

Parents

Why We Need To Stop Outing LGBTQIA Students

Revealing the identities of queer students has a major impact on their mental health and physical safety. Here's how to protect queer youth.

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When Dahlia Bekong was a senior in high school, a teacher outed them during a phone call to their home when the teacher referred to them as "Dahlia," their chosen name. Bekong had previously shared with teachers and administrators that they were transgender and it was not safe to use their [chosen name and pronouns](#) around their family.

What Is Outing?

Outing is disclosing an LGBTQIA person's sexual orientation or [gender identity](#) without their consent. Whether done intentionally or by accident, outing violates a person's privacy and increases their risk of physical harm, homelessness, substance misuse, and suicide.

"After that call, my parents were really angry and confrontational. They accused me of destroying our family. I didn't feel safe in my own home." Bekong adds, "I don't think the teacher meant to cause harm—she made a mistake. But one inadvertent mistake can have catastrophic consequences."

Outing Harms Already Vulnerable LGBTQIA Youth

"After that phone call, my home went from unsupportive to a war zone," says Bekong.

Bekong is not alone. Queer youth across the country have reported the stigma and harassment from being outed at school or by members of the community. In fact, in a survey of 12,000 LGBTQ+ youth conducted by the Human Rights Campaign and the University of Connecticut, many described being outed as "extremely stressful."¹

LGBTQIA teens experience higher rates of bullying and harassment in school. A 2021 survey of more than 22,000 LGBTQ+ youth found:²

- 83% experienced harassment or assault in school
- 76% experienced verbal harassment in school
- 31% experienced physical harassment and intimidation in school
- 13% experienced physical assault in school

To make matters worse, 44% of those surveyed said they didn't report these incidences due to fear of being outed.

LGBTQ+ students are already at an increased risk for anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation,³ and if a trusted professional outs them it can further compromise their safety and have a detrimental impact on their mental and physical health.

Outing a Student Increases Their Risk of Abuse and Homelessness

Only 1 in 3 LGBTQIA youth say they live in an LGBTQ-affirming home, according to the Trevor Project. For the other two-thirds, being outed can pose a significant safety threat in the home. This risk is greatest among transgender youth, who are 60% more likely to experience physical abuse than their gender-conforming peers.⁴

"There is a big difference between coming out and being outed," says Laura Guy, a clinical social worker in New York City who works with at-risk youth ages 8 to 17. "Just because someone is out with their friends or at school doesn't mean they're out at home. Outing LGBTQ+ youth can lead to them being abused, harassed, severely isolated, and forced to leave their home."

In fact, family rejection is a major contributor to high rates of homelessness among LGBTQIA youth. A 2020 report by the Williams Institute at UCLA

School of Law found that 43% of homeless LGBTQ+ teens were kicked out of their homes by unsupportive parents.⁵

[I'm a Nonbinary Teen: Here's What Parents Need to Know](#)

Protections for LGBTQIA Students Aren't Good Enough

Students have a constitutionally protected right to privacy, which includes the right not to be outed by their school. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), it is illegal to disclose a student's sexual orientation or gender identity, even to a student's parents, without their permission.⁶ But it happens anyway, and in some cases, outing is state-sanctioned.

In 2021, the Biden Administration updated the language of Title IX protections to include guidance for protecting LGBTQIA students against gender discrimination—including outing—within federally funded schools.⁷

Several states—including California, New York, Oregon, Minnesota, Maine, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, New Jersey, Connecticut, Maryland, and Massachusetts—have passed laws to strengthen protections for LGBTQIA students.⁸

However, many more states have enacted laws targeting the rights of LGBTQIA students.

LGBTQIA Lives Are in the Hands of Politicians

Anti-LGBTQIA legislation has skyrocketed in recent years. In 2023, nearly 500 anti-LGBTQIA bills were introduced across the country, and more than 80 were signed into law.⁹

There are laws in four states that prohibit K–12 schools from providing positive and affirming representation of LGBTQIA identities. Another 16 states have laws censoring curricula to prohibit honest teaching about race, gender, and/or LGBTQIA communities.

Perhaps the most well-known of these is Florida's Parental Rights in Education bill that passed in 2022. Dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" bill, it restricts discussion on gender identity and sexual orientation in schools and permits parents to sue teachers.¹⁰

The increase in legislation targeting transgender youth is particularly troubling. Laws banning gender-affirming care for transgender minors have been enacted in 23 states.¹¹

In 34 states, new laws or policies either explicitly ban or restrict transgender, nonbinary, and intersex students from participating in K–12 interscholastic athletics programs that do not match their gender assigned at birth.¹²

But perhaps most worrisome are state laws that mandate or encourage educators to out transgender teens to their parents.

