

Examining School Supports and Barriers to Improving the Health, Safety, and Academic Achievement of LGBTQ+ Students

Mollie T. McQuillan, Sherie Hohs, Jennifer Herdina, Xue Gong, and Erin K. Gill

The Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) has invested in several districtwide organizational supports for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other non-straight, non-cisgender (LGBTQ+) students. Leaders of these initiatives want to know how these supports have contributed to changes in school-level academics and disciplinary actions. Our study responds to the need by asking:

- How many MMSD students identify as LGBTQ+? To what extent are sexual orientation and gender identity related to academic and socioemotional outcomes for MMSD students?
- What percent of MMSD educators attend inclusivity professional development (IPD) trainings?
- Do elementary schools volunteering for MMSD's whole-school inclusivity program, *Welcoming Schools*, differ from schools that don't volunteer?
- Does that program contribute to variation in schools' academic and disciplinary outcomes?

Our longitudinal study used 2013–2020 MMSD program evaluation and procedural tracking data, along with data from the 2013–2019 Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction discipline reports and school report cards and the 2018 Dane County Youth Assessment. Our descriptive analyses revealed that MMSD students identify with LGBTQ+ labels at far higher rates than national estimates and report better school climate; however, transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) students report similar levels of poor school experiences when compared to national surveys. Since 2013, 16% of MMSD staff has received IPD training, but less diverse elementary schools received the intensive *Welcoming Schools* IPD. Controlling for school demographics, the 2018–2019 regression analysis suggests that IPD contributes to fewer school disciplinary actions. Based on our findings, we recommend that MMSD (a) expand and offer equitable access to MMSD district supports for LGBTQ+ students, including professional development, gender and sexuality peer support groups, and inclusive curriculum, (b) offer equitable access to inclusivity professional development, (c) continue to fund and hire a full-time lead to maintain the *Welcoming Schools* program, and (d) include identity-based climate survey items, gender and sexuality administrative data and funding for continued evaluations.

Major Findings

How Many MMSD Students Identify as LGBTQ+? In the 2018–2019 academic year, a conservative estimate using the Dane County Youth Assessment data indicates that almost 1 in 5 MMSD middle and high school students (19%) identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, another non-heterosexual identity, questioning, transgender, or a gender that does not align with sex-assigned-at-birth. This is almost four times the rate of U.S. adults identifying with these labels. About 4% of the students in MMSD identify as transgender, non-binary, or another gender-expansive identity. According to records kept by the district, the number of students requesting the district to formally acknowledge changes in their gender markers and names via the MMSD name change request form *has quadrupled in the last 5 years*, from 19 in 2015–2016 to 79 in 2020–21.

Wellbeing of MMSD LGBTQ+ Students. Overall, MMSD LGBTQ+ students in middle and high school reported poorer school climates and wellbeing compared to their straight, cisgender peers. One-third of LGBTQ+ and 2/5 of TGNC students report feeling like they don't belong and are unsafe in school. Twice as many LGBTQ+ and TGNC students report being anxious often or always and 2.5 times as many LGBTQ+ and TGNC students report depressive symptoms compared to their peers. Most concerning, 4 and 3 times more TGNC (21%) and LGBTQ+ students (13%), respectively, thought seriously about or had attempted suicide compared to cisgender (5%) and straight (4%) students. These findings point to the continued need for access to mental health services and resources for LGBTQ+ students in MMSD.

IPD Educator Participation. We estimate that by 2020 approximately 16% of all MMSD faculty and staff participated in some form of MMSD LGBTQ+-inclusion curriculum. Approximately 546 educators participated in the *Welcoming Schools* IPD program for elementary schools (13% of MMSD faculty and staff), and 190 faculty or staff (4%) attended the voluntary OUT for Safe Schools Institutes in the seven months before the COVID19 disruptions. Again, we found a great deal of variation across schools. As many as 30% of the educators in one school attended the voluntary trainings, while 13 schools sent no staff to the training. Educators from 45 different schools and the central district office received IPD.

