HRC Foundation's Project THRIVE 2024 Back to School Checklist

to Promote Safety, Inclusion, and Well-Being for LGBTQ+ Students & Youth

The 2024-2025 academic year is upon us and is poised to be a rather interesting year with a contentious Presidential election in November. All educators and youth-serving professionals are committed to the thriving of all their students and youth and have an ethical obligation to ensure that each young person feels safe, welcomed, and affirmed at school and in their out-of-school programs. Unfortunately, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) youth continue to experience disproportionate rates of rejection, bullying, and violence, which impact their school attendance, academic performance, and overall well-being. Additionally, the contentious political environment adds additional stress and fear among LGBTQ+ youth. This checklist includes policy and practice guidance to ensure schools and out-of-school programs are affirming to all young people, especially LGBTQ+ young people.

For the first time in the survey's history, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (YRBS) data included demographic questions on sexual orientation and gender identity. This means that we now have comparative data in one of the largest youth studies in the United States to more accurately account for the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers. This data combined with HRC's 2023 Youth Report and the Trevor Project's 2024 US National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People exemplify that LGBTQ+ youth urgently need the support and affirmation of adults in their lives.

As reported in initial toplines released by the CDC from their 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey of US high school enrolled youth:

- Almost **one in three (29%)** LGBTQ+ youth were bullied on school property in the prior year, compared to only **one in six (16%)** of their heterosexual and cisgender peers.
- **One in five (19%)** of LGBTQ+ youth skipped school due to safety concerns at least once in the last 30 days, compared with **one in ten (10%)** of their heterosexual and cisgender peers.
- Depressive symptoms were reported by **nearly two thirds (65%)** of LGBTQ+ youth, compared with **less than one third (31%)** of their heterosexual and cisgender peers.
- **Four in ten (41%)** of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered attempting suicide at least once in the past year, **over three times** that of their heterosexual and cisgender peers **(13%).**
- **One in five (20%)** of LGBTQ+ youth have attempted suicide in the last year, compared to **one in twenty (6%)** of their heterosexual and cisgender peers.

Additionally, HRC's 2023 Youth Report found:

- **More than half (55.1%)** of LGBTQ+ youth screened positive for **depression.**
- **Two thirds (63.5%)** of LGBTQ+ youth screened positive for **anxiety.**
- **Three in ten (30.9%)** of LGBTQ+ youth screened positive for **severe psychological distress.**
- **Over four in ten (41.7%)** of LGBTQ+ youth had an **unmet need for therapy**, defined as wanting to receive therapy, but being unable to do so.
- While **more than nine in ten** LGBTQ+ youth agree/strongly agree that they are **proud** to be part of the LGBTQ+ community, **one in four (23%)** wish they were not LGBTQ+.

Lastly, the Trevor Project's 2024 US National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People found:

- **The overwhelming majority (90%)** of LGBTQ+ young people said their well-being was negatively impacted due to recent politics.
  - **Over half (53%)** said the amount their well-being was negatively impacted by politics was "a lot."
- **Nearly two in five (39%)** of LGBTQ+ young people and **nearly half (45%)** of transgender and nonbinary youth reported that they or their family have considered moving to a different state due to anti-LGBTQ+ politics and laws.
- **LGBTQ+ youth of color had higher rates of suicide consideration and suicide attempts** compared to their white LGBTQ+ peers:

% Considered Suicide in the past year	Race/Ethnicity	% Attempted Suicide in the past year
36%	Asian American / Pacific Islander	10%
41%	Black / African American	14%
40%	Hispanic / Latiné	13%
40%	Middle Eastern / Northern African	14%
48%	Native / Indigenous	24%
37%	White	10%
44%	More than one race/ethnicity	16%

This Back-to-School resource was co-produced by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation in partnership with many of the nation's leading national educational and mental health professional associations and youth-serving organizations and **represents more than 4.9 million professionals** from across the country. The checklist provides research-based guidance for K-12 educators and other youth-serving professionals as they **proactively work to ensure safe, welcoming, and inclusive schools and communities for LGBTQ+ youth.**

When youth feel safe and connected at school, at home, and in their community, they are less likely to miss school and more likely to have higher GPAs and graduate college and be career ready. Therefore, if you are not able to check off all of the items below, we encourage you to work with your colleagues to advocate for changes to policies and practices that are **evidence-based** and proven to create safe, welcoming, and inclusive schools and organizations for all youth to thrive.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

Advocates for Youth
Rights. Respect. Responsibility.