In five states—Alabama, Indiana, Iowa, North Carolina, and North Dakota—the law forces school employees to notify parents about gender-nonconforming students. Laws in another six states—Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Montana, and Utah—encourage schools to out transgender teens to their parents.¹³

How These Laws Harm Transgender Teens

Outing transgender teens puts them at risk of abuse and homelessness. Anti-transgender bills also cause additional stress and anxiety for transgender and nonbinary youth. According to a 2022 survey of gender non-conforming teens:³

- 93% worry about being denied access to health care
- 91% worry about being denied access to bathrooms
- 83% worry about being denied the ability to play sports

[What's Happening to Transgender Youth in Texas and How To Help](#)

Parental Rights vs. LGBTQIA Student Safety

Some lawmakers claim these bills protect parental rights, but experts disagree. "It doesn't violate any parent's rights to allow young people the safety to have those conversations," says Rose Saxe, deputy director of the LGBTQ & HIV Project at The ACLU.

In reality, though, these laws violate the student's privacy rights and put their safety at risk. Outing a student's sexual orientation or gender identity can open them up to hostility, rejection, and violence from their parents.¹⁴

While many of these new laws and policies are being [challenged in court](#), the debates around LGBTQIA rights still cause harm.

"Queer youth hear these conversations, and it is very damaging to have their humanity being debated," states Aloe Johnson, family and community services director at [Resource Center](#). Johnson adds, "If they can't safely disclose their identity, then they can't fully access resources at school."

[Are National 'Parental Rights' Agendas Destroying Public Education?](#)

School Boards Are Political Playgrounds for Queer Students

Fights over these policies have been playing out in school boards across the country, which can increase the risk to LGBTQIA students.

Kelsey Waits, a mother in Minnesota, knows this firsthand. Waits was elected to her local school board in 2018, but when she ran for re-election in 2021, some members of a local conservative parents' Facebook group, Concerned Parents of Hastings, publicly outed her transgender child.

"They invaded the privacy of my 8-year-old. There were no boundaries, and they were trying to be hurtful," Waits says. "This spread through the community and began to show up everywhere—the park, the hairdresser, my husband's job."

Waits notes that "many of these negative posts were liked and commented on by the same adults who talked about their concerns over bullying at school board meetings—and yet they were the ones bullying my child."

Waits and her family decided to speak out about the hate they were receiving. "We stood up and took our story back," Waits says. Waits also started the [TransParent Alliance](#), an organization committed to helping caregivers be allies for their children.

[How to Support Parents of Transgender Kids in Your Community](#)

Standing Up for LGBTQIA Teens

Many of these anti-LGBTQIA laws and policies put educators at risk of losing their jobs for supporting queer youth. In recent years, public school teachers have been fired for [displaying a pride flag in the classroom](#), [reading a book on gender identity](#), [using unauthorized materials in lessons](#), and [disclosing their own LGBTQIA identity](#).

Whitney S*, a teacher in Kansas, reports that she received an unsettling email at the beginning of the year instructing teachers not to use the chosen name of transgender students unless a parent consented.

"I feel like I'm in an uncomfortable position with this administrative decision," Whitney says. "As teachers, we are taught to make our classrooms safe spaces for students to express themselves. Knowing a student identifies as a different gender with a different name, but because of decisions made by the administration, they may not be able to share that identity in my classroom feels like it goes against that philosophy."

Although unsupportive districts are putting some school staff in a difficult position, social worker Guy reports that safety still comes first. "Providers have a responsibility to protect children. Outing them violates that responsibility and our professional code of conduct. Safety should always be the highest priority."

Guy adds that even when students are in supportive homes, they still have the right to come out on their own terms.

Rose Saxe, Deputy Director LGBT & HIV Project ACLU, recommends that school staff targeted for supporting LGBTQIA+ students contact a [GLSEN chapter](#) or their local [ACLU affiliate](#).

Providers can also seek support from their professional organizations. The National Association of Social Workers and The American Counseling Association have condemned legislation forcing providers to out students. Educators can contact [The American Federation of Teachers](#) and the [National Education Association](#), who have pledged support to LGBTQIA+ students and allies.

Bekong—who is no longer in contact with their parents—says that it's important that people don't discount the trauma that outing can cause, and it's

crucial to ask a student what they need to be safe. "Never underestimate the impact of a trusted provider's support," Bekong says.

[Why Teachers Need to Prioritize Queer Visibility In Classrooms](#)

How To Be a Supportive Ally

LGBTQIA youth need supportive adults in their lives. Research shows having the support of friends and family significantly reduces the likelihood an LGBTQIA teen will attempt suicide.

Parents, teachers, and other adults can be an ally for LGBTQIA youth in the following ways:

- Learn about LGBTQIA issues and people.
- Support their gender expression.
- Use their name and pronouns correctly.
- Talk respectfully about their identity.
- Welcome their LGBTQIA friends or partners.

If an LGBTQIA teen comes out to you, it is important to keep their confidence and avoid accidentally outing them. Always ask permission before disclosing a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Resources for LGBTQIA Students and Allies

LGBTQIA students and allies who need support can contact the [ACLU](#), [The Trevor Project](#), [LGBT National Help Center](#), [Trans Lifeline](#), [PLFAG](#), [Crisis Text Line](#), or [Please Stay](#). To file a Title IX complaint, contact the [US Department of Education](#).