

**Impacts of the Religious Right Agenda on LGBTQ+ Students**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the impact of the religious right's policy activism on the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ students. It also explores how educators can collaborate with advocacy groups and how state policies can ensure that each district implements LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula uniformly. Gender identities are particularly vulnerable in 2025, and culture wars are intensifying. I aim to identify modifiable factors that can promote positive school environments throughout our state and ensure that inclusive curricula are equitably distributed across districts. Three key themes were identified: LGBTQ+ underrepresentation in curricula, policies related to LGBTQ+ student protections, parental rights, and backlash bills, and disparities in student health outcomes among LGBTQ+ students compared to their cisgender peers. The paper then explores how state-level practices can be aligned with research and discusses the implications for future research and transformed practice.

*Keywords:* teacher allies, school climate, LGBTQ+ rights, inclusive curriculum, religious freedom

## **Impacts of the Religious Right Agenda on LGBTQ+ Students**

### **Focal Problem**

This examination focuses on the research regarding how the agendas of the religious right affect the health and well-being of our LGBTQ+ students. For years, public education has served as an ideological battleground, but it has never confronted the extensive overreach of the current campaign by the religious right. Conservative Christian parents have allied with political organizations of the religious right and declared war on the LGBTQ+ community, targeting not only the students themselves but also their representation in curricula and programs designed to promote their self-esteem.

Some students must navigate their identity and sense of belonging in school. White Christian nationalism has gained increasing scholarly and public attention in recent years, particularly after President Trump's election, during which he received 81% of the White evangelical/born-again Christian vote (Nalani & Yoshikawa, 2023). How does the religious right's agenda of emphasizing heteronormativity in their curricula affect these students?

### **Context**

I want to emphasize that, while I initially aimed to approach this project in an unbiased and non-partisan manner, the current administration's policies and the political climate of 2025 have significantly influenced this narrative. With Trump's past and current administration targeting LGBTQ+ students, particularly those who are transgender and gender diverse (TGD), and with the rise of far-right groups following his lead, LGBTQ+ students are under siege. They often struggle with their personal identities and sense of belonging within the educational system, creating challenges as they navigate their learning journeys.

Research showed lower academic success rates among students who find it difficult to derive meaning from their curriculum. The findings also indicated that LGBTQ+ young people experience higher rates of poor mental health compared to their cisgender peers. Hostile school climates are consistently linked to negative physical and mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ students. Evidence-based studies have identified interventions that can enhance mental health outcomes among these students, such as promoting recognition, school belonging, and visibility. Furthermore, other interventions, like staff training and inclusion policies that acknowledge and normalize LGBTQ+ students' identities, are essential across campuses in the state.

A substantial body of research supports the need for school reforms that embrace diversity and inclusivity, allowing all students to see themselves in their learning experiences (Southern Poverty Law Center [SPLC] 2024). However, gender identities are particularly under attack in 2025, and the culture wars are worsening under this administration and in the current political climate 2025.

I will reference two key documents throughout. The first is a survey conducted by GLSEN (2019, formerly the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educational Network), an American education organization working to end bullying and discrimination based on gender identity and expression, as well as sexual orientation. The second is a report by Learning for Justice (2024), an offshoot of the Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil rights organization monitoring hate groups in the country, which elaborated in 2024 on why Moms4Liberty has posed a significant threat to our LGBTQ+ students over the past two years. Founded in 2021, as of 2023, it has nearly 250 chapters in 43 states (Nalani & Yoshikawa, 2023). Moms4Liberty, a far-right

conspiracy-minded group, is the 2020s version of the 1960s John Birch Society, shifting the focus of the perceived threat from communism to woke indoctrination and transgender students.

### ***Local Connection***

Moms4Liberty, a far-right organization that identifies as part of the modern parental rights movement, has a highly active and organized chapter in Pierce County addressing anti-LGBTQ+ issues in our schools. They oppose LGBTQ+-inclusive school curricula and have advocated for book bans. In response, The Trevor Project Pierce County, Oasis Youth, Stonewall Youth in Olympia, and The Rainbow Room in Tacoma are available county resources to support youth off-campus. Pizza Klatch also serves as a support group that visits the classrooms of participating high schools.

Regarding policy and legislative efforts in Olympia, Moms4Liberty (M4L) is actively campaigning against two pieces of legislation in the Washington state Legislature for 2025, HB 1296 and SB 5181, through their political arm, Let's Go Washington. Both pieces of legislation ensure that the parents' bill of rights aligns with state and federal laws. M4L also established the Parents' Political Action Committee (PAC) to support their preferred school board candidates running in Washington State (Moms4Liberty, March 2025).

