



# The 2009 Iowa School Climate Survey

The Experiences of  
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender  
Youth in Iowa's Schools

**A Report from Iowa Pride Network**  
[www.iowapridenetwork.org](http://www.iowapridenetwork.org)

## Key Findings

- 1) **Iowa's LGBT students continue to feel unsafe in school and face verbal and physical harassment or assault daily** (*percentages in italicized parenthesis are from the 2007 ISCS*):
  - **87.5%** (*91%*) of LGBT students in Iowa reported hearing homophobic remarks frequently in their schools.
  - **78.4%** (*80%*) of LGBT students report being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation.
  - **37.5%** (*36%*) of Iowa LGBT students reported some incident of physical harassment (being pushed or shoved) because of their sexual orientation
  - **20.5%** (*16%*) of students reported some incident of physical assault (being punched, kicked or injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.
  
- 2) **Many students do not know about Iowa's Safe Schools Law regarding Bullying and Harassment:**
  - **54.2%** of respondents reported that they do not know what the Iowa Safe Schools law is
  - **71.9%** reported that their school has not adopted the law
  - **89.2%** reported that the law is not posted at their school
  
- 3) **LGBT students continue to be targeted for harassment and assault at higher rates than their straight peers. LGBT students were:**
  - **2.41** times more likely to report having been verbally harassed sometime in the last year
  - **82%** more likely to report that they had been physically harassed
  - **84%** more likely to report that they had been physically assaulted
  - **2.03** times as likely to have been cyber-bullied sometime in the last year
  - **79%** more likely to report that they had lies or rumors spread about them
  - **39%** more likely to report that they had their personal property damaged
  - **78%** more likely to report that they had skipped class at least once in the last year because they felt unsafe
  - **59%** more likely to have stayed home from school at least once in the last year because they felt unsafe
  - **56%** more likely than their straight peers to report that they had considered committing suicide
  
- 4) **This hostile climate experienced by LGBT students adversely impacts their achievement levels and increases thoughts of suicide. LGBT students were:**

### **Achievement Levels:**

- 69% less likely to report excellent grades when feeling unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation
- 83% less likely to report having excellent grades when they had also experienced physical assault because of their sexual orientation
- 59% less likely to report having excellent grades when they had also reported damage to their personal property.

### **Suicidal Thoughts:**

- Students who reported that they felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation were 2.06 times as likely as those who had not felt unsafe to report that they had considered suicide
- Students reporting that they had felt unsafe at school due to gender expression were also more than twice as likely to report having considered suicide
- 93% more likely to have considered suicide if they were verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation
- 34% more likely to have considered suicide if they were verbally harassed because of their gender identity

- 48% more likely to have considered suicide if they were physically harassed because of their sexual orientation
- 60% more likely to have considered suicide if they were physically harassed because of their gender identity
- 65% more likely to have considered suicide if physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation
- 71% more likely to have considered suicide if physically assaulted because of their gender identity
- 59% more likely to report having considered suicide if cyber-bullied because of their sexual orientation

**5) Unsafe Schools affect ALL students, gay and straight alike. Harassment and assault effects grades and attendance and increases absenteeism. Specifically, LGBT and straight respondents were:**

**Grades:**

- 65% less likely to report having excellent grades if having experienced physical assault in the last year
- 45% less likely to report having excellent grades if having their property damaged in the last year

**Attendance:**

- Respondents who reported having been physically assaulted were more than five times as likely to report that they had skipped class at least once in the last year because they felt unsafe
- Those who had been cyber-bullied were 3.88 times as likely to have skipped class
- Those who were sexually harassed were 2.53 times as likely to have skipped class
- Those who had their personal property damaged were 2.65 times as likely to have skipped class
- Students who reported having lies or rumors spread about them were three times as likely as their peers to have skipped class at least once in the last year because they felt unsafe

**Absenteeism:**

- Respondents were 2.30 times as likely to report that they had stayed home from school at least once in the last year because they felt unsafe if they had experienced verbal harassment
- Students were 4.92 times as likely to have stayed home from school because they felt unsafe if they had experienced physical harassment
- Students were 3.67 times as likely to have stayed home if they had experienced physical assault, 3.03 times as likely if they had experienced cyber-bullying, 2.26 times as likely if they had been sexually harassed, 4.42 times as likely if their property had been damaged, and 4.51 times as likely if they reported having lies or rumors spread about them.

