"Don't Leave Us Out:" LGBTQ+ Students on School Policies in North Carolina

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.

"If certain policy changes could be made, it could do a lot to ensure the safety or at least improve the mental health and social situations of a lot of LGBTQ students."

Marimba, Wake 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

Schools need gender neutral bathrooms and locker rooms.

> *"I can't really use the bathroom at school, I have to hold it… really the only times I have the chance to use the bathroom is like in the mornings or in the afternoons, and even then I don't go because people look at me weird..."*
>
> *Kendall, Catawba County*

Bathrooms are places where harrassment occurs for many LGBTQ+ students. Several focus group participants spoke about their uncomfortable, and even violent, experiences when using the bathroom at school, and how they often feel unsafe:

> "I wasn't allowed to use the bathroom I wanted. They forced me to use the teachers' restroom which I guess was fine, but then all students started using it. Then what's the point of me using that? It's no different … There's no protection for me whatsoever."

For schools where some accomodations were made, students often had to use the teachers' bathroom, which was was usually located out of the way of their classes, and singled them out to other students as explained by Henry in Wake County:

> "I have to walk across campus to a private restroom. It's in the office… and separate and I have to use like the staff bathroom. So when I go in the office, I have to get a pass from the teacher. And it's kind of a big hassle to have to be like, 'Yeah, I have to go to the bathroom and be gone for 10 minutes because I have to walk across campus.'"

LGBTQ+ students also experience harrassment in locker rooms, especially when "dressing out" for physical education (P.E.) classes. This experience and its impact is described by Tuesday, a student in Wake County:

> "I don't take physical like education anymore. But when I did, I got a significantly lower grade than my classmates, because I wouldn't like change out because, like, people would threaten me in the locker room … Particularly like with the boys bathroom, people have threatened to sexually assault me … I missed a lot of school and I know some of my peers who missed a lot of school because of like bullying…"

Focus group participants suggested these policy changes around bathrooms and locker rooms:

- Gender neutral bathrooms
- Adding stalls in locker rooms for changing
- Having the option to not dress out for P.E.

Schools need to update their anti-discrimination and anti-harassment/bullying policies to explicitly include protections for LGBTQ+ students.

"I know there's policies that say they don't condone discrimination against like sexual orientation, race, gender, etc. But it kind of doesn't feel like it's carried out at all, in any ways.

Slider, Cumberland County

Focus group participants overwhlemingly reported that their schools either do not have written anti-discrimination or anti-harrassment policies that protect LGBTQ+ students explicity, or that teachers and staff at their schools do not enforce these policies for cases of discrimination, harrassment, or bullying against LGBTQ+ students.

Many participants spoke about instances where teachers disregarded or did not intervene when LGBTQ+ students were bullied. As a result, most bullying and harrassment goes unreported, as described by Renji from Cumberland County:

"A lot of people don't report because a lot of times, nothing gets done because staff and administrators don't really care about it."

Focus group participants advocate for proper punishment in instances of verbal and physical harrassment against LGBTQ+ students. Ojay from Cumberland County explained how he envisions his school's anti-bullying policies extending to include harrassment of LGTBQ+ students:

"So, in our school… if you're caught bullying a freshman, you get out of school suspension … We're not asking for anything special, but if that somebody is caught bullying somebody in the LGBT community, why shun it away? Why not give them out of school suspension or ISS, just as if it was any regular offense?"

Participants made several suggestions for improving written anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies and their enforcement, including:

- Add sexual orientation and gender identity to any anti-discrimination, anti-bullying, or anti-harrassment policies
- Add specific langauge about punishments for harrassment and assault against LGBTQ+ students
- Amend "zero-tolerance" policies to protect LGTBQ+ students who defend themselves against harrassment or assault
- Create and enforce policies to protect LGBTQ+ students against online and social media harrassment

- Train teachers and school staff on policies and appropriate ways to intervene in instances of harrassment by students or other teachers
- Invite LGTBQ+ students and staff to provide feedback on exisiting policies

LGBTQ+ students want equal enforcement of PDA policies for all types of relationships.

"Seeing same sex couples holding hands in the hallway would be a much bigger deal than seeing a straight couple kissing in the hallway. And there would be completely different reactions."