AASL
American Association of School Librarians

AMERICAN COUNSELING ASSOCIATION

AMERICAN SCHOOL COUNSELOR ASSOCIATION

CASE
Council of Administrators of Special Education

FIRST

MHA
Mental Health America

NACAC
National Association for College Admission Counseling

NASP
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF School Psychologists

nea
NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

NASW
National Association of Social Workers

social current
Activating the Power of the Social Sector

School Social Work Association of America

Policies and Procedures

Non-Discrimination

- ❑ Our school, district, or organization has an **enumerated nondiscrimination policy** that **explicitly includes** protections for **students, youth, families, and staff** based on all of the following actual or perceived traits:
  - ❑ sexual orientation
  - ❑ gender identity
  - ❑ gender expression
  - ❑ sex assigned at birth
  - ❑ race
  - ❑ ethnicity or culture
  - ❑ ancestry or national origin
  - ❑ Religion
  - ❑ ability status
  - ❑ socio-economic status

Anti-Bullying or Anti-Harassment

- ❑ Our school, district, or organization has an **enumerated anti-bullying or anti-harassment policy** that explicitly includes protections for students based on all of the following actual or perceived traits:
  - ❑ sexual orientation
  - ❑ gender identity
  - ❑ gender expression
  - ❑ sex assigned at birth
  - ❑ race
  - ❑ ethnicity or culture
  - ❑ ancestry or national origin
  - ❑ Religion
  - ❑ ability status
  - ❑ socio-economic status

Equity & Inclusion

- ❑ Our school, district, or organization has an **equity & inclusion policy** that explicitly includes a commitment to each student based on the following and addresses unique challenges when students have multiple historically marginalized identities:
  - ❑ sexual orientation
  - ❑ gender identity
  - ❑ gender expression
  - ❑ sex assigned at birth
  - ❑ race
  - ❑ ethnicity or culture
  - ❑ ancestry or national origin
  - ❑ Religion
  - ❑ ability status
  - ❑ socio-economic status
  - ❑ other

Discipline

- ❑ Our school, district, or organization **promotes an intersectional approach to addressing all forms of bias and oppression** (i.e., racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, antisemitism, etc.) that includes:
  - ❑ promoting the use of restorative justice-type approaches to address bullying behavior
  - ❑ annual reviewing of disciplinary youth data disaggregated by identity to address trends of historically marginalized students being overly punished
  - ❑ maintaining access to identity-affirming, and life-saving resources, including GSAs

Confidentiality

- ❑ Our school, district, or organization has a policy that **explicitly asserts the confidentiality** of information pertaining to a student's or youth's sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression that should include:
  - ❑ educators and staff are aware that under FERPA they must protect the confidentiality of students related to their gender identity and sexual orientation and show great caution not to share a student's sexual orientation or gender identity without that student's permission, even to the student's parent or guardian.
  - ❑ a requirement that staff not "out" youth or disclose their identities to others, including the youth's parents/guardians, without the youth's written consent
  - ❑ assurances that only staff who need to know information such as a student's legal name or gender marker will know that information

Free Speech and Expression

- ❑ Our school, district, or organization has a policy that **recognizes the First Amendment rights of youth** exist in public schools AND commits to ensuring equitable speech and expression in private schools and organizations. These include the rights to:
  - ❑ freely assemble by forming Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSA), Diversity Clubs, or other organizations/groups focused on identity
  - ❑ freely assemble by allowing students and youth to bring a date of the same gender to events
  - ❑ freely express themselves in photos for yearbooks or other school/organization publications

- ❑ freely speak about LGBTQ+ issues that are including allowing students to do research on LGBTQ+ topics
- ❑ freely access age-appropriate books, websites, and other learning materials that are inclusive of LGBTQ+ identities and stories
- ❑ freely celebrate LGBTQ+ cultural events including National Coming Out Day, LGBTQ+ History and Pride months, No Name-Calling Week, etc.
- ❑ provide information on how to participate in the 2024 election including how eligible students can register and vote for the first time. (Checkout HRCF's Pride to the Polls for details.)