### ***Regional/National Connection***

Findings from the GLSEN School Climate Survey (2019) show that Washington schools were unsafe for most lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) secondary school students. GLSEN, founded by teachers in 1990, is an American education organization dedicated to ending discrimination, harassment, and bullying based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, while promoting LGBTQ cultural inclusion and awareness in K-12

schools. I will present the following statistics from their National School Climate Survey 2019, which reported on over 16,000 LGBTQ+ students and their experiences.

Many LGBTQ+ students in Washington lack access to essential school resources, including an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. Supportive and inclusive school policies often fail to protect them. LGBTQ+ students in Washington frequently hear anti-LGBTQ+ remarks, with many also overhearing homophobic comments from school staff (11%) and negative remarks about someone's gender expression (32%). Most LGBTQ students in Washington experience anti-LGBTQ victimization at school. They also face victimization based on disability (38%), religion (18%), and race/ethnicity (17%). Approximately half of these incidents go unreported to school staff (51%). Only 35% of students reporting incidents say they lead to effective staff intervention. Many LGBTQ students in Washington report experiencing discriminatory policies or practices in their schools (GLSEN, 2019).

Over half of the survey's respondents (55%) experienced at least one form of anti-LGBTQ discrimination in school over the past year. In Washington, 28% of LGBTQ students and 45% of transgender students were unable to use school bathrooms that aligned with their gender. A quarter of LGBTQ students in Washington (25%) faced discipline for public displays of affection (PDA) that did not result in similar actions against non-LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students in Washington were either prevented or discouraged from participating in school sports due to their LGBTQ identity (11%), could not form or promote a GSA (9%), were not allowed to wear LGBTQ-supportive apparel (5%), and were unable to bring a same-gender date to a school dance (3%). Only 26% attended schools with comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policies that included specific protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Just

19% had policies or official guidelines to support transgender and nonbinary students. Only half (54%) reported that their school administration was somewhat or very supportive of LGBTQ students. Nearly all (>99%) could identify at least one school staff member who supported LGBTQ students, but only 3 in 4 (77%) could identify six or more supportive staff members. Three-quarters (76%) had access to a GSA or similar student club, which provides a safe and affirming space while promoting a more welcoming school climate for LGBTQ students. Only 25% were taught positive representations of LGBTQ people, history, or events (“inclusive curriculum”). Just 15% reported receiving LGBTQ-inclusive sex education at school (GLSEN, 2019).

### **Importance**

This matters to me because I have seen students struggle when they cannot envision themselves, their potential, their futures, and their possibilities. How does it affect students when their self-identities are not represented in the curricula? Pedagogical practices must evolve to include the numerous historical and academic achievements and contributions from the LGBTQ+ community. Their history and perspectives belong in the classroom, and the fight to ensure they are represented is crucial. Moreover, with recent fringe groups removing books from school library shelves and textbooks increasingly influenced by the right’s white, Anglo-Saxon, heteronormative standards, there have been efforts to explicitly reinstate these values and erase the representations and contributions made by marginalized communities.

### **Purpose**

I aim to advocate for the representation and well-being of LGBTQ+ students in schools that often fail to respect their identities. This project seeks to ensure that curricula across the

educational system equally represent all communities. My initial goal was to advocate for these students through a non-profit organization; however, 2025 presents uncertain challenges, and I am unsure how things will unfold. I recognize a significant need for stronger advocacy for marginalized students in Washington State. I am seriously considering utilizing my skills at the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction or at the district level, wherever I can make the most impact. I believe that would be at the statewide policy level.

My purpose in this project is to understand how the emphasis of heteronormativity at the expense of all our students' education affects their mental and physical health and society in the long term, and to contribute to developing policies that address these impacts. It is a frightening time out there in 2025 for any marginalized student.

### **Focal Questions**

My three focal questions are:

- How has conservative, Christian policy activism impacted LGBTQ+ students' physical and mental health according to the research?
- How can state policies require each district to implement LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula, according to the research?
- According to the research, how can educators work together with advocacy groups to support LGBTQ students?

### **Literature Review**

This research examines the effects of religious right agendas on LGBTQ+ students. The Right's heteronormative agenda includes book bans, erasing representation of LGBTQ+ individuals, and diminishing their achievements and contributions to their communities. It also

involves banning Pride flags, halting Gender-Sexuality Alliances in schools, ending anti-bullying initiatives, and eliminating all gender-affirming care in educational settings. It is crucial to understand how the mental health crisis in secondary schools intersects with the agendas of the religious right and their influence on the portrayal of vulnerable communities in the curriculum.