**6) Iowa's Safe Schools Law reduces anti-gay verbal harassment and Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) increase the likelihood that LGBT culture, history or events will be included in the classroom and library.**

**In schools where the Safe Schools Law was known by the respondent to have been adopted, respondents were:**

- 40% less likely to report that homophobic remarks are used frequently or often in their schools

**In schools with a GSA or Diversity Club, respondents were:**

- 47% more likely to report that at least some of their classes included material on LGBT culture, history, or events
- 53% more likely to report that the representations of the LGBT community portrayed in those classes were somewhat or very positive
- 49% more likely to report that the school library makes resources on the LGBT community available.

## The 2009 Iowa School Climate Survey

Iowa Pride Network's Iowa School Climate Survey is the only statewide survey to document the experiences of students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) in Iowa's secondary schools. Conducted biennially since 2005, the Iowa School Climate Survey (ISCS) fills a crucial void in our collective understanding of the contemporary high school experience. The results of this survey are intended to serve as a guide for every legislator, educator, school board and community leader concerned with ensuring safe and effective schools for ALL students.

The 2009 ISCS results summarized here continue to track the endemic problem of name-calling, harassment and violence directed at LGBT students, while offering information about the impact of these experiences on academic performance and the effect of interventions designed to address the underlying problem. The 2009 ISCS paints a disturbing picture of the school environments and experiences for LGBT students; while providing further insights into the solutions for creating safer schools for all students.

### Methods

The 2009 Iowa School Climate Survey (ISCS) included responses from 203 students in 69 Iowa high schools. Of the respondents, 88 identified themselves as LGBT and 115 identified as straight. Of the straight respondents, 86 identified as allies of the LGBT community, while the remaining 29 identified as non-allies. The Iowa Pride Network School Climate Survey was available on the internet via Iowa Pride Network's website: [www.iowapridenetwork.org](http://www.iowapridenetwork.org). Persons who were interested in taking the survey could go online to take the survey or print out the survey and mail in a copy. A majority of the sample was asked to participate in the survey at GSA meetings where the survey was optional to take. And for the first time, the Iowa Pride Network handed out the survey at Youth and Shelter Services in Ames. Notices about our on-line survey were emailed out to Gay-straight Alliances and youth advocacy organizations. Data collection occurred from May through June 2009.

Responses to the 2009 ISCS were analyzed using cross tabulations for 2x2 tables that included tests for independence, the calculation of correlation coefficients, the calculation of odds ratio estimates, and the calculation of risk ratios for significant results<sup>1</sup>. Chi-square tests were conducted first, followed by estimates of Pearson's R. Where Pearson's R was significant, R-squared was calculated, the Mantel-Haenszel odds ratio was estimated, and a risk estimate was also obtained. The tables in this report present percentages and risk ratios. A full version of the report that includes Chi-square and Pearson's R coefficients and the associated significance values is available at <http://www.iowapridenetwork.org>. Conclusions were drawn only from results that were determined to be statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .<sup>2</sup>

### Special Thanks

Amy Williamson, Meredith MacQuigg and Dr. Peggy Fitch, Professor of Psychology at Central College. Thank you to Iowa's supportive teachers, administrators and specifically advisors of Gay-Straight Alliances, who work endlessly to ensure the safety and affirmation of all students. And, finally, to Iowa's students, especially those that are LGBT and straight allied, who took this survey to help us better understand what it is like to be LGBT and allied in Iowa's high schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Data were analyzed using SPSS version 17.0.

<sup>2</sup> Tables in this version of the report do not present results that are not significant in order to conserve space. For the full report, including all statistical analyses, please go to <http://www.iowapridenetwork.org>

## Results

Table 1 presents differences in responses between students who identified themselves as members of the LGBT community and those who identified themselves as straight. Options for identifying as LGBT included: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning. Responses from straight respondents include those from allies of the LGBT community and those from non-allies.