Raven, Catawba County

Many focus group participants felt unfairly treated by their school administrators and teachers when showing public displays of affection with their same-sex friends or partners. Several participants detailed experiences when they were reprimanded for holding hands or hugging their friends, whereas heterosexual couples were able to freely showcase their affections, sometimes even "making out in the hallway" without being punished.

"And it's getting to the point where it's – like I can't even hug a friend and feel, you know, without glares or stares from teachers, but kids can make out like dogs in the hallways and no, nothing gets said to them other than, 'Hey, go to class,' and I get yelled at for hugging. It doesn't seem fair or right."

LGBTQ+ students do not want to feel targeted; if there is a policy against student PDA, it should be enforced in the same way for all types of relationships. Renji in Cumberland County describes this discrepancy:

"When gay couples held hands that was an issue. But like when straight couples did it, they didn't really say anything, even though the whole thing like across the board was that you're not supposed to engage in physical contact."

Schools need policies to indicate students' chosen names and pronouns.

For some LGBTQ+ students, taking attendance can be a major cause of distress. Teachers often do not realize that they may be outing students by calling attendance. Syd from Wake County describes this risk:

"In new classes and stuff, my trans friends were always really worried about that first attendance call, because like, even if they're going by their chosen names, and that's what

everyone knows them as, you're gonna get outed when the teacher reads through that attendance list for the first time and read their dead name out loud to everyone."

LGTBQ+ students want the option to change their names and indicate their pronouns in their school's administrative systems. That way, all teachers and substitutes would know their preferences.

"Within systems…give your students an option to be listed as a chosen name, whether that's just in like their school email or on attendance sheets, or, and like being able to change it."

Marimba, Wake County

Several focus group participants, such as Peyton in Catawba County, described another easy solution for teachers to learn students' preferred names without singling out trans students:

"When you first have like a class come into your, like the first day of class, maybe have everyone go around say their name and pronoun. You know, everyone do that. And that makes everybody so much more comfortable. You know if everybody has to say that, that doesn't single out the trans person in the room."

These policies should extend to the virtual setting. Focus group participants want the ability to change their display names to their preferred names, as well as indicate their pronouns, in the Zoom virtual enviornment.

LGTBQ+ students want LGBTQ+ topics incorporated into their school's curriculum.

"Have more lessons educating students on LGBT lives, history, and past/present day issues we face."

Skylar, Cumberland County

When asked to what extent LGBTQ+ topics are integrated into their school's curriculum, a majority of focus group participants agreed that there is "aboslutely zero, below zero" integration (Robbie, Mecklenburg County).

Focus group participants suggest that these topics be incorporated in order to promote an inclusive, safe and supportive school enviornment for LGBTQ+ students:

- LGBTQ+ history
- LGBTQ+ lived experiences and issues/needs

- LGBTQ+ literature
- Comprehensive sexual health education relevant for LGBTQ+ relationshops
- How students can demonstrate allyship

The additions of these topics in lessons can have a significant, positive impact on LGBTQ+ students, as described by Slider in Cumberland County:

> "I think the most support that really stood out to me was when I was in science class…She took time to explain that people can change their genders and that gender and biological sex are not the same. So her just taking the time just to educate people—even though she wasn't required or even if she might have gotten in trouble for it—her taking the time to educate those kids on something that's important to me was great."

Teachers and coaches should refrain from separating classes by gender.

Several participants across focus groups described in vivid detail about how they feel excluded when teachers and coaches separate their classes into two groups, boys verus girls. This often takes place in P.E. or arts classes during games and activities, but can have a negative impact on some LGTBQ+ students.

Salem from Cumberland County spoke about how separating classes by gender may exclude LGBTQ+ students, or even "out" them:

> "We could just be playing a casual game in class or something that doesn't really need to be separate and it is girls against boys… I feel like they shouldn't do that because… you never know [if there is] a non-binary person in the class… and there could be someone who identifies as transgender in a class too but they haven't , or they don't want to, be out in that moment…"

To be more inclusive, focus group participants suggest that teachers and coaches find other ways to separate students ito groups, beyond binary gender categories. For example, in chorus classes, groups may be separated by tone of voice, and not gender, as described by Marimba in Wake County:

> "A simple way is just to do like 'soprano and alto choir' or 'tenor and bass choir.' Like what voices do you want, not what bodies do you want here."

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