

Michigan Psychological Association

Comment on the Draft Michigan Board of Education's Statement and Guidance on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Students.

The Michigan Psychological Association (MPA) is the primary professional association for psychologists in Michigan. Its members are diverse and hold diverse opinions and beliefs about social issues, yet operate under a common ethical code, standards of practice and a shared mission to support human welfare. MPA is also an affiliate of the American Psychological Association (APA), and fully supports the APA's Public Interest Directorate to apply psychology "to the fundamental problems of human welfare and social justice and the promotion of equitable and just treatment of all segments of society through education, training and public policy." Thus, MPA uses its voice as a professional and scientific organization to promote the public welfare by encouraging the highest professional standards, offering public education and providing public service, and by participating in the public policy process on behalf of the profession and health care consumers.

To that end, the MPA offers its full support for the Michigan State Board of Education's February 6, 2016 draft, "Statement and Guidance on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Students," which is consistent with current scientific research and evidence-based best practices.

Diversity in sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression is part of healthy human nature.

- Biological sex that is assigned at birth and a person's gender identity are two separate aspects of a person. Research shows that gender identity is a psychologically felt sense that begins to develop early in life. For some youths and adults, gender identity does not match the biological sex assigned at birth.
- There is no evidence that supports the notion that one kind of sexual or gender identity is inherently healthier than another; instead, research shows that individuals of all genders and sexual orientations have the capacity to live healthy, productive lives.
- Scientific studies find that the broad range of sexual orientations and gender identities people experience are similarly associated with health, safety, and the capacities to learn, have successful relationships, and lead happy and productive lives.

All youth deserve equal access to education in a safe, accepting and respectful learning environment.

- LGBT youth, and those suspected of being LGBT, experience higher rates of bullying, harassment, and exclusion in schools. In several recent studies, more than half of LGBTQ students surveyed reported feeling unsafe at school.
- Bullying, harassment, discrimination, and exclusion of youth robs them of their sense of safety and belonging, and is consistently associated with negative mental health and academic problems that can have far-reaching consequences for their well-being. Specifically, research shows that bullying, discrimination, rejection, and exclusion of LGBT youth are stressors that contribute to mental health issues (e.g. anxiety, depression, suicidality), poorer academic outcomes (i.e. low/inconsistent

academic performance, truancy and drop-outs), and a higher risk for negative behaviors such as substance use.

- There is no empirical basis for treating LGBTQ youth, or those who are suspected of being LGBTQ, with less respect, care, or acceptance.
- Creating inclusive, safe and respectful school environments benefits all students.

School practices that are supportive and affirming of sexual orientation and gender diversity are linked with positive outcomes.

- Creating accepting practices and groups that support all students in their identities including LGBTQ, heterosexual, and cisgender identities is associated with students feeling safer and completing school.
- Social science research reveals that accepting school and family practices that affirm LGBTQ youths for who they are lead to more positive outcomes.
- Schools that have implemented supportive policies and practices that affirm gender and sexual orientation diversity have students with more positive mental health and academic outcomes.
- When schools adopt model policies like those recommended in the Statement and Guidance, there is no evidence that students have been harmed, threatened, or attacked in restrooms, locker rooms, or other private spaces. Instead, finding solutions that respect the identities of all students in their particular school is associated with students feeling safer.

To accurately inform educators and families, we ask that the Draft Statement and Guidance be approved.

Schools and families are constantly managing challenging questions about how to promote the safest and most effective learning environments for all students. Questions about creating a safe and respectful learning environment for LGBTQ students have challenged some deeply-held personal beliefs and triggered emotional arguments. As psychologists with training and expertise in social science research methodology however, we cannot ignore the difference between scientific empirical evidence and false information that is often generated by fear and misunderstanding. We at MPA support informing individuals and communities with credible evidence.

As a document that presents evidence-based information about sexual orientation and gender diversity to schools and communities, we ask that you join us in supporting the Draft Statement and Guidance on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Students.

References

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www.stopbullying.gov