



## Maryland Commission on LGBTQIA+ Affairs

### 2026 Recommendations for Supporting LGBTQIA+ Students in Maryland's Schools

#### Introduction

This report represents an update to the Maryland Commission on LGBTQIA+ Affairs' 2023 *Recommendations for Supporting LGBTQIA+ Students in Maryland's Schools*. It builds on prior findings and recommendations, incorporates more recent data, reflects changes in the legal and policy landscape, and responds to emerging challenges facing LGBTQIA+ students, families, and educators. These updated recommendations are intended to strengthen implementation, address gaps identified since the original report, and provide clearer guidance to state and local education stakeholders.

The Maryland Commission on LGBTQIA+ Affairs is charged with assessing the challenges facing LGBTQIA+ communities and recommending best practices for inclusion. Data from reports such as the [2021 GLSEN National School Climate Survey](#), the [2021 Maryland State Snapshot of the GLSEN Survey](#), and the [2023 Maryland High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) highlight alarming trends in the experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth in Maryland schools. In response, this report provides actionable recommendations for state and local stakeholders, including the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), local school systems, and other relevant agencies, to affirm and protect LGBTQIA+ students and ensure that every child can learn in a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment.

These data are clear: Maryland's K-12 schools often are unsafe, hostile places for LGBTQIA+ students. LGBTQIA+ students are experiencing high levels of bullying, harassment, assault and discrimination in our schools. The violence comes from multiple directions, including fellow students, teachers, administrators, family members, and other adults. The effects are dire; LGBTQIA+ students who are victimized in school suffer lower GPAs, lower school attendance and lower post-secondary aspirations. The damage is not limited to school achievement; anti-LGBTQIA+ hostility in school also leads to severely impacted overall health and wellness. According to the GLSEN National School Climate Survey, LGBTQIA+ youth who are victimized in school suffer higher rates of depression, lower self-esteem and higher rates of suicidal ideation. According to the GLSEN National School Climate Survey, LGBTQIA+ youth who are victimized in school suffer higher rates of depression, lower self-esteem, and higher rates of suicidal ideation. According to the 2023 YRBS, LGBTQ+ youth experience disproportionately high rates of poor mental health and suicide risk, including 65.7% reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness and 41.0% reporting they had seriously considered attempting suicide.

Transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive students are especially at-risk. [National results](#)

from the [2023 CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#), in which Maryland participated, show that transgender students are more than twice as likely to report having been bullied at school than cisgender students. Nearly half had seriously considered suicide in the previous year, and nearly one in three reported an attempt. It is important to note that the majority of anti-LGBTQIA+ policies introduced in state legislatures and local school districts across the country specifically target and endanger the health, safety and well-being of transgender, nonbinary and gender-expansive youth.

LGBTQIA+ youth of color, including Black, Latine, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Native and Indigenous youth experience increased victimization related to both their race and LGBTQIA+ identity. Approximately 2 in 5 LGBTQIA+ youth of color experience both anti-LGBTQIA+ and racist harassment at school, placing them at particularly high risk for adverse outcomes.

Anti-LGBTQIA+ groups are on the rise in Maryland and across the United States, spreading harmful misinformation, introducing anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation and policies, and blocking attempts to support LGBTQIA+ youth. At the same time, coordinated attacks at the federal level seek to dismantle protections and normalize discrimination against queer and trans students nationwide. Urgent, comprehensive action is needed in Maryland's schools to affirm and protect LGBTQIA+ youth, ensuring that every student can learn in an environment that values safety, dignity, and inclusion.

## **Additional Supporting Data**

According to the [2021 Maryland State Snapshot of the GLSEN National School Climate Survey](#):

- 96% of LGBTQ+ students in Maryland report regularly hearing “gay” used in a negative way and 87% regularly heard other homophobic remarks in school.
- 76% of LGBTQ+ students in Maryland regularly heard negative remarks about transgender people in school.
- Approximately 1 in 2 LGBTQ+ students in Maryland report being verbally harassed due to their sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual or other) or gender identity (transgender, nonbinary or other).
- Transgender and nonbinary students in Maryland experienced gender-based discrimination in school, specifically being prevented from:
  - using their chosen name or pronouns (31.7%)
  - using the bathroom that aligns with their gender (28.2%)
  - using the locker room that aligns with their gender (25.1%)
  - wearing clothing deemed “inappropriate” based on gender (14.6%), and;
  - playing on the school sports team that was consistent with their gender (11.4%)
- Only 16.6% of LGBTQ+ students attended a school with a comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policy that included specific protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Only 15.3% had a policy or official guidelines to support transgender and nonbinary students.
- Only 26.7% were taught positive representations of LGBTQ+ people, history, or events.

