# "Don't Leave Us Out:" LGBTQ+ Students on Resources and Supports for Staff and Students

## Recommendations for Schools from Young People in Catawba, Cumberland, Mecklenburg, and Wake Counties

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## Introduction

SHIFT NC conducted five focus groups with racially and ethnically diverse LGBTQ+ young people throughout North Carolina in order to learn more about LGBTQ+ students' school experiences and recommendations. We asked the young people who participated in these focus groups about the experiences of LGBTQ+ students at their schools, such as experiences with peers, educators, and administrators. We also asked about their experiences receiving sexual health education and about where LGBTQ+ students access information about sexual health, such as information about condoms and STI testing.

*"I would like training for teachers and a class for students to learn about LGBTQ issues, maybe even an LGBTQ history course."*

*Skylar, Cumberland County*

This paper is part of a series of papers that share what we learned from students' firsthand experiences. We hope that NC school staff and community organizations can use these young people's recommendations to better support students' health, safety, and success. We also hope that LGBTQ+ young people can use these white papers to support their ongoing leadership in our state.

## Methods

During Spring 2019 and Summer 2020, SHIFT NC conducted five focus groups with LGBTQ+ youth ages 14-19 who attended school in NC (n=30). Groups in 2019 were held in person. Groups in 2020 were held virtually via Zoom. Participants were selected via purposive convenience sampling with outreach by four LGBTQ+ community organizations from across the state. Recruitment in 2020 focused on reaching LGBTQ+ students who were Youth of Color. We obtained informed consent and guardian consent for youth under age 18 before participation. Participants received a gift card incentive for their participation. Focus groups were audio recorded and the data were transcribed. Participants had the option to write, post, or type anonymous responses, which were also recorded and used in analyses. Demographic data was collected by self-report. Open coding was used following a content analysis approach to generate salient themes that aligned with the key aims of the study. All names used are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of participants.

## Demographics

A total of 30 youth ages 14-19 years old participated (mean age: 16.7). Half of the youth (15) participated in 2019, and half (15) in 2020. Participants in 2020 were mostly youth of color. Among participants in both years, more than half identified as White (57%); 23% as Black; and 17% as Asian, South Asian, or Pacific Islander. A smaller percentage identified as Latinx or Hispanic (10%), multiracial (10%) and Native American, American Indian or Alaska Native (7%). Participants attended school in the following counties: Alexander, Burke, Catawba, Cumberland, Mecklenburg, Wake, and Washington. At the time of participation, most participants were in high school grades 8-12 (73%). About two thirds attended public school and 20% attended home school after previously attending public school. Among 2020 participants, nearly half (47%) reported having a mental health condition and one third reported having a learning disability.

Participants reported diverse gender identities. Forty-three percent self-identified as transgender, and 43% reported a non-binary gender. Participants also reported diverse sexual orientations. Thirty percent identified as bisexual, and 17% identified as asexual or on the asexual spectrum.

| Race/Ethnicity* | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| African American or Black | 7 | 23 |
| Asian, South Asian, or Pacific Islander | 5 | 17 |
| Latinx or Hispanic | 3 | 10 |
| Multiracial | 3 | 10 |
| Native American, American Indian or Alaska Native | 2 | 7 |
| White | 17 | 57 |

*Participants were given the option to identify with all race categories that applied. For those who chose more than one category, they were counted for each category they indicated. The percent total is more than 100%.

| County Where Attended or Attending School | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Alexander | 1 | 3 |
| Burke | 3 | 10 |
| Catawba | 5 | 17 |
| Cumberland | 8 | 27 |
| Mecklenburg | 5 | 17 |
| Wake | 7 | 23 |
| Washington | 1 | 3 |

| Gender Identity | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Boy/Man/Male | 9 | 30 |
| Girl/Woman/Female | 8 | 27 |
| Non-binary Genders* | 13 | 43 |
| Questioning | 1 | 3 |

*Participants were given the option to write in their gender identity. This category includes agender, femme non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, gender flux tran-girl, queer, and transmasculine.