**Table 1: Differences in Responses from LGBT and Straight Students**

Data element	% LGBT	% straight	risk ratio
Reported being verbally harassed sometime in the last year	87.50	64.30	2.41
Reported being physically harassed sometime in the last year	40.90	17.40	1.82
Reported being physically assaulted sometime in the last year	22.70	7.00	1.84
Reported being electronically harassed sometime in the last year	46.60	17.40	2.03
Reported having lies or rumors spread about them in the last year	80.70	61.70	1.79
Reported having property damaged in the last year	50.00	35.70	1.39
Skipped class at least once in the last year because of feeling unsafe	25.00	8.70	1.78
Was absent from school at least once in the last year because of feeling unsafe	31.80	15.70	1.59
Said they look forward to going to school	54.50	69.60	0.70
Report having thought about committing suicide	60.20	40.90	1.56

The data presented in Table 1 demonstrate that LGBT students were 2.41 times more likely than their straight peers to report that they had been verbally harassed sometime in the last year. LGBT respondents were also 82 percent more likely to report that they had been physically harassed, 84 percent more likely to report that they had been physically assaulted, and 2.03 times as likely to have been cyber-bullied sometime in the last year.

LGBT students were also 79% more likely to report that they had lies or rumors spread about them and 39% more likely to report that they had their personal property damaged. LGBT students did not look forward to attending school as much as their straight peers: they were 78% more likely to report that they had skipped class at least once in the last year because they felt unsafe; and 59% more likely to have stayed home from school at least once in the last year because they felt unsafe. LGBT students were 56% more likely than their straight peers to report that they had considered committing suicide.

The Iowa Safe Schools Law, passed in 2007, protects students in Iowa schools from being bullies or harassed based on 17 protected categories, one of which is sexual orientation. This is the first ISCS administered since the Iowa Safe Schools Law passed, so new questions about the law were added to the survey in 2009. One question asked respondents whether the Safe Schools Law has been adopted by their school. Table 2 presents differences in responses to a number of questions based on whether or not the Safe Schools Law was known to have been adopted by the respondent's school.

**Table 2: Differences between Schools where the Iowa Safe Schools Law Has and Has not been Adopted**

Data element	% ISS adopted	% ISS not adopted	risk ratio
<b>Reported hearing homophobic remarks used frequently or often in their schools</b>	10.50	21.90	0.60

In schools where the Safe Schools Law was known by the respondent to have been adopted, respondents were 40% less likely to report that homophobic remarks are used frequently or often in their schools. Respondent knowledge of school adoption of the Safe Schools Law does not appear to have any significant covariance with the use of racist remarks, sexist remarks, or negative remarks regarding gender expression, however. Iowa Safe Schools Law adoption also does not appear to have a significant relationship with the availability of LGBT resources in schools or the light in which LGBT culture, history, and events are portrayed in schools.

One of Iowa Pride Network's main goals is to encourage the creation and development of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) or Diversity Clubs that have an LGBT component at Iowa schools. Table 3 presents differences in responses from students at schools that do and do not have a GSA or diversity club.

**Table 3: Differences between Schools that Do and Do Not have a GSA or Diversity Club**

Data element	% GSA	% no GSA	risk ratio
<b>Reported that some classes in the last year included LGBT culture, history, or events</b>	28.30	12.20	1.47
<b>Reported that representations of LGBT culture, history, or events were somewhat or very positive</b>	17.70	5.60	1.53
<b>Reported that there are resources in the school library containing LGBT culture, history, or events</b>	48.70	26.70	1.49

While the presence of a GSA or Diversity Club does not appear to have a significant relationship with the use of homophobic remarks in schools, GSAs do share a relationship with the resources and information on the LGBT community that are provided in schools. In schools with a GSA or Diversity Club, respondents were 47% more likely to report that at least some of their classes included material on LGBT culture, history, or events, and 53% more likely to report that the representations of the LGBT community portrayed in those classes were somewhat or very positive. In schools with a GSA or

Diversity Club, respondents were also 49% more likely to report that the school library makes resources on the LGBT community available.