This study identifies three recurring themes based on the research: LGBTQ+ underrepresentation; policies concerning parental rights, LGBTQ+ student protections, and backlash bills from the right; and health disparities faced by LGBTQ+ students compared to their cisgender peers. The issue of LGBTQ+ underrepresentation and its harmful effects on students has been the focus of recent research, although research on specific experiences of individual students within the LGBTQ+ student population is lacking. Regarding policies, the religious right has portrayed itself as victims of religious persecution, fearing that discussions about LGBTQ+ topics will undermine the dominance of heterosexuality as the only acceptable way of life. Finally, the consequences of an anti-LGBTQ+ climate are tangible and devastating for student health: LGBTQ+ youth consistently report higher rates of bullying, threats or injuries with weapons, and dating violence. Students who have faced prejudice-based victimization and bullying are significantly more likely to attempt suicide, abuse substances, experience homelessness, suffer from clinical depression, feel isolated, or become victims of sexual violence.

### **Representation**

The first theme that emerged from reviewing the literature concerns the approaches to the underrepresentation of LGBTQ+ issues in school curricula. Teaching materials across the educational system must represent all communities equally. When LGBTQ+ topics are excluded

or portrayed negatively, it can create a hostile school environment and elevate the risk of bullying and harassment.

Perhaps best exemplifying this issue of underrepresentation is Garry's (2015) study, which drew a contrast between LGBTQ+ students and their cis peers. "There are tons of gay teens struggling to find a group to fit into. LGBT YA lit helps us realize that no, they aren't alone, and no, they aren't worthless" (Garry, 2015, p. 74). Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data from 120 public high schools, Garry employed a mixed-methods approach to examine whether public high school library professionals self-censor their collections and the extent to which outside influences affect their decisions on which titles to carry regarding LGBTQ+ themes. Although librarians can effect significant change by highlighting inclusive collection development, she documented a notable disparity between library collections. While some school libraries provided numerous materials with LGBTQ content, the majority had very few, and some had none. This produced quantitative evidence that most librarians purchasing controversial books remain hesitant to acquire materials with LGBTQ content. Garry suggested having one certified librarian in each school within the district. Having a librarian grounded in inclusion will ensure a well-rounded collection.

In a content analysis, Brendlar (2017) examined 24 libraries nationwide, exploring how effectively they serve LGBTQ+ youth in terms of access to LGBTQ materials and identifying several barriers to providing inclusive collections. These challenges include opposition from social and religious groups regarding LGBTQ+ issues, librarian self-censorship during collection development due to fears of book challenges, and concerns over a lack of administrative support should a challenge arise. He mentions the backlash a librarian faced when ordering LGBTQ

books in his conservative county. Brendlar suggested making ebooks and audiobooks more readily accessible. Some students seek information about their identities, looking for stories to help them understand their often chaotic and confusing worlds. The growing LGBTQ+ youth population creates a need for representation of these communities in the curriculum. PEN America's (2022) report found that LGBTQ+ themed books or books with LGBTQ characters were the most likely to be banned from school libraries. Many students often navigate between their identity and sense of belonging within their schools, feeling completely disconnected from their school and peers. Next, we will explore LGBTQ+ Inclusivity Strategies within Sexual Health Education, which refers to a program that teaches about relationship boundaries, the social aspects of sexuality and gender, as well as biological processes like puberty.

Drawing on data from quantitative surveys, Keslar et al. (2023) examined the impact of an inclusive, comprehensive sex education program on homophobic and transphobic beliefs. This study found that High School FLASH and other comprehensive relationship and sexual health education programs reduced homophobic and transphobic beliefs among participating students compared to a knowledge-only sexual health education curriculum. Keslar drew a clear parallel between an inclusive curriculum and a reduction in transphobic and homophobic school climates. The study by Keslar et al. highlights the benefits of inclusive curricula.

However, McLaughlin (2023) argued that educational institutions should adopt student speech guidelines that protect controversial speech while limiting only the discourse that crosses the line between controversial and threatening speech. This content analysis focuses on students' religious free speech rights. McLaughlin suggested that the law be amended to support the individuality and growth of all students, including their ability to express their religious beliefs.

However, the religious right has recently repositioned itself as pro-family rather than anti-LGBTQ in the classroom.