| Sexual Orientation | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Asexual and Asexual Spectrum | 5 | 17 |
| Bisexual | 9 | 30 |
| Gay or Homosexual | 3 | 10 |
| Lesbian | 4 | 13 |
| Queer | 3 | 10 |
| Questioning | 2 | 7 |
| Pansexual | 3 | 10 |
| No Answer | 1 | 3 |

| Transgender (Self-Identified) | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 13 | 43 |
| No | 13 | 43 |
| Unsure | 4 | 13 |

## Teachers and staff need training to help foster safer and more supportive school environments for LGTBQ+ students.

> *"Teachers should be trained [by] LGBT students and understand things that surround them (bullying, pronouns, etc.)"*
>
> *Leigh, Wake County*

When asked what resources and trainings teachers and school staff need to better support LGBTQ+ students, focus group participants provided several suggestions on content, including:

- LGBTQ+ history and common experiences
- Gender pronouns and the importance of respecting preferred or chosen names
- Addressing personal biases
- Enforcement of anti-bullying and anti-discrimation policies
- How to best intervene when LGBTQ+ students are experiencing harassment or violence
- How to demonstrate allyship
- Crisis and mental health intervention for LGTBQ+ students

Most focus group participants agreed these trainings should be mandatory and offered school-wide to teachers, school administrators, other school support staff, and even student bodies.

Participants hope that these training opportunities help teachers better understand the unique experiences and concerns of LGBTQ+ students, which in turn could help them empathize and provide more support. This impact is described by Besty, a student from Cumberland County:

> "[Teachers should receive education on things] like the bullying, sexuality, all of it because I think a lot of the time, teachers or even some of these adults, they've never been in this situation where maybe they've been bullied by their sexuality or because of their partner or anything like that. So, it would be a good training for them or an educational class for them to be like, 'Okay, this is what could happen even though you've never been in this situation. This is what happened. And this is why.'"

## Teachers need to learn ways to demonstrate visible allyship.

Participants across multiple focus groups spoke about wanting their teachers to show more visible acts of support, especially in front of other students.

Students do not want "silent allies," but rather school staff who will share that they are an available resource out loud, and not in just one-on-one encounters with LGBTQ+ students.

> *"I want it to be a little bit better than to just, 'I see you, I support you.'*
> *I'd rather they may make it obvious to me and other kids."*
>
> *River, Cumberland County*

Examples of visible acts of support by school staff include:

- Verbally stating that they are avaiable for LGBTQ+ students to talk to
- Reprimanding other students and teachers out loud when they make negative comments about LGTBQ+ students
- Advertising that their classroom or office is a safe place for LGBTQ+ students (e.g., display safe zone posters, offer LGBTQ+ books and resources in classroom)

These visible acts of support can have a meaningful impact. Slider, a student from Cumberland County, further described the significance of having teachers stand up for them in front of the class, especailly for students who feel alone at school:

> "It should be said out loud, in front of the whole class. Let the whole class know that this is a real issue, that actual people have to face. And that it's not going to be taken easily. So it should just be said out right in front of everyone just in case people who think they're alone and they don't get to hear it, they get to hear it too."

## Teachers need training to address their personal biases.

Participants across all five groups shared their experiences of teachers refusing to respect LGBTQ+ students, and in some cases refusing to intervene or report harrassment, because of their personal beliefs. Several participants discussed the need for all teachers to able to separate their personal beliefs from their professional responsibilities:

> "At least in the classroom, there shouldn't be bias towards, 'Well I can't do my job because that's my religion.'…I think it should be completely outruled because teachers are saying they're neutral [but] they're still obviously having problems so something's not really working out." Kayla, Mecklenburg County

Even when teachers claim to "mean well," they may be inflicting harm on some LGTBQ+ students, an experience described by Harley, a student in Catawba County:

> "Like I feel as if, since they can't empathize, they can't see what they're doing, and see that it's not the right way to go about things. I feel as if a lot of the teachers that do these things genuinely feel that because of their…religion or their belief system, that telling us these

things is helping. You know, telling us, you know, if you don't change the way you think, you're gonna go to hell, is genuinely helping us, and it's helping the way that we feel. And even though, they can't really see that it doesn't help."

