



School Social Work Association of America Resolution Statement

Promoting the Well-being of LGBTQIA+ Students

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The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) promotes equality for and well-being of all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) students. The SSWAA believes that all students should be afforded equal opportunity to learn and thrive in a safe and supportive school environment. Additionally, the SSWAA believes that students who are struggling with issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity should have access to inclusive and affirming school social work services and programs, as well as school social workers adequately trained in LGBTQIA+ issues.

LGBTQIA+ Students

Although many acronyms may be used to refer to sexual and gender minority young people, we choose to use LGBTQIA+ as it represents inclusivity of all marginalized sexual and gender identities. LGBTQIA+ students may include youth who: are exclusively attracted to someone of the same gender; are attracted to multiple genders, gender identities, or gender expressions; identify as a gender different from their sex assigned at birth; were born with genitalia or reproductive systems not consistent with a binary male or female identity; and/or are not interested in romantic and/or sexual relationships. Our position is to support and validate the experiences of all youth with marginalized sexual and gender identities.

Issues Facing LGBTQIA+ Youth

It is essential that schools and school social workers promote equality and well-being for LGBTQIA+ youth. LGBTQIA+ youth are growing up with marginalized and stigmatized sexual and gender identities; this marginalization can result in adverse health and well-being outcomes (Collier, van Beusekom, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013). LGBTQIA+ youth experience more victimization in their schools (Birkett, Russell, & Corliss, 2014), homes, and communities (Whitbeck et al., 2004) than heterosexual and cisgender youth, which may result in increased rates of depression (Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013), suicidal ideation (Robinson & Espelage, 2011), substance use (Goldbach, Tanner-Smith, Bagwell, & Dunlap, 2014), and disordered eating (Calzo, Austin, & Micali, 2018). LGBTQIA+ youth also tend to experience their schools less positively and have increased truancy when compared with heterosexual and cisgender youth (Birkett et al., 2009). LGBTQIA+ youth are also very resilient. Research indicates that some protective factors for LGBTQIA+ youth include social support and community connections, actively resisting oppressive systems, engaging in self-care, and finding ways to affirm their sexual or gender identity (DiFulvia, 2011; Scourfield et al, 2008; Toro-Alfonso et al., 2006).

Role of the School Social Worker in Promoting Well-Being for LGBTQIA+ Students

It is essential that school social workers engage in activities to promote equity and well-being for LGBTQIA+ students, particularly given their risks and potential for resilience. First, it is essential for school social workers to engage in critical self-reflection to identify and address any attitudes or biases they have regarding providing direct service with or advocacy for LGBTQIA+ students. This is essential to

providing ethical and competent social work services. The following recommendations are based in evidence and divided into micro, mezzo, and macro-level interventions that should be provided within multi-tiered systems of support.

Micro. At the micro level, school social workers should provide LGBTQIA+ affirming counseling to students, actively respond to reports of bullying and discrimination, and intentionally promote youth empowerment and leadership. Research indicates that when LGBTQIA+ youth have supportive individuals in school, including teachers, administrators, and counselors, they report more positive mental health (Goodenow et al., 2006) and academic outcomes (Russell et al., 2001). It is critically important that school social workers attain the training and skills necessary to affirm LGBTQIA+ youth's identities and work effectively with them. This includes being actively opposed to efforts to promote conversion therapy as it is a harmful practice which numerous health and mental health organizations have opposed (see NASW, 2015). Additionally, when LGBTQIA+ students witness school staff intervene in incidents of bullying or harassment, they report less school-based discrimination and truancy (Kosciw et al., 2010). School social workers can set an example for other school staff by addressing harassment and bullying based on gender identity or sexual orientation immediately in a manner that affirms the LGBTQIA+ youth's identity. Finally, many LGBTQIA+ students are instrumental in creating spaces for themselves and their peers to find support and affirmation in the school environment. LGBTQIA+ students value opportunities to provide input on decisions that impact them (Craig, Tucker, & Wagner, 2008). Such involvement can have a positive impact on an LGBTQIA+ student's sense of connection to and ownership of their school (Black, Fedewa, & Gonzalez, 2012; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009), which can positively impact academic and social-emotional outcomes. School social workers can nurture LGBTQIA+ student leadership and empowerment in settings that are focused solely on LGBTQIA+ issues and concerns, as well as in broader student leadership opportunities. School social workers can also serve as an important voice with school administration; balancing the importance of keeping students safe with supporting student choice and empowerment to be visible and outspoken as an LGBTQIA+ person. School social workers should always be guided, first, by the wishes of the individual student with regard to leadership and visibility as an LGBTQIA+ person.

