LGBTQI+ Students Online: 10 Questions to Promote Digital Health, Safety, and Citizenship

Digital health, safety, and citizenship skills reflect the full set of knowledge and habits students can adopt to protect themselves and others in online spaces. For schools and districts, protecting student health and safety while those skills develop means taking an approach that can include policies governing the use of school-provided technology, access to personal devices at school, anti-bullying policies, and standards of responsible interactions online. While digital health, safety, and citizenship are important for all students, creating and maintaining school policies and cultures that meet the needs of students who are LGBTQI+[1] can require special consideration in areas such as responsible use of school-provided digital access, anti-bullying policies, and resources for building healthy online habits.

"Digital health" refers to the skills and practices necessary in maintaining a healthy and balanced relationship with technology and the digital world. It recognizes the benefits of technology as well as the potential negative impacts of excessive or unhealthy technology use, including strategies to help promote physical, mental, and emotional well-being in the context of digital usage.

"Digital safety" focuses on skills and practices to avoid online risks and ensure privacy and security while using digital technologies. It involves measures to safeguard personal information, avoiding cyber threats, and prevent unauthorized access to sensitive data. Digital safety also encompasses educating individuals about online dangers, such as phishing scams, identity theft, cyberbullying, and online harassment, and promoting responsible digital citizenship.

"Digital citizenship" refers to appropriate, responsible behavior when using technology. It encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to navigate the digital world respectfully and responsibly while engaging positively and constructively in online communities. Prepared digital citizens possess good digital literacy and critical thinking skills.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - Division of Adolescent and School Health, LGBTQI+ students were more than twice as likely as their peers to be bullied online.[2] Those findings confirm the results of GLSEN's national survey published in *Out Online: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth on the Internet*: "LGBT youth were nearly three times as likely as non-LGBT youth to say they had been bullied or harassed online (42 percent vs. 15 percent) and twice as

---

[1] The Department generally uses the term "LGBTQI+" to refer to students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, asexual, intersex, nonbinary, or describe their sex characteristics, sexual orientation, or gender identity in another similar way. When referring to some outside resources, this document also uses variations of this acronym to track the content of those documents, as appropriate.
[2] https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023_508.pdf

likely to say they had been bullied via text message (27 percent vs. 13 percent)."[3] Research shows inclusive language and policies regarding LGBTQI+ students can be associated with improved outcomes for all students.[4] Additionally, a 2016 study[5] surveying more than 7,000 LGBT students across nearly 3,000 schools found that inclusion of sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression in antibullying policies led to "significantly greater feelings of safety, less victimization experiences (e.g., harassment and assault based upon sexual orientation and gender expression)" than among students in districts with generic policies or no policy.

To support the wellbeing of LGBTQI+ students, the U.S. Department of Education (Department) recommends school leaders – including superintendents and other district leaders, as well as school principals – consider and address the following questions as they establish school policies and cultures that are inclusive and supportive of LGBTQI+ students with respect to their digital health, safety, and citizenship:

1. **Does your school or district have a clearly articulated vision of digital health and safety for students at all levels and does it account for possible risks related to student demographics?** Because some students, including LGBTQI+ students, experience heightened bullying and abuse online, consider specifically addressing those population-specific risks and harms in equity statements, policies, and planning.

2. **How are you collecting data and evidence to better understand the digital health and safety needs of students, families, and employees within your district or schools (e.g., needs assessments, climate surveys, incident reports)?** Be sure any data collection protects privacy, safety, and disclosures of information as appropriate and is sensitive to the needs of LGBTQI+ members of the school community. The Department's Student Privacy Policy Office has a [Know Your Rights resource](#) on the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)'s protection for student health records.

3. **What measurable goals have you established for the digital health, safety, and mental well-being of students?** When determining these measures, consider both reduction in negative incidents against LGBTQI+ students as well as increases in proactive measures and positive outcomes.

4. **How might students and families be included in assessing needs, setting district and school goals, and designing learning opportunities?** While some students and families may be willing to publicly participate in this process, it is also important to provide pathways for participation that allow for anonymity or otherwise protect privacy and safety that may be especially important to LGBTQI+ students and students with LGBTQI+ parents or family members given their heightened risk of electronic bullying as set out in the research discussed above.

5. **What supports are necessary and do you have in place to ensure key staff (e.g., administrators, school counselors, social workers, educators) have an adequate understanding of and capacity to respond to the unique needs involving support of student digital health and safety?** This can require a three-pronged approach: 1) Increase capacity around digital health, safety, and citizenship in general; 2) Build understanding of the specific needs and risk of harassment of LGBTQI+ students in digital spaces; and 3) Assess how

---

[3] [Out_Online_Full_Report_2013.pdf (glsen.org)](#)
[4] [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023_508.pdf](#)
Examining the Relationship Between LGBTQ-Supportive School Health Policies and Practices and Psychosocial Health Outcomes of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Students
[5] [Effectiveness of school district antibullying policies in improving LGBT youths' school climate. (apa.org)](#)

school-based technologies in place (e.g., student activity monitoring software) may inadvertently filter or block access to mental health resources for LGBTQI+ youth.

6. **What emergency resources, procedures, and supports are in place to support in moments of crisis regarding digital health and safety?** When building pathways for students and staff to signal their need for support in responding to potential digital crises, such as online bullying, be sure to consider safety and other interests regarding disclosures of identities.

7. **What curricular, extra-, or co-curricular inclusion supports can be or have been established to support student digital health and safety?** Such activities may involve support for Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSAs[6]), training for advisors/sponsors of school GSAs, training for IT staff to prevent filtering or blocking of LGBTQI+ mental health resources on school networks, and processes for inclusion of LGBTQI+ history and contributions in digital learning resources.

8. **What external partnerships can be or have been established to augment school and district capacity to promote student digital health and safety?** Such partnerships may include non-profit organizations with expertise supporting LGBTQI+ students, local health offices, and national organizations focusing on issues of digital health, safety, and citizenship. Consider whether possible partners may need additional training in legal protections for student privacy, your school/district digital ecosystem, and specific needs of LGBTQI+ students.

9. **How do you plan to build community awareness and support of these needs, goals, and efforts?** School leaders should consider how to share information with LGBTQI+ students and parents about how to protect their safety online and build community-wide awareness of the challenges that LGBTQI+ youth can face online.

10. **What ongoing funding sources (e.g., Title II, Title IV grants) can or will you leverage to support these efforts?** The Department's Dear Colleague Letter on the use of federal funds for educational technology may help as you consider sustainable funding for meeting the digital health, safety, and citizenship needs of all students, including LGBTQI+ students.

These questions and their specific consideration for LGBTQI+ students are intended to help school leaders shift from a focus of response and reaction to one of proactive planning for helping all students be safe, healthy, and digitally responsible citizens. For general resources on supporting LGBTQI+ youth, consider the Department's Toolkit on Creating Inclusive and Nondiscriminatory School Environments for LGBTQI+ Students and this collection of resources from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

***

HOW TO CITE
While permission to reprint this publication is not necessary, the suggested citation is as follows:

---

[6] https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/safe-supportive-environments/sexuality-alliances.htm and https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/lgbt.html

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, LGBTQI+ Students Online: 10 Questions to Promote Digital Health, Safety, and Citizenship, Washington, DC, 2024

Please note: This resource does not have the force or effect of law, is not meant to bind the public, and does not constitute legal advice. In addition, this resource contains links to materials created and maintained by other public or private organizations that are provided for the user's convenience. The inclusion of these materials is not intended to endorse any views expressed or products or services offered, and the opinions expressed in any of these materials do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials.

March 25, 2024