Support for Transgender and Non-Binary Youth

❑ Our school, district, or organization has a policy **enumerating support of transgender and non-binary** youth and provides them with the right to:

- ❑ support during gender social transitions including communication plans that relay necessary information such as name or pronoun changes
- ❑ be called by their chosen name and pronouns, (including gender-neutral pronouns) regardless of what is listed on their permanent student record or organizational file
- ❑ be treated consistent with their gender identity in all activities and school/organization-sponsored events
- ❑ equal access to facilities (restrooms, locker rooms, etc.) that align with their gender identity, OR where they feel most safe and comfortable
- ❑ have access to an all-gender restroom and private changing options that are available to all students seeking privacy

Dress Codes and Uniforms

❑ Our school, district, or organization has a **gender-neutral dress code** that is also **free of racial and cultural bias including:**

- ❑ rules around clothing that is not gendered but focuses on the article of clothing (e.g., skirts must be a certain length for anyone who wears them regardless of gender)
- ❑ freedom for youth to wear hairstyles and accessories that reflect their culture, customs, and/or religions including head coverings
- ❑ if your school or organization has a uniform, ensure that students have the ability to wear a uniform that aligns with their gender identity and/or their gender expression
- ❑ for school-sponsored or organization-sponsored activities, provide uniforms that ensure all students can participate in a way that aligns with their gender identity and/or expression

Professional Development

Ongoing Training

❑ Our school, district, or organization provides regular **ongoing professional development** such as HRC's Welcoming Schools' training to improve critical skills to address bias-based bullying behaviors as well as:

- ❑ specific training to prevent and respond to bullying incidents involving sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in addition to race, ancestry, ability status, religion, and other traits that are often targeted by bullies
- ❑ specific training for any and all mental health professionals that address the unique needs of LGBTQ+ youth

Climate, Culture, and Resources

School/Organizational Climate Assessment

❑ Our school, district, or organization **has a plan to regularly assess the climate for underrepresented youth** including:

- ❑ collecting school or program climate data that allow for the analysis of LGBTQ+ youth responses compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers.
- ❑ providing opportunities for LGBTQ+ students to share their experiences and recommendations to improve the climate and culture.

Visual Support / LGBTQ+ Affirming Signals

❑ Our school, district, or organization **displays positive LGBTQ+ affirming symbols** such as:

- ❑ posters on office/classroom walls that reflect LGBTQ+ people and the full spectrum of gender expression
- ❑ all staff members are offered posters or stickers to display in their office/classroom conveying the environment as a safe and inclusive space for LGBTQ+ students
- ❑ using inclusive, non-heteronormative, non-gendered language
- ❑ school, district, and/or organization website recognizes and celebrates LGBTQ+ diversity.

Mental & Behavioral Health Support

- ❑ Our school, district, or **organization takes a proactive approach to support the mental health and well-being** of all youth by:
  - ❑ ensuring LGBTQ+ youth have equal access to affirming counseling and social work services and resources
  - ❑ including a suicide prevention policy that addresses youth who are more at risk due to being marginalized such as LGBTQ+ and BIPOC youth
  - ❑ making LGBTQ+-affirming suicide prevention resources like The Trevor Project readily available
  - ❑ having certified/credentialed LGBTQ+-affirming school mental health professionals with a youth to professional ratio as recommended by ASCA, NASP, and SSWAA and/or a referral program to affirming counselors in your community
  - ❑ having readily available LGBTQ+ affirming support referral resources for youth such as local LGBTQ+ centers, Q-Chat Space and imi Guide
  - ❑ having readily available LGBTQ+ affirming support referral resources for parents and families such as PFLAG and the Family Acceptance Project

Inclusive Activities

- ❑ Our school, district, or organization **ensures that activities including sports and athletics are inclusive** of all students and particularly LGBTQ+ students including:
  - ❑ ensure activity groupings for classes including PE, class rosters, student royalty, in-class competitions, health, and choir should not be segregated by gender
  - ❑ ensure transgender and non-binary students can fully participate in intramural sports, recreational activities, physical education, and athletics
  - ❑ actively work to eliminate gender stereotypes with youth
  - ❑ provide LGBTQ+-specific activities such as GSAs, Pride groups, etc.

