

# A Focus Guide for School Professionals

## Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for LGBTQIA2S+ Youth

### Background

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center partnered with NORC at the University of Chicago to develop a series of resource guides for professionals, families, communities, and technical assistance providers who regularly interact with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and/or Two-Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+). These guides were developed with input from LGBTQIA2S+ youth and their parents, professionals and advocates, and people who have experienced suicidal thoughts and behaviors. This focus guide is intended specifically for K-12 school professionals. The other guides—a comprehensive resource guide and three focus guides for health and behavioral health professionals, families and communities, and state agencies—can be accessed at <https://sprc.org/lgbtqia2s-youth-resources/>.

### Introduction

The number of individuals who are openly Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and/or Two-Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+) is at an all-time high in the U.S., having doubled since 2012.<sup>1</sup> This increase may be driven by the younger population; one in five Gen Z adults (ages 18 to 26) are openly LGBTQIA2S+ compared to 7.1% of adults

18 and above. This increase is expected to continue as today's adolescents reach adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

Even with greater openness around sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE)<sup>1</sup> in the U.S., LGBTQIA2S+ youth continue to face unique challenges that can contribute to poor mental health and increased risk of suicide. The challenges can include trauma; lack of acceptance from family, peers, or at school; discrimination; homophobia; transphobia; and violence.<sup>3,4</sup> Research shows that approximately 46% of LGBTQIA2S+ adolescents

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seriously considered suicide in 2022.<sup>4</sup> Efforts that help LGBTQIA2S+ youth feel more comfortable and safe in being their true selves are critical in supporting the well-being of this growing population.

Schools play an important role in promoting positive mental health and well-being among LGBTQIA2S+ youth and their families. This focus guide is intended to be a brief, high-level resource to help school professionals better support the mental well-being of LGBTQIA2S+ youth. It offers recommendations and strategies for creating inclusive, affirming, and protective environments for LGBTQIA2S+ youth and includes links to more in-depth resources and trainings.

*Two-Spirit describes the presence of both male and female energy combined with the ability to connect with the spiritual world (ancestors, Creator, and higher power). In most Tribes, Two-Spirit people occupy a distinct, alternative gender status.<sup>2</sup> Not all Tribal communities agree that it is appropriate to include Two-Spirit in discussions of LGBTQIA2S+ identities. Please consult the communities you engage about their perspectives on this.*

## Create an Inclusive and Supportive School Environment

It is important to create environments in which LGBTQIA2S+ youth can thrive. Research links inclusive, supportive, affirming environments to mental health and psychosocial development among LGBTQIA2S+ youth.<sup>3,5-7</sup> It is particularly important to create these environments in school settings, as LGBTQIA2S+ youth spend a significant portion of their day in school and are more likely than other youth to face harmful, unsafe conditions and experience bullying and harassment.<sup>8-12</sup> The Resources box on this page offers some recommendations and resources for creating a school environment that is inclusive and supportive of LGBTQIA2S+ youth.

## Create policies and practices that ensure a protective and inclusive environment for all youth.

One important way to improve the well-being of LGBTQIA2S+ youth in your school is the implementation of district-wide policies and practices that are inclusive of LGBTQIA2S+ youth. If you do not have an initiative related to SOGIE, consider convening a diverse team to **implement an anti-discrimination, anti-bias, and anti-bullying policy and to work to create a culture of respect, inclusivity, and equity.** Research has shown that LGBTQIA2S+ students attending schools with SOGIE-supportive policies and practices are less likely to experience bullying and victimization and are more likely to succeed academically than those attending less supportive schools.<sup>6-8</sup>

## Ensure that curricula and communications are LGBTQIA2S+-inclusive.

- As a first step, ask your students how they would like you to address them. You can ask them to record their preferred name and pronouns on a form at the beginning of each school year and let them know how to update their preferences if anything changes. Ensure that students and school personnel **use and respect preferred names and pronouns.**<sup>13</sup>
- Ensure that school-wide messaging is gender neutral and inclusive of LGBTQIA2S+ youth and