According to the [2022 - 2023 Maryland High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#):

*(Note: these data do not clearly reflect the experiences of transgender, nonbinary and gender expansive youth, however, many of these youth may also identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual)*

Question	% gay, lesbian or bisexual	% heterosexual
did not go to school because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to or from school	12.5	7.2
felt sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks in a row so that they stopped doing some usual activities	67.3	32.2
bullied on school property	22.8	13.1
carried a weapon on school property	4.9	2.1
reported that their mental health was most of the time or always not good	57.9	23.4
seriously considered suicide	44.7	14.1
made a plan about how they would attempt suicide	35.5	10.3
actually attempted suicide	26.7	5.1

**Recommendation #1**

**Develop and enact a statewide policy which protects transgender, nonbinary and gender-expansive students from sex and gender-based discrimination in schools.**

A comprehensive, statewide policy is needed to support and protect our transgender, nonbinary and gender-expansive students. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) published updated [guidelines](#) to support LGBTQIA+ students in 2024, however these guidelines are not implemented uniformly across the state, and there are no consequences for schools and districts that choose not to implement. Districts with strong implicitly biased opposition groups are not likely to adopt supportive guidelines unless mandated by policy.

At minimum, a comprehensive policy should address the following:

- **Name and pronoun usage.** Allowing students to use and be addressed with their chosen name and pronouns in school, without a legal name or gender marker change, and without parent or guardian permission. Ensure correct name and pronouns are accurately documented in the school record system.
- **Bathrooms and gender-segregated facilities.** Allowing students to use all gender-segregated facilities consistent with their gender identity. If such a facility does not exist, students should be given the choice to use the facility where they feel most comfortable, and should not be required to use certain separate facilities. All new school construction should include plans for gender-neutral facilities.
- **Athletics and physical education.** Allowing students to participate in athletics and physical education programs consistent with their gender identity. Nonbinary and other gender expansive youth should be given a choice as to which athletic program makes

them feel most comfortable.

- **Overnight field trips.** Allowing students to be housed according to their gender identity. Nonbinary and other gender expansive youth should be given a choice as to which housing assignment makes them feel most comfortable.
- **Student privacy.** Allowing students the right to determine when, how and to whom information about their gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation is shared. Ensure legal names can be “hidden” in the student record system.
- **Affirmation and support.** Allowing teachers to, if asked, engage in supportive conversation with students about their individual needs as it relates to their gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation. Allowing and encouraging teachers to discuss gender diversity with the school community.
- **Nondiscrimination.** Affirming that transgender, nonbinary and gender-expansive students are protected under Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution. Prohibiting other forms of sex-based discrimination as codified in Title IX, including dress codes, educational programming and curricula, and student activities.
- **Training and professional development.** Requiring that all public school educators receive annual training on the needs and experiences of transgender, nonbinary and gender-expansive students.
- **Application to faculty and staff.** Where appropriate, the same gender-affirming protections for students shall apply to all teachers, administrators and staff, specifically name and pronoun usage and gender-segregated facilities.

According to the 2021 GLSEN National School Climate Survey, only 8.2% of LGBTQ+ students reported that their school or district had official policies or guidelines to support transgender or nonbinary students. In schools where such a policy exists, transgender and nonbinary students reported that they were (compared to their peers who attend a school without such a policy):

- less likely to be prevented from using their name or pronoun of choice in school,
- less likely to be prevented from using bathrooms aligned with their gender,
- less likely to be prevented from using locker rooms aligned with their gender ,
- less likely to be prevented from wearing clothes thought to be “inappropriate” based on gender,
- less likely to be prevented from playing on the school sports team that is consistent with their gender,
- less likely to miss school because of feeling unsafe, and
- more likely to feel a part of their school community.