One of the personal experiences included in the ISCS is the extent to which students become depressed or have suicidal thoughts. Table 4 presents differences in responses to questions about bullying and harassment based on the percent of respondents who reported having considered suicide.

**Table 4: Difference between Respondents who Have and Have Not Considered Suicide**

Data element	% considered suicide	% not considered suicide	risk ratio
Felt unsafe at school because of sexual orientation	20.00	1.90	2.06
Felt unsafe at school because of gender identity/expression	13.00	1.00	2.02
Experienced verbal harassment because of sexual orientation	61.00	29.10	1.93
Experienced verbal harassment because of gender identity/expression	45.00	31.10	1.34
Experienced physical harassment because of sexual orientation	26.00	12.60	1.48
Experienced physical harassment because of gender identity/expression	19.00	6.80	1.60
Experienced physical assault because of sexual orientation	16.00	4.90	1.65
Experienced physical assault because of gender identity/expression	12.00	2.90	1.71
Experienced electronic harassment because of sexual orientation	33.00	14.60	1.59

Students who reported that they felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation were 2.06 times as likely as those who had not felt unsafe to report that they had considered suicide. Students reporting that they had felt unsafe at school due to gender expression were also more than twice as likely to report having considered suicide. Students who reported that they had been verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation were 93% more likely to report having considered suicide, and those who reported verbal harassment because of gender expression were 34% more likely to report having considered suicide.

Students who were physically harassed due to their sexual orientation were 48% more likely to report having considered suicide, and those who were physically harassed due to gender identity were 60% more likely to have considered suicide. Students who reported physical assault because of their sexual orientation were 65% more likely to have considered suicide; those who reported physical assault due to gender expression were 71% more likely to have considered suicide. Respondents who reported cyber-bullying because of their sexual orientation were 59% more likely to report having considered suicide.

Respondents to the ISCS had the opportunity to tell us about their grades and about their attendance at school. Table 5 presents results for LGBT respondents who reported that their grades were “excellent” and those who reported that their grades were anything less than excellent. Table 6 presents similar results for all respondents. Table 7 presents results for respondents who reported that they skipped class at least once in the last year because they felt unsafe at school and respondents who reported that they did not skip class. Table 8 presents results for respondents who reported that they stayed home from school at least once in the last year because they felt unsafe at schools and respondents who reported that they did not stay home from school.

**Table 5: Effects on Grades among LGBT Respondents Only**

Data element	% with excellent grades	% with less than excellent grades	risk ratio
<b>Felt unsafe at school because of sexual orientation</b>	8.30	28.10	0.31
<b>Felt unsafe at school because of gender identity/expression</b>	0.00	18.80	NA
<b>Experienced physical assault because of sexual orientation</b>	4.20	26.60	0.17
<b>Experienced physical assault because of gender identity/expression</b>	0.00	15.60	NA
<b>Reported having property damaged in the last year</b>	29.20	57.80	0.41

LGBT respondents who felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation were only 31% as likely as their peers who had not reported feeling unsafe to report having excellent grades. In other words, LGBT students were 69% less likely to report excellent grades when they had also felt unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation. LGBT students were 83% less likely to report having excellent grades when they had also experienced physical assault because of their sexual orientation, and 59% less likely to report having excellent grades when they had also reported damage to their personal property. There is a significant, negative relationship between LGBT students who report having felt unsafe at school or experienced physical assault due to their gender identity and those reporting excellent grades, as well.

**Table 6: Effects on Grades among All Respondents**

Data element	% with excellent grades	% with less than excellent grades	risk ratio
<b>Reported being physically assaulted sometime in the last year</b>	5.40	17.00	0.35
<b>Reported having property damaged in the last year</b>	28.60	46.90	0.56

Table 6 shows that both LGBT and straight respondents who experienced physical assault in the last year were 65% less likely to reported having excellent grades. Respondents who reported having property damaged in the last year were 45% less likely to report having excellent grades.