Mezzo. At the mezzo level, school social workers can promote a more positive school climate for LGBTQIA+ students, including the development and sustainability of gender and sexuality alliances (also known as gay-straight alliances; GSAs), and make referrals to and collaborate with community organizations. A supportive climate may include having a point-person for LGBTQIA+ students, increasing the visibility of LGBTQIA+ students, implementing GSAs, instituting LGBTQIA+ inclusion in curriculum and professional development for educators, and holding school-wide discussions of bullying-based on real or perceived LGBTQIA+ status (Gower et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2013). When LGBTQIA+ students feel their school climate is safe and supportive, all students fare better (Birkett, Espelage, Koenig, 2009; Gower et al., 2017). GSAs are an important component of climate. GSAs have served as a primary mechanism for student-led support and advocacy that promotes a welcoming and affirming school environment for LGBTQIA+ students and their allies. Protected by the federal Equal Access Act (The Equal Access Act. 20 U.S.C.S. 4071-4074, 1984), GSAs have a positive impact on LGBTQIA+ students' perceptions of their schools whether or not they are directly involved in the GSA activities (Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). Evidence also suggests that attending a high school with a GSA has long-term benefits to the well-being of LGBTQIA+ students (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011). GSAs have traditionally had less participation from students of color (McCready, 2004; 2010), suggesting that students at intersections of marginalized identities may have unique needs and concerns to which school social workers should be attuned. School social workers can support the development of GSAs by sharing resources and toolkit materials with students, assisting students with identifying a school staff member to serve as an advisor, and educating school staff and administration about the value of having

a GSA on campus. School social workers should familiarize themselves with the rights and protections that exist under the law for LGBTQIA+ students who want to develop a student organization, and share the information with students and staff. Another way to promote a positive school climate and provide access to supportive individuals for LGBTQIA+ youth is to promote the hiring of LGBTQIA+ staff and faculty. Some research indicates that teachers are likely to serve as informal mentors to LGBTQIA+ students and this relationship has an association with educational resilience (Gastric & Johnson, 2009). Finally, it is important for school social workers to make referrals to and have ongoing collaborations with LGBTQIA+ supportive community organizations, including LGBTQIA+ youth programs, open and affirming churches, and mental health professionals trained in LGBTQIA+ issues.

Macro. At the macro level, school social workers can advocate for LGBTQIA+-inclusive curriculum, promote inclusive school policies, and provide staff/teacher training on LGBTQIA+ issues. While LGBTQIA+ individuals have contributed to history and culture, they are rarely, if ever, included in a school's curriculum. However, their inclusion can help support a safer school environment for all students (Burdge, Sinclair, Laub, Russell, 2012). School social workers can utilize the GSA Network recommendations for creating an LGBTQIA+-inclusive curriculum. School social workers should also advocate for their school and/or school district to have non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies that are inclusive of LGBTQIA+ students (Kopels & Pacey, 2012). These policies should clearly lay out that bullying or discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is prohibited. It is important for school social workers to also reflect on existing school policies and practices that may limit the capacity for LGBTQIA+ students to thrive in their schools, including ways that these policies/practices could be adapted or enhanced to better reflect inclusion of sexual and gender minorities. Finally, school social workers can encourage or facilitate LGBTQIA+-inclusive training for staff, teachers, and administrators to help increase sensitivity and inclusivity of LGBTQIA+ students. Local non-profits serving LGBTQIA+ individuals often provide inclusivity trainings at little to no cost. If none of these resources are available in your community, national resources will provide materials to support your own facilitation of inclusivity trainings (see recommended resources).

Recommended Resources

LGBTQIA+ Youth Health and Well-Being Resources

- Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) online resource guide (<https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm>)
- My Kid is Gay- Helping Families Understand Their LGBTQIA+ Kids (<http://mykidisgay.com/>)
- The Trevor Project (<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/#sm.00013h937m176aeuhtqf60ksg8cjo>)
- LGBT National Help Center (<http://www.glbtnationalhelpcenter.org/>)
- Everyone is Gay State-by-State Resource Guide (<http://everyoneisgay.com/national-resources-by-state/>)

LGBTQIA+-Inclusive School Climate

- Teaching Tolerance's Guide ([\">https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/creating-an-lgbtinclusive-school-climate](https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/creating-an-lgbtinclusive-school-climate))\
- GLSEN's Back to School Guide (https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/back_to_school_guide_0.pdf)
- Accredited School's online guide (<https://www.accreditedschoolsonline.org/education-teaching-degree/lgbtq-youth/>)
- StopBullying.gov (<https://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/lgbt/>)

LGBTQIA+-Inclusive Curriculum

- The Gay-Straight Alliance Network (<https://gsanetwork.org/get-involved/change-your-school/campaigns/lgbtq-inclusive-curriculum>)
- Lambda Legal (<https://www.lambdalegal.org/know-your-rights/article/youth-curricula-lgbtq-inclusive>)
- California’s Department of Education’s fact sheet on the FAIR act (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/senatebill48faq.asp>)

LGBTQIA+ Inclusivity Training

- Los Angeles’ LGBT Resource Center online training (<https://lalgbtcenter.org/rise/lgbtq-training-coaching/lgbtq-training-topics>).
- Northwestern’s Fienberg School of Medicine online training program (<https://www.feinberg.northwestern.edu/diversity/programs-groups/lgbt-safe-space-training.html>)

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