Researchers also illustrate that most religious right groups associate homosexuality with pornography and pedophilia and, therefore, believe it has no place in youth library collections (Coleman & Lange, 2024). For example, Coleman and Lange conducted an action research study on book bans in 2024, which provided strategies for English teachers to resist book-banning educational policies in their local districts. Their opponents describe the targeted books as part of “a sinister agenda to normalize sexually deviant behavior, including pedophilia” (25). They found that as educators attempted to interpret the unclear wording of the state's new policies, the state departments of education provided no official guidance on compliance. The researchers in this article recommended that teachers begin by seeking guidance from librarians, who have dealt with book challenges and developed protocols for sometimes stopping this action. They also suggest that teachers collaborate with community advocacy organizations to take collective action and intentionally design curricula. Finally, they recommended that teachers recognize sudden warning signs that specifically outline details about challenges and research district policies surrounding book bans.

While the lack of federal and state funding for school libraries, along with internet filtering software on computers, partly contributes to the inadequate representation of LGBTQ themes, sometimes one needs to look no further than the librarians themselves, who often fear reprisal from specific parents and community members (Brendlar, 2017). The fear of book challenges and the concern about insufficient support from library administration in the event of a challenge serve as barriers to providing students with an inclusive collection. However,

LGBTQ+-themed books can easily fit into the health curriculum. LGBTQ students seek books about their own experiences. Garry (2015, described earlier) emphasized every school's absolute need for certified librarians. School librarians should include a diverse collection of high-quality materials for all students. She asserts that this is imperative. She demonstrates through qualitative data that even in small, rural, conservative districts, a certified librarian, educated and grounded in access and inclusion, often makes the difference between a balanced and diverse collection and a limited one. With varying parental beliefs and perceptions, large student populations, and community influences, having a certified librarian on staff is the only factor that a school district can control.

Attention has been devoted to LGBTQ themed books in primary grades. The following study explored LGBTQ themes and representation in elementary education. Bickford (2018) conducted a qualitative content analysis study examining how LGBTQ+ individuals and issues were represented in elementary books. One area that warranted further exploration was that while nearly all stories centered on a child, only a few main characters identified as LGBTQ, more frequently the main character was a child with a close relative—usually a parent, aunt, or uncle—serving as a central character who identifies as LGBTQ. Bickford also noted that LGBTQ characters in intermediate-level books experienced more interpersonal aggression than their counterparts in primary-level books, who faced no disapproval or criticism. Older students were exposed to more realistic content. Authors aimed to avoid presenting younger students with graphic depictions of cruel actions and words; however, an age-appropriate middle ground existed between straightforward and idyllic narratives.

**Policies Involving LGBTQ+ Students**

The second theme that emerged from examining the literature pertains to policies involving LGBTQ+ students. This includes policies specifically addressing both parental rights and student protections, and those addressing backlash bills against LGBTQ+ students.

***Student Protections***

Using various methodologies, previous research showed a significant relationship between inclusive curricula, gender sexuality alliances on campus, antibullying programs, teacher allies with positive school climates, a sense of safety, and increased health outcomes for LGBTQ+ students. However, these supportive steps are all being threatened.

Several studies indicated that religious right parents have chosen to align themselves with religious right political organizations, targeting not only LGBTQ+ representation in curricula but also programs aimed at promoting LGBTQ+ students' self-esteem. Gender-sexuality alliances (GSAs) are student-led clubs that provide support and safe spaces for LGBTQ youth, educate members about LGBTQ issues, and promote school connectedness. State laws appear to correlate with increased support for GSAs from school districts. Research consensus indicated that LGBTQ students with access to resources like GSAs on their campuses feel their schools are safer compared to those attending schools without these clubs.

Harper (2022) conducted correlational research using quantitative data from 19 state education agencies, encompassing 246 school districts. He examined whether increases in the percentage of priority districts recommending or requiring schools to provide gender-sexuality alliances (GSAs) on campuses varied by the presence of state nondiscrimination or anti-bullying laws. He established a connection between a state's anti-discrimination laws and its district's

support for GSAs on campuses within that state. Harper's study on the relationship between anti-discrimination laws and district support for GSAs highlights the contributions of state laws to school districts striving to create safe educational environments for LGBTQ students. His research pinpointed ways to help us better understand the roles of processes, laws, and policies that more effectively support students. He found a 30% increase in priority districts recommending or requiring schools to provide GSAs in states with nondiscrimination laws, compared to a 12% increase in states without such laws. Like other positive youth development programs, GSAs aim to support LGBTQ+ students and increase school connectedness. His study demonstrates that when clear laws designed to discourage discrimination are in place in a state, school stakeholders may better recognize the importance of providing programs that address LGBTQ-related stigma.