IPD and LGBTQ+ Students' Wellbeing. Schools reported lower suspension, assault, and endangering behavior rates when participating in the *Welcoming Schools* program when compared to schools that did not participate. These findings hold when controlling for school demographics associated with volunteering for the program, such as high financial resources and less racial/ethnic diversity. Participation in the *Welcoming Schools* program was not associated with statistically significant changes in academic outcomes. Since the conclusion of this study, both the LGBTQ+ Lead and *Welcoming Schools* Lead that built this professional development program have left the district.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Scale Up Inclusivity Efforts. Resources and capacity-building to support LGBTQ+ students should expand to meet the needs of MMSD's changing population. The number of students identifying as LGBTQ+ and TGNC has risen in recent years, with more TGNC students requesting that the district formally recognize their social transition. Expanding district supports may help remedy some of the poorer academic and socioemotional outcomes for LGBTQ+ students compared to cisgender and heterosexual students. MMSD students and staff identified these district actions as priorities:

1. allocate additional resources to buy and create LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum across all grade levels,
2. initiate visible district support against anti-queer, anti-trans efforts in a transparent, timely manner,
3. modify gendered school facilities and resources to ensure greater safety and accessibility for all students and staff,
4. earmark additional financial support to connect trans youth with gender-affirming resources,
5. prioritize mental health resources for LGBTQ+ youth when distributing district resources. The research literature on LGBTQ+ reforms suggest these strategies improve the school climate for students.
6. Continue to fund and prioritize hiring a *Welcoming Schools* Lead position to lead this district-wide initiative.

Equitable Access to IPD Trained Educators. Wealthier, less racially diverse elementary schools participate in the *Welcoming Schools* program, so a targeted expansion of that programming may be necessary to ensure equitable access to this resource. As noted, 4% of teachers and staff attended OUT for Safe Schools training and 13 schools had educators with no training, suggesting the need for more participation and capacity-building to train more educators across the district.

During the 2020-21 school year, results from our study were used by the LGBTQ+ Lead and *Welcoming Schools* Lead to advocate for a district-wide LGBTQ+ 101 training, which was delivered by the MMSD co-PIs, Sherie Hohs and Jennifer Herdina. MMSD required this training for all school-based staff during the 2020–21 school year, which led to an increase in staff participation in the OUT for Safe Schools trainings and the participation of nine new elementary schools in the *Welcoming Schools* IPD by the 2021–22 school year. MMSD should continue to expand capacity-building with training that includes targeted recruitment in low-participation and upper-level schools.

Inclusion of Identity-Based School Climate Survey Items and Administrative Data. Evaluations of the district's gender and sexuality initiatives and descriptions of how LGBTQ+ students fare would be enhanced if administrative data and the MMSD school climate survey included standardized identity-based items (e.g., a gender identity demographic question with non-binary response options,

items about bullying attributed to sexual orientation or gender expression). While the Dane County Youth Assessment includes identity-based school-climate items for a sample of middle and high school students (e.g., questions about bullying based on gender, religion, and race), the MMSD survey uses more general prompts to assess student experiences. The lack of quality data contributes to the erasure of LGBTQ+ student experiences and limits what we can know about the effectiveness of district supports.

Continued Support for Improvement and Evaluation. This research-practice partnership helped change MMSD practices in several key areas. The enhanced descriptions of LGBTQ+ student experiences have been used in IPD staff trainings, student advocacy efforts, and a meeting with the Superintendent and school board members concerning trans students. MMSD practitioners on our team report that the more specific statistics for the local district helped leaders and teachers connect to and contextualize the experiences of queer and trans youth better than when trainers used national and countywide statistics. We intend to scale up the IPD evaluation to the national program and explore how affirming district supports, such as MMSD's IPD, contribute to variation in the socioemotional outcomes of LGBTQ+ youth across the country.