



LET HER
LEARN

STOPPING SCHOOL PUSHOUT *for LGBTQ Girls*

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As more and more adults identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT),¹ it comes as no surprise that more and more young people also identify as LGBT.² Yet there is extremely limited data, government or otherwise, on LGBT youth and their distinct experiences in and out of school. In order to better understand the obstacles different groups of girls—including girls who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ)—face in school and what they need to be safe, healthy, and successful, the National Women’s Law Center (NWLC) conducted six focus groups around the country and a nationwide survey of girls in January 2017 (the Let Her Learn Survey).³

The Let Her Learn Survey reveals that nearly 1 in 4 girls nationwide (24 percent) identify somewhere on the LGBTQ scale and also shows that girls who identify as LGBTQ often face substantial and challenging barriers to succeeding in school and thriving in their communities.⁴ For example, these girls were more likely than girls overall to report experiencing sexual assault and were more likely to report being harassed after the 2016 presidential election. These girls were also more likely to report being absent from school because they felt unsafe there or on their way there. However, the Let Her Learn Survey brings to light that LGBTQ girls, just like other girls, want to succeed in school and want help in doing so.

Barriers to Success in School for LGBTQ Girls

Bullying and harassment remains a substantial impediment to girls who identify as LGBTQ feeling safe and accepted in school. More than 1 in 5 LGBTQ girls (21 percent) have been bullied or harassed

because they identify as a girl and more than 1 in 4 (27 percent) have been harassed since the 2016 presidential election (**Figure 1**). Given that many of these girls have experienced bullying or harassment, it is not surprising that more than 1 in 3 (36 percent) reported that they felt like other students did not want them in their school and why 1 in 4 (25 percent) has been absent from school because they felt they would be unsafe there or on their way there. If girls do not feel like they are safe and accepted in a place they spend a significant amount of their time, they may opt to skip school altogether: More than 2 in 5 (43 percent) LGBTQ girls have been chronically absent from school—meaning they have missed 15 or more days of school in a school year—and are at risk of falling far behind their peers.

Figure 1. Selected LGBTQ Girls' Experiences

Experience	LGBTQ Girls
Has experienced symptoms of PTSD	83%
Felt like their future looked positive	75%
Felt they had a support system in their life	68%
Has missed 15 or more days of school in a school year	43%
Has been kissed or touched without their consent	38%
Felt like other students did not want them at their school	36%
Has been bullied or harassed since the presidential election	27%
Has been hurt or injured on purpose by a family member	27%
Has been absent from school because they felt they would be unsafe at school or on way to school	25%
Has been harassed or bullied because they identify as a girl	21%

Source: National Women's Law Center, Let Her Learn Survey, Conducted by Lake Research Partners (2017).

WHAT
GIRLS
SAY:

“I think the bullying thing at my school is too much.

A boy... got mad at me because I'm gay... He was making really inappropriate comments... He was like oh you want to act like a boy? I'm going to show you how a boy acts.”

– LGBTQ Girl Focus Group Participant

But bullying and harassment is just the tip of the iceberg for many girls who identify as LGBTQ. More than half (52 percent) reported that they are a survivor of some form of sexual or other violence, including nearly 2 in 5 (38 percent) who reported that they had been kissed or touched without their consent.⁵ Experiencing such traumatic events has steep physical, emotional, and mental consequences that can affect school performance.⁶ For example, nearly 1 in 12 LGBTQ girls (8 percent) has repeated a grade and more than 6 in 10 (61 percent) have trouble concentrating and staying focused in school. Girls who identify as LGBTQ (83 percent) are also more likely than girls overall (67 percent) to report experiencing symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder.⁷

How Schools Can Help LGBTQ Girls Succeed

Despite the prevalence of harassment and violence among girls who identify as LGBTQ, NWLC's Let Her Learn Survey indicates that many of these girls felt like their future looked positive (75 percent) and they felt like they have a support system in their lives (68 percent). The survey also uncovers a variety of solutions that these girls say would make schools better for them, with the top solutions falling into two main categories (**Figure 2**).⁸