Henderson (2023) conducted a case study of school boards using qualitative research protocols grounded in theory, offering insights into how the public and U.S. school board members perceived the appropriateness and limitations of meeting the needs of LGBTQ+ students. She conducted her research in Miami-Dade, Florida, the third-largest school district in the country, and observed a highly contentious public meeting of the Miami-Dade school board. She identified several key factors that hinder schools and school districts from effectively supporting LGBTQ+ students. Misinformation, restrictive state laws, and parents' rights movements create a moral panic surrounding non-heteronormative gender expressions. One consequence of this panic is the limitation of information provided to K-12 students about LGBTQ+ individuals, which can significantly impact all K-12 students. With recognition and healthy identity formation, along with exposure to positive representations of individuals similar

to themselves, LGBTQ+ students were less likely to skip school, face bullying, or hear negative comments about sexual orientation and gender expression. Instead, they were more likely to feel safe and experience a sense of belonging (Henderson, 2023).

Research has also investigated the rise in anti-LGBTQ+ harassment and assaults on campuses post-COVID, along with problematic pedagogy and awkward representation in the science classroom. Weinstein and Schafer (2025) conducted a narrative inquiry into a high school science classroom and a teacher education program, noting an increase in anti-queer violence post-COVID. They suggested that science classrooms and school climates generally move away from clinically assessing bodies and instead cultivate a sex-positive atmosphere to foster healthier attitudes about sexuality. They also recommended incorporating classroom opportunities for students to discuss how homophobia and intolerance have been institutionalized, particularly now that transgender identities are being medicalized and increasingly under attack. They emphasized that much of the groundwork and advocacy the queer community had begun building with LGBTQ+ youth in the years leading up to COVID was lost during the shutdown. Furthermore, there was a substantial rise in far-right policy decisions at both state and national levels, resulting in significant cuts to essential services and resources for LGBTQ+ youth. Weinstein and Schafer note the underrepresentation of LGBTQ+ individuals in curricula, mentioning the omission of queerness in biology textbooks and referencing studies that address this erasure (p. 148).

### ***Parental Rights and Religious Freedom***

In this section, I examine how the literature addresses freedom of speech and parental rights. Specifically, I mean how cases and state laws have emphasized religious freedom over

LGBTQ+ issues in schools, especially since the Roberts Supreme Court, based on arguments framed as parents' rights. The religious right has, therefore, transformed from an attacker to a victim in the national conversation about LGBTQ+ equality.

Studies (Jones, 2024; Velte, 2016) have shown that many religious right groups are now reframing the discourse surrounding their objections to LGBTQ+ themes in classrooms as an attack on their religious beliefs. They argue that the flurry of laws proposed in recent years is infringing upon their religious liberty. Velte (2016) conducted a narrative inquiry/observation study examining the claims for exemptions from state and federal anti-discrimination laws based on religious reasons. He found that some of the advances made by the LGBTQ community have ironically intensified the backlash against them from the right. This article investigated how and why the religious right transitioned from being aggressors to victims. Jones (2023) produced quantitative correlational research to explore the connections between students' experiences in religious and non-religious educational institutions. She discovered that attending religious schools was linked to increased anti-LGBTIQA+ messages and practices. In religious education settings, educators were more likely to deliver anti-LGBTIQA+ messaging at class or group levels, particularly concerning the concept of 'sinning.' "Whilst we may never be able to completely rid religious schools of homophobia and transphobia, we can mediate their influence with policy protections for LGBTIQA+ staff and students" (Jones, 2023, p. 1150). She advocated for the removal of exemptions for religious education sites in anti-discrimination laws, revising educational policies, and establishing clearer protections for LGBTQ+ students in educators' professional codes as necessary recommendations.

It is not surprising that there are so many attempted challenges right now, given the misinformation circulating. Campbell-Fox et al. (2024) conducted a reflexive thematic analysis of the rhetoric used in the legislative misinformation pipeline. They found that while proponents of anti-TGD legislation relied on biological determinations and fearmongering to portray trans girls as a threat to their cis peers, opponents expressed concern about how this type of legislation might affect these students' mental health and experiences of discrimination. They also discovered that in the U.S., not only has anti-transgender and gender diverse (TGD) hyperbole and fearmongering been calculated and deliberately employed to advance conservative agendas, but both traditional and social media have been utilized to amplify anti-transgender and gender diverse panic and hostility through misinformation. Some far-right extremist groups have capitalized on these fear tactics and rhetoric. In a court case in early March 2025 in Chicago involving death threats to a church that dared to fly the Pride flag, the Chicago Moms4Liberty chairwoman stood up in court and proclaimed that the pink stripes in the flag symbolized a "minor-attracted" preference (Moms4Liberty, 2025).