### Resources

- ✓ **Toolkit:** [Creating Safer Spaces for LGBTQ Youth](#)
- ✓ **Book:** [LGBTQ Youth and Education: Policies and Practices](#)
- ✓ **Tool:** [LGBTQ Inclusivity in Schools: A Self-Assessment Tool](#)
- ✓ **Course:** [National Education Association's Support LGBTQ+ Students - Micro-credentials](#)



## Ensure that your school is affirming of SOGIE

*"The power of affirmation is everything. If we can understand the simple 'accept you for who you are, and it is completely normal and amazing who you are,' that right there can make a mental health crisis disappear."*

**LGBTQIA2S+ professional and advocate**



staff. For example, refrain from using gendered terms and phrases such as “ladies, gentlemen, guys, or girls”; use “friends, folks, everyone, or you all” instead.

- Identify **safe spaces** where LGBTQIA2S+ youth can receive unbiased support. GLSEN’s [Safe Space Kit](#) or the [Safe Zone Project](#) can help you create and promote these spaces in schools.
- Use age-appropriate, LGBTQIA2S+-**inclusive and affirming curricula**. This can improve academic and mental health outcomes among LGBTQIA2S+ students, and it has been shown to reduce risk of suicide.<sup>4,8</sup>

## Promote Well-being, Resiliency, and Healthy School Connections

- **Strengthen school climate.** School climate refers to the quality and character of a school. It is influenced by social and physical factors such as norms, values, safety, relationships, teaching practices, and organizational structures.<sup>11</sup> School climate can impact school success and mental health and suicide-related outcomes. See the [National School Climate Center](#) for more information and resources.
  - Use a tool such as the [U.S. Department of Education School Climate Survey](#), the [Comprehensive School Climate Inventory](#), or [GLSEN Local School Climate Survey](#) to measure school climate and implement data-driven change.
  - Improve school discipline policies through evidence-based models such as the [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\)](#).
- **Improve relationships between youth and adults.** Research has found that when youth can identify at least one adult they trust, they are less likely to experience suicidal thoughts and behaviors.<sup>4,7,14</sup> Help teachers and school personnel understand what it means to be a supportive adult and provide them with [resources and support](#) to cultivate these positive connections.

### Resources

- ✓ [GLSEN’s Educator Resources](#)  
Guides, curriculum lesson plans, activities, tools, and more.
- ✓ [Developing LGBTQ-Inclusive Classroom Resources](#)  
Practical information and guidance on classroom behavior and developing inclusive curricula.
- ✓ [Trans Student Educational Resources](#)  
Youth-led organization dedicated to transforming the educational environment for trans and gender non-conforming students.
- ✓ [LGBTQ Youth Programs-At-A-Glance](#)  
Examples of state and local educational agency model programs focused on addressing the needs of LGBTQIA2S+ youth.

- **Incorporate peer programs and supportive clubs** for LGBTQIA2S+ students such as [Gender & Sexuality Alliances](#).
- **Implement universal programming** to improve well-being and create safer schools for all students. Universal programming can be particularly helpful in areas where there is resistance toward SOGIE-focused programs. Universal programs can help ensure that LGBTQIA2S+ youth receive mental health programming and feel supported by their schools. In addition to the Sources of Strength program mentioned above, other examples of universal programming for mental health and suicide prevention include:
  - [Social Emotional Learning \(SEL\)](#)  
Educational method or curriculum to help youth develop social and emotional skills that benefit children and adults, both in and out of the classroom.
  - [Good Behavior Game](#)  
Developed to help teachers manage classroom behavior, this team-based activity helps children become successful students and members of the school community.

- [Gizmo’s Pawesome Guide to Mental Health](#)  
A child-friendly guide and curriculum designed to introduce youth to mental health and wellness, problem-solving, and connectedness and to help them cope with stress and find support.

