harassment	8
Total responses	79

Of the 37 students who reported verbal harassment, 13 reported it to adults at their school. The remaining 24, or 65 percent, did not report the harassment.

Figure 7

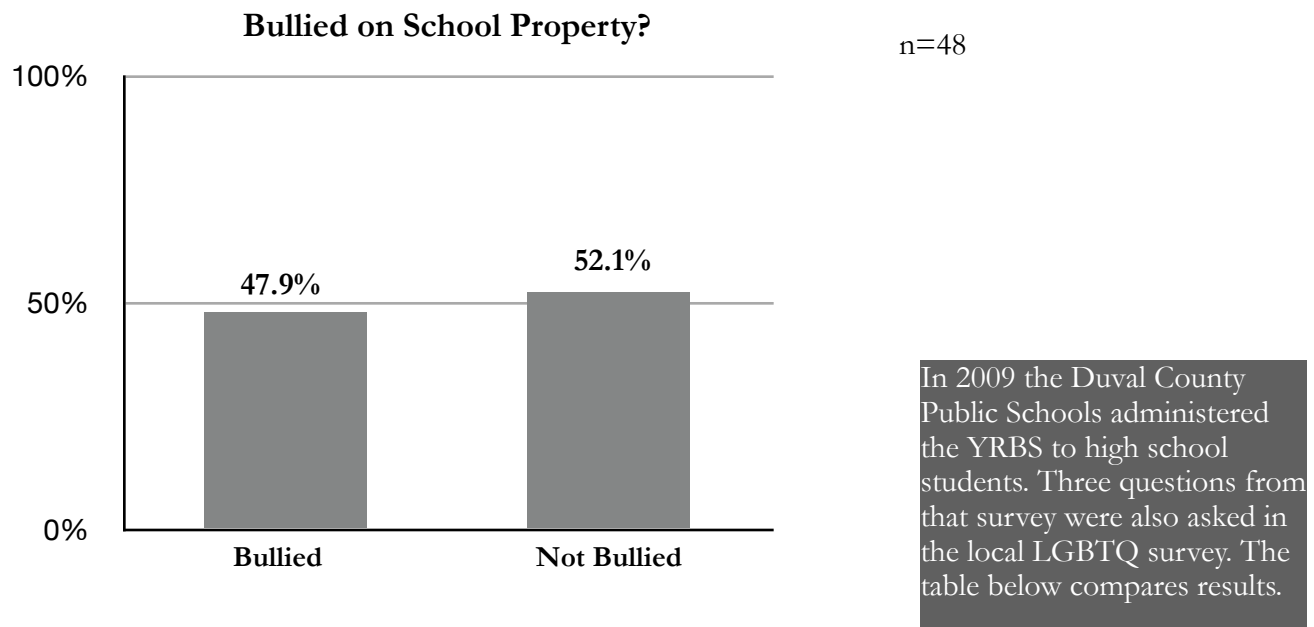
Percent Students Reported Verbal Harassment to Adults at School, 2011



Respondents were also asked what happened as a result of reporting the harassment. There were thirteen responses to the question; eight reported that they felt more in danger or that nothing was done in response to their report.

48% of LGBTQ students reported being bullied during the previous year.

Figure 8



	YRBS	NEFL Survey
Bullied in the past year	16.2%	47.9%
Missed 1 day of school	14.4%	17.1%
Carried a weapon to school	7.8%	12.8%

Bullying has been an issue for many students in public schools. The same question was asked of a much larger, more diverse pool of Duval County Public School high school students in the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). That group of respondents included LGBT students as well, only they did not identify as such. Sixteen percent of those students reported being bullied in the previous year.

IMPACT OF SCHOOL CLIMATE

Within the backdrop of frequent anti-gay remarks (see Figure 3), verbal and physical harassment against LGBTQ students occurs in Northeast Florida schools (See Figure 6). This school climate has an impact on their connection to school.