Some cases brought before courts involve religious-based claims focused on the right to public expression, while others pertain to the right to exemption due to religious beliefs. Given legal precedent in recent decades, courts are more likely to recognize harm to LGBTQ+ students when religious plaintiffs express anti-LGBTQ beliefs in schools and public spaces. Kazyak et al. (2024) conducted an in-depth content analysis using qualitative data on court cases concerning religious exemptions, free exercise claims, or religious discrimination claims that oppose LGBTQ rights. They found that although courts often distinguish between public expression and private convictions, they frequently view religious complainants opposed to LGBTQ rights as a

small group in need of protection. They also observed that various religious groups receive different levels of support from the courts. For instance, Jewish and Muslim Americans experience significantly less support compared to Protestant Americans. Kazyak's study stands apart from others by highlighting the courts' acknowledgment of disparities in support among different religions.

In an observational study utilizing data from a survey of 1493 participants, Walker and Haider-Markel (2023) compared secular frames with religious liberty frames and explored claims made by Christians, Muslims, and atheists. Their findings support the idea that religious liberty claims have a significant partisan effect, particularly when LGBTQ advancements are perceived as conflicting with religious interests. They observed that policies and decisions aimed at expanding the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment prominently emphasized religious liberties that had not been highlighted in years. Next, we will examine how the religious right utilizes social media in this narrative.

Strand's (2024) international case study examined the social media tactics of a central anti-gender player, the International Organization of Families. A low-intensity period of activism—2021—and a high-intensity period of activism—2022—were intentionally selected, and the researchers noted that the period covering the World Congress of Families in 2022 was significantly less antagonistic and hostile than the previous year. The increasingly successful campaigns opposing LGBTIQ+ rights worldwide align with a shift in advocacy tactics and strategies. Strand et al. found that the newfound stance of religious rights is one of human rights champions, protectors of the rights of the "natural family." They are not anti-anything; they are just pro-family. Strategic self-victimization enables hetero-activists to portray themselves as

defenders of oppressed individuals, most notably families and parents, and they frequently express sentiments that ‘natural families’ are at risk of being eradicated. Strand found that while hetero-activist online media advocacy by an anti-gender giant often seems to fail, such content still spreads widely by inspiring local anti-gender actors, who in turn adapt, modify, and reframe the messaging to fit their local context.

### ***Backlash Bills***

After reviewing the literature, another component that emerges from the theme of LGBTQ+ policies is the anti-LGBTQ bills affecting students, introduced following legal victories for the LGBTQ community and commonly referred to as *backlash bills*. Viewing LGBTQ+ acceptance as a threat to children, the religious right seeks public policies grounded in their morals and rejects the idea of church-state separation as a false precept. They assert that this concept was intended to keep the state out of the church, not the other way around. Believing victory is within reach, they aim to identify the right legal challenge that could serve as a test case to overturn the separation of church and state. While most studies cite religious rights groups as the primary proponents of these repeals, Jones (2024) points out that President Trump personally repealed several transgender and gender-diverse protections.

What was once an overtly aggressive anti-LGBTQ narrative has transformed into a protective one conveyed through the lens of religious liberty. “Far-right hetero-activists also use strategic self-victimization, accusing liberals of attempting to silence pro-family activism. Any objection to hetero-activist narratives is constructed as suppression and violation of their right to freedom of speech and religion” (Strand, 2024, p. 226). The religious right has created a very narrow worldview, with education, curricula, staffing, and books aligned solely with their

heteronormative belief system. Now that LGBTQ+ students and parents seek acknowledgment as well, the religious right feels victimized.

Some religious right organizations have argued that they should be exempt from complying with nondiscrimination laws regarding sexual orientation and gender identity, claiming that such compliance would infringe upon their religious beliefs. In a legal and theoretical analysis, Clark (2023) utilized empirical and theoretical research on the prosocial values of religious beliefs to advocate for religious exemptions and to deconstruct the tensions between religious rights and LGBTQ rights. She asserted that Christian beliefs can counter liberalism's detachment and help societies maintain commitments to values, fostering a sense of community and encouraging civic engagement.