Inclusive Materials and Curriculum

Inclusive Materials and Curriculum

- ❑ Our school, district, or organization is **committed to the use of inclusive materials and curricula** that directly speak to the lives and experiences of LGBTQ+ people including:
  - ❑ staff use LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum for elementary and secondary-level youth
  - ❑ sexual health curriculum is inclusive of all sexual orientations and gender identities and includes HIV prevention and treatment information.
  - ❑ academic curriculum includes a full spectrum of gender identity and sexual orientation perspectives, voices, histories, and current events.
  - ❑ library collection selection and reconsideration policies are inclusive and based on best practices.
  - ❑ elementary and secondary school libraries include books and resources about people with a broad spectrum of gender identities, sexual orientations, and family structures.
  - ❑ staff members are empowered to address micro- and macro-aggressions utilizing teachable moments when anti-LGBTQ+ comments are made.
  - ❑ normalize pronoun sharing, including lesson plans that teach youth about gender-neutral pronouns.
  - ❑ provide affirmative counsel and support with the knowledge that a student's sexual orientation and/or gender identity is an integral part of who they are, which affects them academically and functionally.

Additional Resources

- ❑ Our school, district, or organization is aware of **local, regional, and national LGBTQ+ affirming** resources including:
  - ❑ resources for coming out including HRC's coming out guides and NBJC's inviting in toolkit
  - ❑ resources for finding scholarships and grants for post-secondary education
  - ❑ resources for finding LGBTQ+-inclusive colleges and universities, including historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs)

CHECK OUT ADDITIONAL HRC RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS & YOUTH-SERVING PROFESSIONALS

- All Children - All Families Free Field Forward Webinar Series
- Economic Empowerment Programs
- Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU) Program
- Project THRIVE Free Webinar Series
- Welcoming Schools
  - Welcoming Schools Training Program
  - Welcoming Schools Book Lists
  - Welcoming Schools Lesson Plans

Check Out Additional Resources from Project THRIVE Partners

- Advocates for Youth Back to School K-12 Professional Development
- American Association of School Librarian's (AASL) Defending Intellectual Freedom: LGBTQ+ Materials in School Libraries
- AASL's Developing Creative Collaborators, Flexible Partners, and Resilient Citizens: Activity Guide, Applied Framework, and Infographic.
- AASL's Developing Inclusive Learners and Citizens: Activity Guide, Applied Framework, and Infographic
- AASL's Developing Reflective Explorers and Innovators: Activity Guide, Applied Framework, and Infographic
- AASL's Developing Critical Curators Seeking Diverse Perspectives: Activity Guide, Applied Framework, and Infographic
- AASL's Developing Inquisitive Learners, Critical Thinkers, and Resourceful Citizens: Activity Guide, Applied Framework, and Infographic
- American Counselors Association's (ACA) LGBTQ+ Counseling Resources
- ACA's "Celebrating LGBTGEQIAP+ Diversity - Can One Acronym Say It All?"
- ACA's Counseling Today article, "Making schools more inclusive for LGBTQ+ students" by Stephanie Opiela (August 2023)
- American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) The School Counselor and LGBTQ+ Youth
- ASCA's The School Counselor and Transgender and Nonbinary Youth
- ASCA's Support LGBTQ+ Students Toolkit
- Camp Fire's New, First-of-its-Kind Study: Creating Gender-Affirming Spaces at Summer Camp
- FIRST's LGBTQ+ of FIRST
- FIRST's Rainbow STEM Alliance FIRST Scholarship
- Mental Health America's LGBTQ+ Mental Health Resource Center
- Mental Health America Young Minds Resource Hub
- National Association of School Psychologists' (NASP) Resources for Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth
- National Education Association's (NEA) LGBTQ+ Support & Protection Resources

PROJECT THRIVE
A NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO SUPPORT LGBTQ YOUTH
HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN FOUNDATION