**Table 7: Effects on Attendance among All Respondents**

Data element	% skipping school	% not skipping school	risk ratio
Reported bring physically assaulted sometime in the last year	46.90	7.60	5.52
Reported being electronically harassed sometime in the last year	62.50	24.00	3.88
Reported being sexually harassed sometime in the last year	71.90	46.20	2.53
Reported having lies or rumors spread about them in the last year	87.50	66.70	3.01
Reported having property damaged in the last year	65.60	37.40	2.65

Respondents who reported having been physically assaulted were more than five times as likely to report that they had skipped class at least once in the last year because they felt unsafe. Those who had been cyber-bullied were 3.88 times as likely to have skipped class, those who were sexually harassed were 2.53 times as likely to have skipped class, and those who had their personal property damaged were 2.65 times as likely to have skipped class. Students who reported having lies or rumors spread about them were three times as likely as their peers to have skipped class at least once in the last year because they felt unsafe.

**Table 8: Effects on Absenteeism among All Respondents**

Data element	% absent from school	% not absent from school	risk ratio
Reported being verbally harassed sometime in the last year	87.00	70.70	2.30
Reported being physically harassed sometime in the last year	65.20	16.60	4.92
Reported bring physically assaulted sometime in the last year	37.00	7.00	3.67
Reported being electronically harassed sometime in the last year	56.50	22.30	3.03
Reported being sexually harassed sometime in the last year	69.60	44.60	2.26
Reported having lies or rumors spread about them in the last year	91.30	63.70	4.51
Reported having property damaged in the last year	76.10	31.80	4.42

Respondents were 2.30 times as likely to report that they had stayed home from school at least once in the last year because they felt unsafe if they had experienced verbal harassment. Students were 4.92 times as likely to have stayed home from school because they felt unsafe if they had experienced physical harassment; they were 3.67 times as likely to do so if they had experienced physical assault, 3.03 times as likely to do so if they had experienced cyber-bullying, 2.26 times as likely to do so if they had been sexually harassed, 4.42 times as likely to do so if their property had been damaged, and 4.51 times as likely to do so if they reported having lies or rumors spread about them.

## **Recommendations**

Our results indicate much work must be done in Iowa schools to create safer climates for all students, including LGBT students. The following recommendations, if adopted, will help make a major difference across Iowa in providing a safe learning atmosphere for all students.

- **Schools** must
  - Implement and enforce the Safe Schools Law by ensuring the school is in compliance with the requirements of the law:
    - A definition of bullying and harassment as described in the law
    - An Anti-Harassment, Anti-Bullying Statement
    - A clear reporting procedure with a person designated to receive and investigate reports
    - A clear investigation procedure
    - A policy that states that students will be protected from bullying and harassment based on any of the following traits or characteristics: “age, color, creed, national origin, race, religion, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical attributes, physical or mental ability or disability, ancestry, political party preference, political belief, socioeconomic status, or familial status”
    - The policy publicized in student handbooks, registration materials and periodic updates to the community
    - School officials report annually to the Iowa Department of Education
  - Go beyond basic law requirements and exhibit exemplary efforts in implementing and enforcing the Safe Schools Law by:
    - Adopting the Department of Education’s Harassment and Bullying Incident Report Form
    - Ensuring school investigators understand their role and responsibilities
    - Adopting the “recommended programs” of the law: creating and supporting anti-bullying programs such as GSAs and Diversity Clubs and providing Teacher and student Trainings regarding the law
    - Ensuring that bus drivers, volunteers, vendors, community members and others who have contact with the school understand the law and their responsibilities in upholding the law
    - Engage the community in diversity efforts at the school
- **Administrators, Teachers, Staff** must
  - Help students understand the law
  - Stop bullying and harassment
  - Educate students on how to report incidents of bullying and harassment
  - Seek out continuing education on how to best serve marginalized students and know how to recognize signs that a student may be depressed or suicidal and how to intervene
- **Students** must
  - Report harassment and bullying
  - Stop bullying and harassment (with the help of teachers and friends)
  - Create student clubs that focus on helping marginalized students
  - Become educated on the Safe Schools Law by reading Iowa Pride Network’s “Make it Real” manual
  - Take friends and peers comments on suicide seriously and know how to recognize signs that a friend may be depressed or suicidal and how to intervene
- **Community Members and Parents/Guardians** must
  - Provide a safe and affirming home environment
  - Ensure the school is publicizing the law
  - Ensure the school is reporting incidents of bullying and harassment annually
  - Build a relationship with their child’s school
  - Know how to recognize signs that their student may be depressed or suicidal and how to intervene

## Appendix A: Trend data

Tests for statistical significance were not conducted for year to year changes, and it is recommended that trend data be interpreted cautiously.