**Additional resources:**

- a. [GLSEN Model Policy](#)
- b. [Guidelines to Support Transgender & Nonbinary Students--NYC Dept of Education](#)
- c. [Schools in Transition--Gender Spectrum](#)
- d. [Policy 443 - Frederick County Public Schools](#)
- e. [Policy JBB - Baltimore City Public Schools](#)
- f. [Policy: JQ - Anne Arundel County Public Schools](#)
- g. [Regulation: JQ-RA - Anne Arundel County Public Schools](#)
- h. [Guidelines for Student Gender Identity - Montgomery County Public Schools](#)
- i. [Examples of Policies and Emerging Practices for Supporting Transgender Students--US Dept. of Education](#)
- j. [Model Policy: Howard County Public Schools Student Name Guidance](#)
- k. [LGBTQIA+ Youth Support: Howard County Public Schools](#)
- l. [LGBTQ+ Information: Montgomery County Public Schools](#)

**Recommendation #2:**

**Require all public school educators to receive annual professional development training about the needs and experiences of LGBTQIA+ students and families. Training should be delivered by facilitators with extensive personal and professional experience with educating about gender, sexuality, and identity.**

It is imperative that educators have the confidence, skills and resources to contribute to positive outcomes for LGBTQIA+ students in school. More knowledge about gender, sexuality and identity, particularly among school-aged youth, would contribute to better strategies, awareness, responsiveness and proactiveness when dealing with situations where LGBTQIA+ identity is involved. Furthermore, all students, including heterosexual and cisgender students, require accurate information and support regarding gender and sexuality. Anti-LGBTQIA+ language and actions harm everyone.

**Professional development regarding LGBTQIA+ inclusion should include the following core competencies:**

- **Terminology and usage.** Common terms and concepts related to gender, sexuality and identity, including guidelines for proper usage.
- **Data and experiences.** Current research regarding the needs and experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth in school, as well as infusions of real-life stories from LGBTQIA+ youth.
- **Connection to racial justice and other systems of oppression.** Understanding anti-LGBTQIA+ bias is often exacerbated by racism and vice versa. Understanding the unique experiences of Black and Brown LGBTQIA+ people. Examining the intersection of anti-LGBTQIA+ bias with racism, misogyny, ableism and other systems of oppression.
- **Personal and interpersonal best practices.** Guidance regarding how to discuss gender, sexuality and identity with ourselves and others, including how to use affirming language, how to honor chosen names and pronouns, and how to address harmful language.
- **Instructional and institutional best practices.** Systemic interventions such as LGBTQIA+-inclusive curricula, specific policy protections, student clubs, administrative protocols, classroom procedures, data and evaluation.
- **Legal considerations.** An overview of federal, state and local policy regarding nondiscrimination, curriculum, climate and culture, safety and other topics relevant to LGBTQIA+ inclusion in school.
- **Supporting transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive students.** A specific look at the school's role in supporting the health, safety and wellbeing of transgender, nonbinary and gender-expansive students.
- **Suicide prevention and mental health risk factors.** Suicide prevention training must explicitly address the elevated risk of suicide among LGBTQIA+ youth, particularly students whose sexual orientation or gender identity is not affirmed at home, at school, or in their community. Training should ensure educators can recognize LGBTQIA+-specific risk and protective factors, respond appropriately, and connect students with affirming supports and resources.
- **Family and community engagement.** Guidelines and resources for building strong partnerships with families, caregivers and local organizations and agencies, where appropriate. Providing support for families who are struggling with supporting their

- LGBTQIA+ student. Legal and ethical responsibilities to both the family and the student.
- **Elementary and Early Childhood settings.** A specific look at LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the early elementary grades.
- **LGBTQIA+ History and Culture.** An overview of the LGBTQIA+ Rights Movement, including appreciating the monumental impact LGBTQIA+ people have made on the nation's history, including civil rights and popular culture.
- **Case studies and roleplays.** An opportunity to practice and grapple with real-time situations involving LGBTQIA+ students.
- **Open Q&A.** A brave, open space for questions.
- **Additional resources.** How and when to access local or online resources for LGBTQIA+ inclusion in schools.

Teachers and administrators should be empowered to be vocal, visible, and bold with their support of LGBTQIA+ students and families. According to findings from the 2021 GLSEN National School Climate Survey, supportive educators have a powerful effect on the safety, health and wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ youth.

LGBTQIA+ students who attend schools with an increasing number of supportive educators report experiencing:

- Increased feelings of safety related to gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation,
- Fewer missed school days due to feelings of insecurity,
- Higher levels of self-esteem,
- Lower levels of depression,
- Lower likelihood to consider suicide,
- Increased feelings of school belonging,
- Lower levels of victimization, and
- Higher GPAs.