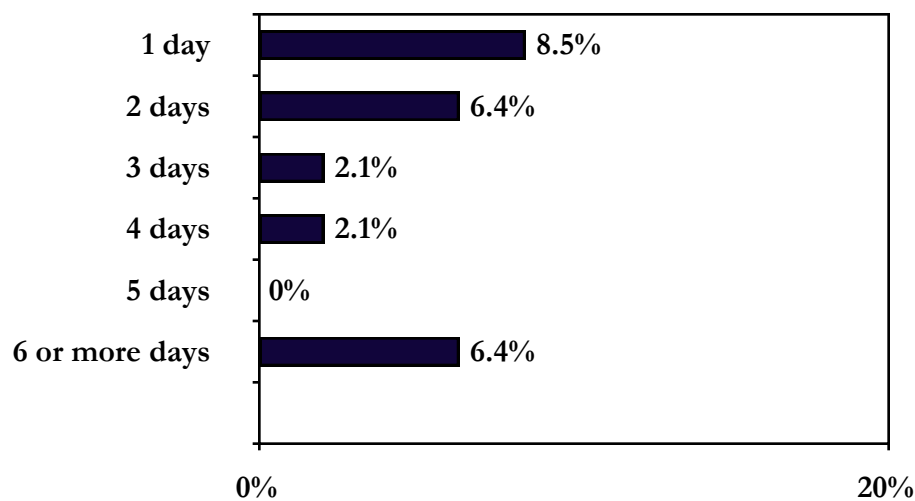
LGBTQ students are at risk for missing school. Eight respondents (17.1%) reported missing at least one day of school during the previous month because they felt unsafe at school or on the way to school. One respondent skipped the question.

The same question was asked on the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). 14% of those high school students reported missing a day.

Twenty-six percent of LGBTQ students in the Northeast Florida survey reported skipping a class in the past month because they felt uncomfortable or unsafe in the class. Seventeen percent of LGBTQ students skipped class on multiple days.

Figure 9

Percent Respondents Who Skipped Class in Previous Month



n=47

Youth workers and educators know anecdotally that students who feel unsafe day in and day out take measures to protect themselves from violence. Six students (12.8%) responded that they carried a weapon to school. The 2009 YRBS also asked high school students whether they carry a weapon on school property. The survey results show that 8% of Duval County Public School high schoolers brought a weapon to school in the previous month. A greater percentage of LGBTQ students carried a weapon to school.

CONCLUSIONS

LGBTQ respondents identified two strategies for making schools safer.

One strategy is to support a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) in a school. A respondent wrote, “I believe we just need to make sure there is always a place for kids to go to feel okay....For a LGBTQ club to be as common as a chess club or Hispanic Pride club.”

Twenty-nine respondents said their school has a GSA that openly supports LGBTQ students. Nineteen respondents said their school does not.

Another strategy is to intervene when harassment occurs. A respondent wrote, “Teachers need to be more aware of the bullying that is going on around them.” Another said, “Teachers need to take harassment seriously and step in to prevent it before it becomes harmful.”

Research shows that supportive school staff enforcing anti-harassment policy is “directly related to greater school connectedness for LGBT students” (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010). For many LGBTQ students in Northeast Florida schools, a supportive adult is difficult to find at school. A supportive adult acknowledges a student’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity and works to keep the student safe and healthy within an unsafe school.

Seven students (14.6%) reported there were no supportive teachers or school staff at their school. The same question was asked in 2009 of LGBT students throughout Florida, and 47% could identify 6 or more supportive staff. In Northeast Florida, 27.1% LGBT students could identify 6 or more supportive staff.

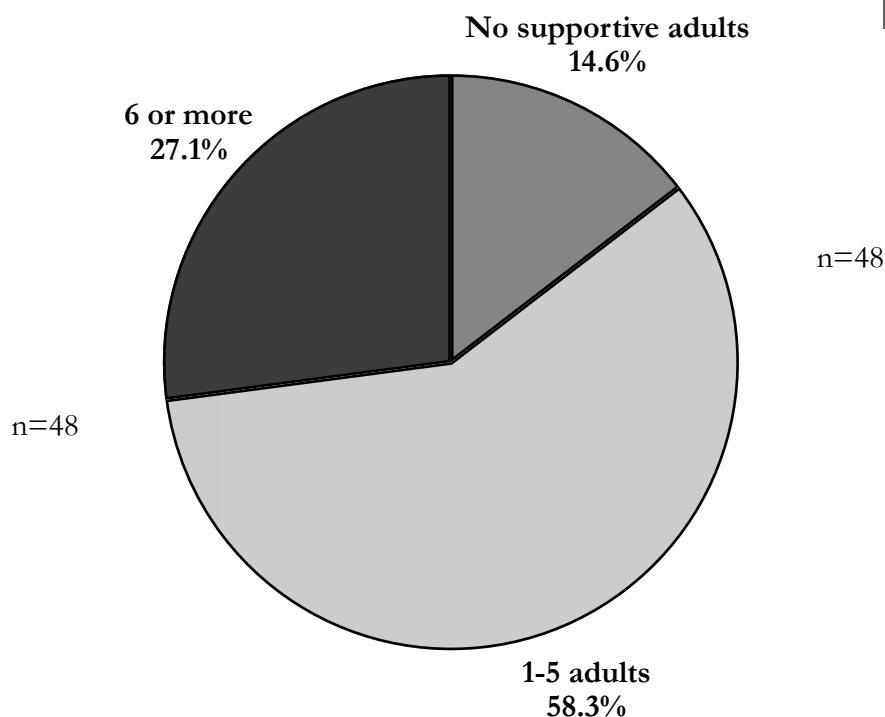
STUDENTS KNOW...