	Percent of LGBT respondents 2005	Percent of LGBT respondents 2007	Percent of LGBT respondents 2009	Percent of Straight respondents 2005	Percent of Straight respondents 2007	Percent of Straight respondents 2009
Reported hearing homophobic remarks used frequently or often in their schools	92	91	87.5	94	91	78.3
Reported hearing homophobic remarks from teachers or school staff at least some of the time	14	7	28.4	18	7	11.3
Reported that teachers or staff only intervened some of the time when homophobic remarks were made in their presence	75	75	55.7	72	76	42.6
Reported that students only intervened some of the time when homophobic remarks were made in their presence	97	89	69.3	96	95	70.4
Reported hearing racist remarks used frequently or often in their schools	37	43	43.2	37	25	37.4
Reported hearing racist remarks from teachers or school staff at least some of the time	33	25	9.1	30	30	3.5
Reported that teachers or staff only intervened some of the time when racist remarks were made in their presence	51	50	31.8	61	51	32.2
Reported hearing sexist remarks used frequently or often in their schools	77	79	85.2	81	77	84.3
Reported hearing sexist remarks from teachers or school staff at least some of the time	31	18	20.5	15	22	7.8
Reported that teachers or staff only intervened some of the time when sexist remarks were made in their presence	59	64	39.8	76	72	31.3
Reported hearing negative remarks regarding gender expression used frequently or often in their schools	45	55	62.5	43	38	40.9
Reported that teachers or staff only intervened some of the time when negative remarks regarding gender expression were made in their presence	80	88	70.5	83	83	64.3

	Percent of LGBT respondents 2005	Percent of LGBT respondents 2007	Percent of LGBT respondents 2009	Percent of Straight respondents 2005	Percent of Straight respondents 2007	Percent of Straight respondents 2009
Felt unsafe at school because of sexual orientation	61	58	22.7	3	1	1.7
Felt unsafe at school because of gender identity/expression	40	43	13.6	18	17	1.7
Experienced verbal harassment because of sexual orientation	83	80	78.4	12	22	19.1
Experienced verbal harassment because of gender identity/expression	60	66	58.0	24	29	22.6
Experienced physical harassment because of sexual orientation	34	36	37.5	10	7	5.2
Experienced physical harassment because of gender identity/expression	27	31	20.5	10	13	7.0
Experienced physical assault because of sexual orientation	18	16	20.5	0	4	2.6
Experienced physical assault because of gender identity/expression	17	11	11.4	3	6	4.3
Experienced electronic harassment because of sexual orientation	46	41	45.5	4	2	7.0
Experienced electronic harassment because of gender identity/expression	21	24	15.9	4	3	5.2
Reported that their school has a policy or procedure for reporting incidents of harassment or assault that specifically mentions sexual orientation or gender identity	42	37	36.4	49	30	47.0
Reported textbooks containing information about LGBT people, history, or events	23	16	14.8	13	25	13.0
Reported more than 10 teachers and staff at their school supportive of LGBT students	31	40	31.8	24	29	24.3

	Percent of LGBT respondents 2005	Percent of LGBT respondents 2007	Percent of LGBT respondents 2009	Percent of Straight respondents 2005	Percent of Straight respondents 2007	Percent of Straight respondents 2009
Reported at least one teacher or staff member at their school open about being LGBT	13	24	36.4	16	15	28.7
Describes grades over the past year as mostly As/excellent	21	15	27.3	31	36	27.8
Would be very to somewhat comfortable talking to teachers one-on-one about LGBT issues	57	70	54.5	69	79	NA
Would be very to somewhat comfortable taking a date of the same gender to a school dance or prom	64	78	50.0	42	47	NA