#### **Additional resources:**

- [GLSEN Professional Development](#)
- [GLSEN Safe Space Kit](#)
- [Supporting LGBTQ Youth of Color - GLSEN](#)
- [Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth | Adolescent and School Health](#)
- [Welcoming Schools - Human Rights Campaign](#)
- [Respect Workshop - American Psychological Association](#)
- [The Trevor Project - Mental Health and Crisis Support Resources](#)
- [Trans Lifeline - Trans Peer Support](#)

#### **Recommendation #3:**

**Require an LGBTQIA+-inclusive curriculum and enforce the Freedom to Read Act to prevent book bans.**

#### **Social Studies and Literature Curriculum**

According to the Maryland State Department of Education, the [vision](#) for social studies reads:

*“Social studies in Maryland will produce students with the knowledge and skills necessary to be empowered, informed, and socially responsible participants in our nation’s democracy.”*

The most recent Maryland [State Standards and Frameworks in Social Studies](#) dictates that social studies curricula should include, among other standards (COMAR [13A.04.08.01](#)):

- concepts and processes of authority, power, and influence.
- historically grounded, multidisciplinary approach in order to recognize multiple narratives and acknowledge the diversity and commonality of the human experience.
- decisions made by individuals and groups using economic reasoning.
- significant events, ideas, beliefs, and themes to identify patterns and trends and to analyze how individuals and societies have changed over time to make connections to the present in their communities, Maryland, the United States, and the world.

Each of the frameworks presented have clear, strong connections to the social, political, and economic struggle for equality for LGBTQIA+ people in Maryland, across the country, and around the world. Teaching LGBTQIA+ history and culture offers a rich lens into the concepts and processes of authority, power and influence, the diversity and commonality of the human experience, economic decision-making, and plenty of significant events, ideas, beliefs, and themes to identify patterns and trends and to analyze how individuals and societies have changed over time.

Teaching LGBTQIA+ history and culture is not only a powerful vehicle for achieving the state's instructional goals for social studies, it also improves school climate and culture for all students. According to the 2021 GLSEN National School Climate Survey, LGBTQ students who attended a school with an LGBTQIA+ curriculum reported:

- Decreased instances of hearing biased language,
- Increased GPAs,
- Increased levels of self-esteem,
- Decreased levels of depression, and
- Increased interest in post-secondary education (college or university).

According to GLSEN, only 26.7% of LGBTQIA+ youth in Maryland were taught positive representations of LGBTQ+ people, history, or events. Nationwide, 14.4% had been taught negative content about LGBTQ+ topics.

While there are clear opportunities for LGBTQIA+ inclusive curriculum in social studies, positive representations of LGBTQIA+ history and culture can and should be included in all content areas at all grade levels. All students benefit from a curriculum that is inclusive of the diversity of multiple cultures and experiences and does not promote discrimination, marginalization or harm. In the groundbreaking 1988 essay "[Curriculum as a Mirror and Window](#)", Emily Style emphasizes the importance of curriculum as a mirror, reflecting student's identity and experiences back to them, as well as a window, allowing students to explore other identities and experiences. Being knowledgeable about the diversity of society also contributes to strong [social and emotional learning](#), as well as college and career readiness, both of which are identified as priorities for student success by the Maryland State Department of Education. According to the [Movement Advancement Project](#), seven states which include California, Colorado, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, Oregon, and Washington have enacted legislation which require LGBTQIA+-inclusive curricular standards.

In the last several legislative sessions of the Maryland General Assembly, Del. Acevero (D) introduced legislation which would establish a Commission on History, Culture, and Civics in Education to "make recommendations to the State Board of Education and the State Department of Education to further the discovery, interpretation, and learning of the history,

culture, and civics of the United States and Maryland.” While the bill has not progressed, we agree with and applaud these efforts to support additional implementation of inclusive curriculum across the State.

### Comprehensive Sexual Education Curriculum

In addition to LGBTQIA+ inclusive curriculum in social studies, similar inclusion is desperately needed in sex education curricula. Less than 10% of LGBTQIA+ youth in Maryland report being taught LGBTQIA+-inclusive sex education. Meanwhile, according to the [2022 Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results](#), youth who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual report participating in risky sexual behaviors at much higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts.