Teachers may need formal training opportunities to help them overcome their biases, which is necessary because "being at school is where [LGBTQ+ students] are most of the time and teachers are the adults that they see the most."  (Betsy, Cumberland County)

> *"Making sure that teachers can step back from their beliefs…That's what they're there to do, is to teach, not to put their beliefs or whatever in front. So maybe having a class to teach on that."*
>
> *Harley, Catawba County*

## To provide accurate information, LGTBQ+ students must help create and deliver these trainings for teachers and staff.

Participants across four focus groups suggested that LGTBQ+ students be involved in the creation and delivery of trainings for teachers and staff so that the information accurately describes the unique experiences of LGTBQ+ students.

> *"It has to be completely from a perspective of the youth or from someone who has accurate health information, accurate cultural information."*
>
> *Mara, Cumberland County*

In these trainings, LGTBQ+ students can share their personal stories and thus are best-positioned to offer specific suggestions on how schools may better support them.

> *"They should hear their stories…hear their sides of view instead of just being fed this information…I think students should actually be part of the ones to give that talk."*
>
> *Robbie, Mecklenburg County*

## Substitute teachers need clear protocols and trainings too.

Trainings and resources for supporting LGTBQ+ students need to be provided to substitute teachers as well. Participants across focus groups shared stories of harmful experiences with substitutes who were not aware of their preferred pronouns and names, or refused to respect them.

> *"Whenever I was in public school was that like with substitutes, names and pronouns and certain needs are forgotten and lost in translation."*
>
> *Kendall, Catawba County*

Another student in Catawba County, Peyton, suggested there be clear protocols provided to substitute teachers:

> "There should be…a book or sticky notes or something somewhere that just says like certain information about certain students, like preferred names, cause it's not on the roll that subs are given by the offices whenever they come into substitute."

## LGTBQ+ students need access to trained counselors, trusted teachers, and safe spaces in-school and virtually.

> *"[Students need to be] able to chat with counselors and school psychologists while not in school. Not all students have access to a therapist especially because of COVID."*
>
> *Syd, Wake County*

Participants across all focus groups overwhelmingly suggested that LGBTQ+ students should have more access to counselors and resources targeted for them, especially in the form of virtual support.

Suggested resources for LGBTQ+ students include:

- In-person and online school support counselors who identify as LGBTQ+
- Student services staff who specialize in LGBTQ+ issues
- Anonymous helplines for students to contact after school hours
- Online support groups for LGTBQ+ students
- Information on local LGBTQ+ organizations for students
- Safe spaces to talk to teachers or counselors such as in a classroom or the library

Betsy from Cumberland County described the ideal safe space for LGTBQ students as comfortable, inviting, and with direct access to trusted teachers:

"We do have this teacher that her room has like been converted into an entirely safe place and she's like the main teacher that everybody goes to…she has posters up on the wall and everything and in a corner of her room is kind of like a lounge area so you can sit there and stuff like that. So it's just somewhere, you could be like comfortable and then her desk was there too so you can talk to her."

## LGBTQ+ students want opportunities to connect with other students.

Several participants noted the importance of having safe places, like GSAs/QSAs and other clubs, for LGBTQ+ students to feel a sense of belonging, connect with other students, and "vent or talk about their problems." (Cameron, Cumberland County)

> *"I would like to see a group created by the county or even the school where students can interact with each other."*
>
> *Parker, Cumberland County*

Though there were mixed feelings across the focus groups about the quality of GSAs, there was significant support for ensuring each school has a well-functioning GSA/QSA led by students committed to the mission. A few participants noted that GSAs/QSAs need to have the support of school administrators to be effective, an experience described by Sam, a student in Mecklenburg County:

> "When I was in high school, I was the president of my GSA and we did activism, but when we tried to do our activism, the principal shut it down, and we weren't allowed to do it."

## Acknowledgements

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