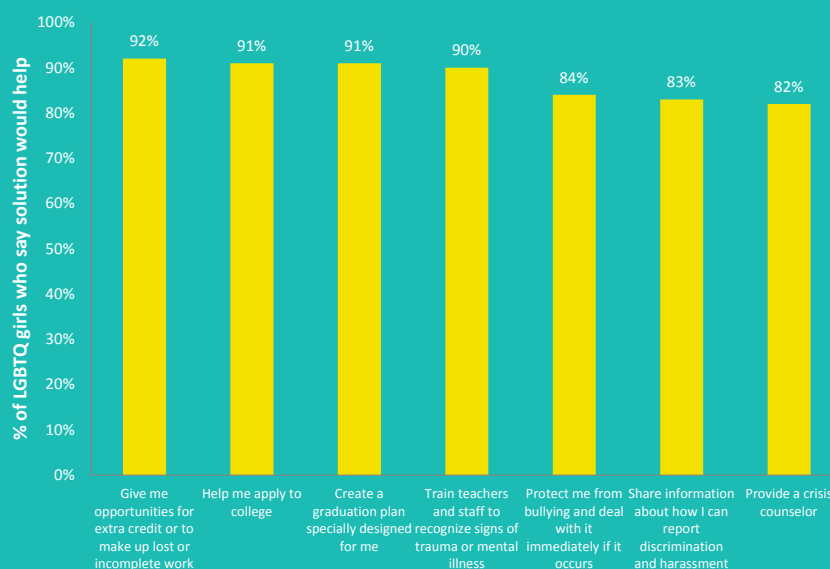
First, girls who identify as LGBTQ want to make sure they have the tools they need to graduate and to pursue higher education. Although more than 8 in 10 LGBTQ girls (82 percent) are interested in a 4-year college after high school, more than half of LGBTQ girls (54 percent) say they get little or no counseling or help with their future and 60 percent say not having access to the courses they want makes it hard to go to school.⁹ The top solutions LGBTQ girls identified to address these problems were:

- Provide opportunities for extra credit or to make up lost work (92 percent);
- Help them apply to college (91 percent); and
- Help them finish school by having a graduation plan designed just for them (91 percent)

The second category of solutions LGBTQ girls identified that would improve schools for them revolve around preventing bullying and harassment and helping them deal with or recover from trauma. The top solutions were:

- Train teachers and staff to recognize signs of trauma or mental illness (90 percent);
- Protect them from bullying and deal with it immediately if it occurs (84 percent);
- Share information about how they can report discrimination or harassment (83 percent); and
- Provide a crisis counselor (82 percent).

Figure 2. How to Make Schools Better for LGBTQ Girls



Source: National Women's Law Center, Let Her Learn Survey, Conducted by Lake Research Partners (2017).



Policymakers, educators, and communities can and should do more to help girls who identify as LGBTQ succeed in school and thrive in their communities. The solutions that LGBTQ girls identified in the Let Her Learn Survey are just a start. With greater attention to their needs and the proper support systems and services, LGBTQ girls can thrive in school.

This publication would not have been possible without the generous support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions within, however, are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the funder.

- 1 Gary J. Gates, Gallup, "US, More Adults Identifying as LGBT" (Jan. 2017), available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/201731/lgbt-identification-rises.aspx>.
- 2 Human Rights Coalition, *National Coming Out Day Youth Report* (2016), available at <http://www.hrc.org/youth-report/national-coming-out-day-report>.
- 3 To better understand what healthy and safe schools look like for all girls, the National Women's Law Center (NWLC) collaborated with Lake Research Partners to conduct a study of girls from January 5-19, 2017. The study included an online survey of 1,003 girls ages 14-18 nationwide. Black girls, Latinas, Asian/Pacific Islander girls, Native American girls, and LGBTQ girls were oversampled. The data were weighted by age, race, and census region to reflect the actual proportions of the population. Oversamples were weighted down to reflect their proportions in the population. The margin of error is +/- 3.1%. The margin of error is higher among subgroups. The study also included six focus groups on barriers facing girls who are survivors of sexual assault and girls who are either currently pregnant or those who are parenting children. The focus groups were conducted in Washington, D.C., Chicago, IL, and Atlanta, GA. The focus group guide and nationwide survey were reviewed by Schulman Institutional Review Board to ensure they protected the well-being of all girls involved in the study.
- 4 National Women's Law Center, Let Her Learn Survey. NWLC's survey asked respondents about their current gender identity, allowing them to select from male, female, transgender male, transgender female, gender queer or gender nonconforming, or other. The survey also asked respondents about their sexual orientation, allowing them to select from heterosexual or straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual/biromantic, asexual, not sure, or other. Any data describing the experiences of LGBTQ girls reflects responses from those who self-identified their gender to be female or transgender female and those who self-identified their sexual orientation to be anything except heterosexual or straight.
- 5 Ibid. Girls are considered survivors of sexual or other violence if they experienced one or more of the following: being kissed or touched without their consent, being physically forced to have sex when they did not want to; being forced to have sex in exchange for money or gifts; being hurt or injured on purpose by someone they were going out with or by a family member.
- 6 For a discussion of trauma experienced by girls who have suffered sexual harassment or violence, see Kayla Patrick and Neena Chaudhry, National Women's Law Center, *Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout for Girls Who Have Suffered Harassment and Sexual Violence* (April 2017).
- 7 National Women's Law Center, Let Her Learn Survey. Girls experiencing symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder reported experiencing at least one of the following: felt very upset when something reminded them of a stressful experience from the past; had repeated disturbing memories, thoughts, or images of stressful experiences from the past.
- 8 Ibid. Girls who supported a solution include those who said the solution would help a lot, help somewhat, or help a little.
- 9 Ibid. Girls who identified not having access to courses they want in school said it was a major barrier, somewhat of a barrier, or a little barrier to going to school.