## Create a School Environment That Is Protective Against Youth Suicide

### Best Practices Implementation

Create a [comprehensive approach](#) and school-wide policy that includes best practices and evidence-based protocols for school-based suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention (what to do after a suicide death). Every person working in a school has a role to play in preventing youth and LGBTQIA2S+ suicide, and creating clearly **defined roles and responsibilities** can help ensure that no young person falls through the cracks.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) developed the [Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention](#). The Suicide Prevention

### Program Spotlight

#### Sources of Strength

Sources of Strength is an international best practices and evidence-based program for youth mental health promotion and suicide prevention. Typically conducted in K-12 schools, this program is youth-driven and harnesses the power of peer social networks to create healthy norms and a positive school culture. By increasing well-being, help-seeking, resiliency, healthy coping, and belonging, it has been shown to reduce suicide, substance use, violence, and other negative outcomes in a school population. The program uses a diverse group of peer leaders and adult advisors to implement public health messaging campaigns and activities throughout a school. To learn more about Sources of Strength, visit <https://sourcesofstrength.org/>.

#### Resources for Implementing School-Based Suicide Prevention

- ✓ [Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention](#)
- ✓ [K-12 Toolkit for Mental Health Promotion & Suicide Prevention](#)
- ✓ [After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools](#)
- ✓ [Rural Suicide Prevention Toolkit – School-based Strategies](#)

#### Training Resources and Organizations

- ✓ [The Trevor Project](#)
- ✓ [Making Educators Partners in Youth Suicide Prevention](#)
- ✓ [Umatter® for Schools](#)



Resource Center (SPRC) and AFSP developed [After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools](#). Both are essential suicide prevention resources for schools. After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools provides important guidance to assist schools in the aftermath of a suicide.

Other steps to prevent LGBTQIA2S+ youth suicide in schools include:

- Have trained clinical staff conduct routine mental health and suicide risk screenings.
  - For students with identified suicide risk, conduct a [Stanley-Brown Safety Planning Intervention](#) to help youth develop an individualized set of coping strategies to use during time-limited suicidal crises.
  - Refer to the [comprehensive approach](#) for further action steps and information.
- Distribute and post resources, such as [hotlines and support resources](#), including the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline \(Lifeline\)](#), the [Trevor Project hotline](#) (1-866-488-7386), and [Crisis Text Line](#) (text 741741) around your school and on the school's social media channels.
  - Some schools have initiated Lifeline promotional design programs to encourage students to create their own Lifeline promotional materials that can be used in the school.

## Collaboration

Schools can also improve mental health and prevent suicide by having dedicated school-based health and mental health clinics and/or by collaborating with local mental health organizations and community-based LGBTQIA2S+ organizations. Establish [Memoranda of Understanding \(MOU\)](#) with local organizations to improve communication, coordination, referrals, and follow-up between schools and community-based agencies.

## Training and Education

Increase competence and confidence among teachers and other school personnel through **recurring education and training**. These trainings should cover:

- Cultural humility and anti-bias training, including self-assessments that help educators understand how unconscious bias may impact teaching practices and how teachers treat individual students
  - For example, see the [Cultural Humility Scale](#) and the [Critical Practices for Anti-Bias Education: Teacher Leadership professional development course](#)
- The power of affirmation and its impact on LGBTQIA2S+ health and well-being
- Topics specific to LGBTQIA2S+ health, mental health, and suicide prevention
- Role-specific suicide prevention training for each type of school professional (e.g., educators, nurses, psychologists, social workers, guidance counselors, school resource officers, and other non-academic school roles).

## Conclusion

This focus guide was developed with the help and support of many individuals, including LGBTQIA2S+ youth and their parents. It serves as a starting point for the countless conversations that we can, and should, have as a society to better support, advocate for, and celebrate LGBTQIA2S+ youth. It is imperative that we come together in our communities to lead with love, compassion, and respect for one another rather than focusing on the things that make us different. We hope that this focus guide will help school professionals as they seek to create and maintain supportive, loving, and affirming environments in which LGBTQIA2S+ youth can thrive. By implementing the strategies outlined here and learning from the program spotlight, adults and community members can take the next steps to assess and adapt their current practices to ensure they are meeting the needs of LGBTQIA2S+ youth. A multi-tiered approach will facilitate positive environments and outcomes for LGBTQIA2S+ youth. For more information about working with LGBTQIA2S+ youth, please access the accompanying Resource Guide at <https://sprc.org/lgbtqia2s-youth-resources/>.

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