Question	% gay, lesbian or bisexual	% heterosexual
had sexual intercourse for the first time before age 13 years	5.1%	2.5%
did not use a condom during last sexual intercourse	57.9%	43.5%
drank alcohol or used drugs before last sexual intercourse	23.4%	18.1%
experienced physical dating violence	18%	9.2%

Comprehensive, medically-accurate, and LGBTQIA+-inclusive sex education provides all students with lifesaving information about how to protect themselves and others in sexual and romantic situations. Currently, many sexual education programs are too narrowly focused on the sexual experiences of cisgender, heterosexual students and are often steeped in outdated, puritanical, abstinence-focused rhetoric that fails to provide crucial information. All students, including LGBTQIA+ students and/or sexually-active students, deserve to know how to achieve optimal, safe sexual health. We echo the [American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists \(ACOG\)](#):

***“Comprehensive sexuality education should begin in early childhood and continue through a person’s lifespan. Programs should not only focus on reproductive development (including abnormalities in development, such as primary ovarian insufficiency and müllerian anomalies), prevention of STIs, and unintended pregnancy, but also teach about forms of sexual expression, healthy sexual and nonsexual relationships, gender identity and sexual orientation and questioning, communication, recognizing and preventing sexual violence, consent, and decision making. They also should include state-specific legal ramifications of sexual behavior and the growing risks of sharing information online. Additionally, programs should cover the variations in sexual expression, including vaginal intercourse, oral sex, anal sex, mutual masturbation, as well as texting and virtual sex.”***

In 2025, the General Assembly passed HB0161 – Primary and Secondary Education: Comprehensive Health Education Framework – Established, which officially requires implementation by local school systems. However, the final bill included amendments allowing parents to opt out of instruction related to sexual orientation and gender identity, potentially limiting the reach and consistency of LGBTQIA+-inclusive education across districts.

## Enforce the Freedom to Read Act

Lastly, we recommend enforcement of the Freedom to Read Act, a statewide ban on book bans in all public libraries, including school libraries. Maryland took an important step in this direction with the passage of the 2024 Freedom to Read Act, which protects access to diverse materials in public libraries and schools. Despite the passage of the Freedom to Read Act, some school districts are still removing books with LGBTQIA+ themes and characters. [Violations can be reported to MSDE by filing an appeal with the State Board here.](#)

### Additional resources:

- [GLSEN Inclusive Curriculum Resources](#)
- [GLSEN Inclusive Curriculum Standards](#)
- [GLSEN Inclusive Curriculum Guide](#)
- [Learning for Justice - Southern Poverty Law Center](#)
- [Three Rs—Rights, Respect, Responsibility: A K-12 Sexuality Education Curriculum](#)
- [SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change](#)

### **Recommendation #4:**

#### **Provide resources for the establishment and growth of Gender Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) at all schools and in all grade levels.**

Gender Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) are student-led, extracurricular school clubs that provide supportive, affirming environments for LGBTQIA+ students and allies. Previously referred to as “gay-straight alliances,” GSAs have recently adopted a more inclusive name. Currently, there is no local, centralized place to identify and track student clubs across Maryland: however, we know many of these clubs exist throughout Maryland’s 24 school districts. While most clubs exist at the high school level, there has been recent growth in the number of GSAs in the middle and elementary school levels.

In recent years, however, Maryland schools, like those across the nation, have witnessed a troubling rise in anti-LGBTQIA+ organizing and pressure to remove inclusion symbols such as Pride flags, rainbow stickers, and “Safe Space” signage from classrooms and hallways. These symbols serve a critical role in signaling safety and support to students who may otherwise feel isolated or unsafe. Their removal not only erases visible affirmation of LGBTQIA+ identities but also creates a chilling effect that discourages students and educators from openly supporting equality. At the same time, the growth of coordinated anti-LGBTQIA+ parent and student groups has led to increased hostility toward GSAs, including attempts to defund, restrict, or stigmatize them.

Establishing and strengthening GSAs is one of the most effective responses to these developments. GSAs foster inclusion, counter misinformation, and provide safe, peer-supported spaces that reinforce the values of respect, belonging, and empathy central to Maryland’s educational mission. Schools should be empowered and adequately resourced to establish and sustain these student groups through measures such as:

- A statewide campaign advertising the benefits of establishing a GSA,
- Official resources from the State regarding how to establish a GSA,
- Official resources from the State regarding how to maintain a GSA, including sample discussion guides, project ideas, and best practices or lessons learned from other

- established GSAs,
- Clear guidance prohibiting schools from creating unnecessary or arbitrary barriers to the formation or operation of GSAs, including restricting access to staff advisors or imposing conditions not required of other student organizations,
- Requirements that schools proactively publicize the existence of GSAs and provide accessible information on how students can participate, including through schoolwide announcements and other commonly used communication channels,
- Education and training for student GSA leaders on leadership, communication, and advocacy,
- Professional development for adult GSA advisors regarding how to be an effective and supportive advisor,
- Stipends and/or achievement units for adult GSA advisors,
- Statewide organizing support for GSA leaders across the State, including conferences, special events, and opportunities for civic engagement,
- Grant funding to support local, regional, and statewide GSA activities, and
- A centralized database of GSAs managed by the State.