I believe we just need to make sure there is always a place for kids to go to feel okay....For a LGBTQ club to be as common as a chess club or Hispanic Pride club.

Teachers need to take harassment seriously and step in to prevent it before it becomes harmful.

Figure 10

How Many Supportive Teachers or Staff Do You Know Of?



Finally, students are aware of the impact that the school climate has on all students—regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTQ students can be leaders in making schools safe because they know all students are safe when the most vulnerable are safe. One of the respondents wrote:

My school is a place where everyone is different. Everyone can do their own thing and be creative in their own way. Because of this I am proud to go to my school. In all honesty, I feel safer and more comfortable there than anywhere else.

While not all Northeast Florida LGBTQ students feel the same way, the establishment of GSAs and professional development for teaching faculty and administrative staff can change that. Recent research conducted by GLSEN has found that for LGBT students, attendance at GSA meetings is directly related to school connectedness. Using the 2007 School Climate Survey as well as a scale for measuring students’ sense of school membership, GLSEN calculated the strength of associations between students’ connection to school and GSAs.

In 2009 the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) surveyed 377 LGBT students attending school in Florida. Three questions from that survey were also asked in the local LGBTQ survey. The table below compares results.

	GLSEN	NEFL Survey
Heard anti-gay remarks “frequently,” “often,” “sometimes”	92%	90%
Verbally harassed in 2009	82%	77%
Identify 6 or more supportive adults in school	47%	27%

The research found that students who experience greater victimization due to sexual orientation and/or gender identity are more likely to attend a GSA. It also found that respondents attending a school that had a GSA (whether or not they attended meetings) were less likely to experience harassment (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010).

Research supports and reflects the suggestions made by Northeast Florida’s LGBTQ students. Supportive teachers and staff as well as the opportunity to attend GSA meetings increase LGBTQ students’ feelings of security and safety at school.

In conclusion, it is clear that LGBTQ students attending Northeast Florida schools are at risk for harassment and violence. They are less likely to feel safe and secure at school, and so are more likely to give up if they struggle to complete high school. However, there are research-based strategies available to educators and administrators that make schools safer for all students-- regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX

Demographics

AGE:

13-17	40	(83.3%)
18-23	8	(16.6%)

SEXUAL ORIENTATION:

Gay/lesbian	26	(54.2%)
Bisexual	17	(35.4%)
Queer	3	(6.3%)
Questioning/Undecided	2	(4.2%)

GENDER IDENTITY:

Male	18	(37.5%)
Female	24	(50.0%)
Transgender: Male to Female	4	(8.3%)
Transgender: Female to Male	1	(2.0%)
Gender Queer	1	(2.0%)

RACE/ETHNICITY:

African-American or Black	6	(12.8%)
Latino/a or Hispanic	8	(17.0%)
Native American or Native Alaskan	1	(2.1%)
White or Caucasian	27	(57.4%)
More than 1 race/ethnicity	5	(10.6%)

SCHOOL ATTENDING (high schools unless otherwise noted):

Allen D Nease	2
Atlantic Coast	3
Baldwin Middle-Senior	1
Bartram Trail	1
Bishop Kenney	1
Bishop Snyder	1
Darnell-Cookman Middle	2
Douglas Anderson School of the Arts	3
Duncan Fletcher	3
Ed White	5
Englewood	1
First Coast	1
Mandarin	1
Middleburg	1
Oakleaf	3
Orange Park	3
Paxon	2
Ponte Vedra	1
River City Science Academy (Middle)	1
Sandalwood	2
St. Augustine	1
Stanton	4
Terry Parker	1
West Nassau	3
Yulee	2

One respondent indicated two schools.

Summary:

- 3 Clay County Public Schools
- 14 Duval County Public Schools (including charter)
- 2 Nassau County Public Schools
- 2 private schools
- 4 St. Johns County Public Schools.

ZIP CODE:

32009	1
32011	1
32034	2
32043	1
32046	1
32065	1
32068	1
32073	3
32082	1
32084	1
32095	2
32097	1
32205	1
32206	1
32207	1
32210	3
32211	2
32218	3
32220	1
32221	2
32224	2
32225	2
32227	1
32233	3
32244	1
32246	1
32257	2
32258	2
32259	1
32277	1