The recent surge of religious right agendas has been the subject of extensive research. In his historical analysis of court cases relating to religious freedoms since COVID-19, Baumgardner (2021) found that advocates for religious freedom became political beneficiaries of the pandemic due to the efforts of the Pandemic Court (the Supreme Court during the COVID-19 pandemic). As the pandemic spread worldwide, conservative leaders focused on an unusual casualty of the coronavirus: religious freedom. The Court often sided with religious groups on educational issues. Another fundamental assumption in Henderson's (2023) study was that grassroots parents' rights groups are promoting the concept of religious self-identity, while other researchers, like Goldberg (2023), emphasized the role of legislators in state houses. Several states are trying to integrate religious content, particularly Christian teachings, into public classrooms. These contrasting perspectives illustrate why religious right agendas and timelines are gaining more traction.

Perhaps the best example of this point is Nalani and Yoshikawa's (2023) analysis of Moms4Liberty. Founded in 2021, the organization had nearly 250 chapters across 43 states by 2023. In their content analysis of white Christian nationalism, Nalani and Yoshikawa closely examined Moms4Liberty and discovered that its influence on education occurs through various types of activity settings. First, the organization targets authoritative environments, such as school boards, to implement local ordinances banning books they disapprove of in schools. Second, Moms4Liberty seeks to shape library policies that restrict access to books or those included in public school curricula. Finally, Moms4Liberty collaborates with Christian youth groups to further its agenda (Nalani & Yoshikawa, 2023).

The focus on attempted anti-LGBTIQ+ school or curricula restrictions increased ninefold in 2022 (Jones, 2024), often using parents' rights as justification. To understand the backlash against LGBTQ+ youth, Jones conducted a critical discourse analysis exploring over 500 statewide bills targeting LGBTQ youth since 2018. She found a significant number of inaccurate claims regarding women's religious and parental rights being presented in opposition to LGBTIQ+ youth rights, noting that many of the same hate groups advocating for women's rights against those of transgender and gender diverse (TGD) students (e.g., in athletics exclusion bills) have also undermined women's rights in other legislative initiatives. Jones argued that the recent surge of state-level anti-LGBTIQ+ rights bills in the U.S. is part of a broad anti-rights campaign disguised as a grassroots backlash to earlier progressive equality-based reforms. Similar to the Harris study (2022), which demonstrated that when clear laws aimed at discouraging discrimination are in place in a state, school stakeholders may better understand the importance

of providing programs that address LGBTQ-related stigma, Jones finds that state law protections for LGBTQ+ students enhance their school-level policy safeguards.

The recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance (POA) in the classroom serves as another example of the influence of religious conservatives. I have chosen to research the Wellenreiter (2020) and Isaac (2013) studies concerning the POA because they explored teachers' legal boundaries and restrictions regarding instruction and guidance. I see a direct connection to book bans here.

Both forced POA recitation and book bans undermine students' self-identities; one denies their identity, while the other imposes something upon their self-identity. While examining the legal aspects of requiring students to recite the POA, Wellenreiter conducted a non-experimental action research case study where he interviewed several preservice teachers. He found that most of them anticipated requiring students to justify their actions if they refused to participate in the recitation of the pledge. Attention should focus on moving away from groupthink and towards critical and divergent thinking, which is not something the religious right is typically known for. During high school, it can be challenging to disagree with the majority opinion. Dissent encourages critical, independent thought and moral courage.

After a non-experimental observational study of freshman and sophomore immigrant high school students around ritual performances of resistance, Isaac (2013) concluded that following the addition of the phrase "Under God" in 1954, more students became uncomfortable reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and remained in their seats. After a qualitative narrative inquiry with 88 Native American students, Benus (2016) concluded that the Pledge of Allegiance has no educational value other than fostering an increased awareness of the students' own self-identity.

To marginalized students, the value is related to their own backgrounds and social viewpoints and perspectives.

Striking a balance between the religious right's freedom of expression and the health and well-being of our LGBTQ+ students has been the focus of scholarly research presented here. Clark (2023) highlighted the pro-social aspects of religion and argued that her study shows students who were regularly involved with their church were twice as likely to earn bachelor's degrees and contribute more to society while living fulfilling lives. However, other studies within the research indicate a significantly higher rate of violence and harassment towards LGBTQ+ students in negative school climates, and there is a consensus among most researchers suggesting that in-school victimization is also linked to school climate. From another perspective, Clark argues that the religious have "moralistic minds," and their belief in God greatly impacts youth and positive community involvement. However, as recent research has shown, transphobic and homophobic school climates are responsible for the increased school victimization we see in schools across the country (Day, 2018).