GSAs have a positive effect on school climate and culture, academic achievement and mental wellbeing. According to the 2021 GLSEN National School Climate Survey, LGBTQIA+ students who attended a school with a GSA:

- Were less likely to hear homophobic remarks, negative remarks about gender expression and negative remarks about transgender people;
- Were more likely to report that school personnel intervened when hearing homophobic remarks;
- Were less likely to feel unsafe regarding their sexual orientation, gender expression and gender identity;
- Experienced lower levels of in-person victimization related to their sexual orientation, gender expression and gender identity;
- Were more likely to report having many supportive school staff and more accepting peers;
- Were less likely to have missed school;
- Felt greater belonging to their school community;
- Performed better academically in school;
- Were more likely to plan on pursuing post-secondary education, and
- Reported better psychological well-being, including higher levels of self-esteem, lower levels of depressions and lower levels of suicidal ideation.

According to the Maryland State Snapshot of the 2021 GLSEN National School Climate survey, only about half (50.6%) of LGBTQIA+ youth in Maryland report having access to a GSA in their school.

Aside from the academic and health benefits, GSAs also promote student leadership, opportunities for enhanced social-emotional learning and civic engagement. GSAs are often social groups for students to build supportive relationships, advocacy groups that endeavor to educate their schools and communities, activist groups that take action against anti-LGBTQIA+ language and actions in their schools and communities, or some combination of the three.

The Maryland State Department of Education permits authorized student organizations to conduct activities in public school buildings subject to the supervision of the administration and faculty of the school. ([COMAR 13A.08.01.09](#))

## **Additional resources:**

- [GLSEN GSA Resources](#)
- [GSA Network](#)
- [Time Out Youth](#)
- [How to Start a GSA–ACLU](#)
- [Elements of a GSA–GSAFE](#)

## **Recommendation #5:**

### **Provide culturally-relevant resources and support for parents, families and caregivers to become supportive, affirming adults for LGBTQIA+ youth.**

With the rise of anti-LGBTQIA+ misinformation, hate speech, and other bias-based incidents, as well as a changing and often contentious legal landscape, family education initiatives are needed to promote inclusivity and acceptance. Parents, family members and caregivers are vital partners in supporting and affirming LGBTQIA+ youth. Schools must implement programs to educate and empower parents, family members and caregivers as active members of a student’s support team.

To ensure consistent implementation across Maryland, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) should develop and support strategic partnerships that equip local education agencies (LEAs) to deliver culturally responsive, LGBTQIA+-affirming family engagement initiatives. This work should be integrated into existing equity and student support structures, including statewide equity collaboratives and cross-agency partnerships, to ensure sustainability, accountability, and statewide reach.

Family acceptance is a key indicator of positive outcomes for LGBTQIA+ youth. According to the [Family Acceptance Project](#), LGBTQIA+ youth who belong to families who display moderate to high levels of rejecting behaviors face severe health challenges, including:

- Depression
- Suicidal thoughts and attempts
- Illegal drug use
- HIV/STD risk

Families must understand the benefits of affirming their LGBTQIA+ child as well as the dangerous risks associated with rejecting behaviors. Family education must be culturally relevant, taking into account race, ethnicity, class, language and religion as launching points for conversation regarding LGBTQIA+ affirmation.

In addition to providing resources to families who are struggling to accept their child’s identity, families who are already supportive and affirming may be untapped resources. Schools and families have an opportunity to learn from LGBTQIA+-headed households and other families who have been successful in supporting and affirming their LGBTQIA+ child. Schools should also explore intentional collaboration between Gender Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) and other student and family leadership bodies, such as Student Government Associations (SGAs), Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), and similar groups, to strengthen schoolwide inclusion and shared responsibility.

An LGBTQIA+-affirming family and caregiver program may include:

- Free training and education on LGBTQIA+ identity, offered in multiple languages and taught by compensated community members with lived experience,
- Education regarding federal, state and local policy,
- Access to research regarding LGBTQIA+ family acceptance,
- Peer support and affinity groups to build networks of support among families from similar backgrounds,
- Specific resources for Black and Brown families, immigrant families, and families from religious backgrounds, available in multiple languages,
- Intergenerational conversations between caregivers and youth to build understanding and rapport,
- Collaborative initiatives between GSAs, SGAs, PTAs, and other school-based groups to promote inclusive events, family education, and community dialogue,
- Inclusive school campaigns and events to celebrate family diversity, and
- Restorative conferencing between youth and families who are struggling to accept their child's LGBTQIA+ identity.

To build stronger, more cohesive communities of support, schools should also explore partnerships between Gender Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) and other student and family leadership bodies such as Student Government Associations (SGAs), Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), and other similar groups. These collaborations can amplify inclusion efforts, create shared initiatives that promote respect and belonging, and ensure that affirming practices extend beyond student clubs into the broader culture of the school community.

By connecting affirming families, student organizations, and school leadership structures, Maryland schools can foster a more inclusive and resilient environment, one where every student and family feels seen, supported, and empowered to thrive.

#### **Additional Resources:**

- [Family Acceptance Project](#)
- [Helping Diverse Families Learn to Support Their LGBTQ Children - Family Acceptance Project](#)
- [LGBTQ Youth and Family Resources](#)
- [PFLAG](#)
- [Coalition for Inclusive Schools and Communities](#)
- [Muslims for Progressive Values—LGBTQI Resources](#)
- [The Trevor Project - Mental Health and Crisis Support Resources](#)
- [Trans Lifeline - Trans Peer Support](#)

#### **Recommendation #6:**

**Collect statewide data regarding LGBTQIA+ youth in Maryland, including population size and experiences in public systems.**

There remains a critical need for increased funding, research, and data collection regarding the LGBTQIA+ population. While some national data sources exist, far fewer provide Maryland-specific information, and even fewer capture the experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth in Maryland. These data are essential to understanding the size, diversity, and needs of LGBTQIA+ students across racial, ethnic, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic, and geographic lines, and to informing effective policy and programmatic responses across Maryland's public systems.

According to the [2022 Maryland High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)](#), of the nearly 35,000 students who participated statewide, about 5,600 identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and another 3,300 identified as “other” or questioning their sexual identity. Taken together, this means that roughly one in four Maryland high school students (about 25%) identify as something other than heterosexual. This represents a significant portion of the student population. It is also important to note that the Youth Risk Behavior Survey still does not collect information about transgender, nonbinary, or gender-expansive student identities in Maryland.

Maryland collects statewide data on bullying, harassment, or intimidation through the Safe Schools Reporting Act, as reflected in the Maryland State Department of Education’s 2024 annual report [Bullying, Harassment, or Intimidation in Maryland Public Schools](#), but the publicly reported data are not disaggregated by sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. As a result, the extent and nature of bullying experienced by LGBTQIA+ students in Maryland schools remains largely invisible in state-level reporting.

While the [GLSEN National School Climate Survey Maryland State Snapshot](#) provides valuable insight based on aggregated national data, Maryland should invest in collecting its own statewide, Maryland-specific data to confirm and refine these findings, improve representation of students of color and students in rural areas, and measure the impact of school- and community-based interventions over time. Such data would allow for assessment of progress and challenges at the state, district, and school levels, and help highlight both persistent gaps and effective local practices.

To support a coordinated and responsible approach to data collection, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) should:

- Partner with the Maryland Commission on LGBTQIA+ Affairs and community-based organizations to develop or administer a statewide LGBTQIA+ school climate survey or youth community needs assessment,
- Expand existing data collection efforts, including bullying and school climate reporting, to include voluntary, developmentally appropriate questions related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, where legally permissible,
- Provide guidance and technical assistance to local education agencies (LEAs) on inclusive, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive data collection practices, and
- Ensure that data collection efforts are aligned with student safety, wellbeing, and civil rights protections.

Local school systems should:

- Participate in statewide data collection efforts coordinated by MSDE,
- Collect and review school-level data related to bullying, harassment, absenteeism, and discipline with attention to LGBTQIA+ student experiences, and
- Use data findings to inform school improvement plans, professional development, student supports, and family engagement strategies.

Given the increasingly hostile political climate surrounding LGBTQIA+ inclusion, data privacy and student safety must be paramount. All data collection efforts should prioritize confidentiality and minimize risk to students by using de-identified or aggregated data whenever possible, limiting access to sensitive information, and clearly communicating how data will be used and protected. Participation in surveys or data collection related to sexual orientation or gender identity should be voluntary, age-appropriate, and designed to avoid outing or exposing students to harm.

Finally, understanding the experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth must extend beyond schools alone. Maryland should also explore opportunities to collect data on LGBTQIA+ youth interactions with other public systems, including housing, healthcare, foster care, juvenile justice, and employment, to better understand cross-system impacts and inform coordinated policy responses.

Additional resources:

- [GLSEN School Climate Survey](#)
- [National School Climate Center](#)

### **Recommendation #7:**

#### **Hire a full-time staff team for LGBTQIA+ Student Achievement at the Maryland State Department of Education and within local school systems.**

In order to fully implement and operationalize these recommendations, to respond to the myriad concerns for LGBTQIA+ student achievement in Maryland, and to ensure the work is sustained long-term, the Maryland State Department of Education and local school systems should hire and resource a staff team devoted to addressing LGBTQIA+ inclusion, achievement and well-being in Maryland's schools. The staff team could be comprised of a director, a curriculum specialist, a youth programs specialist, a family and community engagement specialist, a policy specialist, regional liaisons and a professional development facilitation team.

Specific duties of the LGBTQIA+ Student Achievement Team could include:

- Advising on local and state, and Federal policy,
- Developing LGBTQIA+-inclusive curriculum resources,
- Providing ongoing professional development and technical assistance to schools and districts,
- Organizing data collection and research efforts,
- Establishing and supporting GSAs across the state,
- Establishing an LGBTQIA+ Employee Resource Group for teachers, administrators and MSDE staff,
- Hosting listening sessions and connecting LGBTQIA+ students and families with resources and support,
- Hosting conferences and other special events, and
- Establishing partnerships with local organizations and other state agencies to support and affirm LGBTQIA+ youth in Maryland.

### **Recommendation #8:**

#### **Ensure awareness and compliance with the updated 2024 guidelines to support LGBTQIA+ students**

In 2024, following the recommendations from the Maryland Commission on LGBTQIA+ Affairs, MSDE updated their guidelines to support LGBTQIA+ students and published the following documents:

- [Safe and Supportive Schools for All Students: Creating Inclusive Spaces for LGBTQIA+ Youth](#)

- [Non-Discrimination Guidelines for Transgender and Non-Conforming Youth](#)

It is imperative that all local school systems are not only aware of these updated guidelines, but also implement them consistently and in good faith. MSDE should establish clear expectations for compliance and take an active role in monitoring implementation across school systems statewide.

To support effective implementation and accountability, MSDE should:

- Require local school systems to formally acknowledge receipt of the updated guidelines and identify a designated point of contact responsible for implementation,
- Integrate review of LGBTQIA+ inclusion practices into existing monitoring, compliance, and school climate review processes,
- Provide technical assistance and corrective guidance to school systems that are not aligned with the guidelines,
- Clearly communicate reporting and escalation pathways for students, families, and educators when violations occur, and
- Track and publicly report aggregate data on complaints, appeals, and resolutions related to discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.

Additional resources from MSDE:

- [Bullying Prevention and Reporting Form](#)
- [Title IX: Applicable Guidance and Compliance](#)
- [Nondiscrimination in Education Procedure and Process for Filing Complaints](#)
- [File an Appeal with the State Board](#)

## Call to Action

Barriers facing Maryland's LGBTQIA+ youth persist and are intensifying amid escalating attacks at the federal, state, and local levels. These updated recommendations call for coordinated, sustained action to ensure that every LGBTQIA+ student in Maryland is safe, affirmed, and supported.

The Maryland Commission on LGBTQIA+ Affairs calls on the Maryland State Department of Education, local education agencies, individual schools, educators, families, and community-based organizations to work collaboratively to implement these recommendations. Meaningful progress will require alignment across state and local systems, strong partnerships with LGBTQIA+ community organizations, and a shared commitment to accountability, transparency, and student wellbeing.

Maryland has the opportunity and responsibility to lead by ensuring that policies are implemented consistently, resources are equitably distributed, and LGBTQIA+ youth are not left to navigate hostile or unsafe environments alone. Through collective action across government, schools, families, and communities, Maryland can create learning environments where every student is valued, protected, and empowered to thrive.



# **2026 Recommendations for Supporting LGBTQIA+ Students in Maryland's Schools**

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