Day (2018) utilized cross-sectional data from quantitative surveys to investigate the disparities in school experiences and attitudes towards school environments between transgender and non-transgender youth. The study revealed that transgender youth were significantly more likely to feel unsafe on campuses, which resulted in higher rates of school absenteeism, as well as experiences of victimization and bullying, and they reported more negative perceptions of school culture. Additionally, it was found that while similar studies highlighted considerable disparities in health behaviors between transgender youth and their cisgender peers, there remains a significant under-representation of transgender youth in educational materials,

particularly as a group distinct from sexual minority youth, which includes those who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual. This study distinguishes itself from most other research by being one of the first to differentiate between sexual orientation and gender identity. Overall, the findings from various studies agreed that homophobia and transphobia adversely affect students' mental and physical health in profound ways.

### **LGBTQ+ Student Health Outcomes and Disparities**

In this section, I explore another theme that emerged from the literature: LGBTQ+ health outcomes and disparities. By this, I mean the differences between LGBTQ+ students and their cisgender peers concerning both physical and mental well-being. Across the scholarship, there is a consensus that LGBTQ+ students disproportionately experience verbal and physical bullying in school settings, violent victimization, suicidal behaviors, and substance use. According to the National Association of School Nurses, 42.8% of students identifying as LGBTQ+ had seriously considered suicide in the past year (NASN, 2025). Schools with affirming policies for LGBTQ+ students are associated with lower rates of suicidal ideation, victimization, and alcohol and other drug use. LGBTQ+ students in rural areas report fewer supportive staff members or administrators, significantly fewer gender-sexuality alliance groups available to foster dialogue and combat homophobia and transphobia, and a less inclusive curriculum. In this section, I will examine research on how religious conservatism has physically and emotionally affected students. The following studies focused on physical effects, then emotional effects.

#### ***Physical***

A review of the literature revealed disparities in health outcomes linked to negative school climates for LGBTQ youth compared to their non-LGBTQ peers. Most of the research

primarily focuses on bullying and harassment. However, school connectedness also serves as a protective factor against suicidal ideation among LGBTQ+ students.

Vaughn (2018) explored suicidal ideation among LGBTQ students through a narrative inquiry that utilized qualitative interviews, examining common developmental challenges faced by transgender students. She discovered that suicidal ideation was nearly twice as high in transgender youth compared to non-transgender youth, and that, among those transgender students, school-based victimization (bullying) was significantly associated with higher odds of suicidal contemplation.

Schools where students perceive their teachers as LGBTQ allies, alongside institutions where educators and staff intervened in instances of school-based bullying, report lower rates of victimization. One study provided concrete evidence that schools with allies achieved better health outcomes. Shelton (2020) interviewed practicing educators using qualitative research to conduct a narrative inquiry examining LGBTQ+ teacher allies. “Supportive teacher allies are critical to these students’ physical and emotional well-being and academic success” (Shelton, 2020, p. 99). Shelton found it striking how greatly the sociopolitical and socioeconomic contexts of their schools shaped teachers' LGBTQ+ advocacy efforts. Furthermore, she discovered that some teachers, particularly in socio-politically conservative and relatively homogeneous areas, feel caught between doing what they know is right and conforming to what others—students, peers, parents, or other stakeholders—believe is right.

In partnership with a school-based LGBTQ+ support group in Washington State (Pizza Klatch), Adhia et al. (2023) interviewed 31 LGBTQ+ students ages 13-18 in a qualitative study using inductive thematic analysis to analyze data and identify themes. Their goal was to examine

methods for improving school climates to prevent sexual violence (SV) among LGBTQ+ students, and they found several factors that schools should consider in preventing and responding to SV from the viewpoints of LGBTQ+ students. Many students highlighted unmet needs for supportive and dependable staff (allies on campus) and recounted experiences of insufficient training and respect for LGBTQ+ students. They recommended gender-neutral spaces, such as locker rooms and restrooms (where SV commonly occurs). Students emphasized the necessity for stronger offender punishment and clarity regarding the process following an incident report. The researchers addressed the lack of LGBTQ+-competent mental health support for students and advocated for comprehensive sexual health education that specifically addresses LGBTQ+ relationships and SV. This research underscored lived experiences and offered recommendations and solutions to tackle SV, highlighting the importance of including student voices in developing policies and programs aimed at preventing SV. Physical fighting, threats or injury with a weapon, weapon carrying, bullying on school property, and avoidance of school due to safety concerns were examined, with evidence-based programs and policies showing the potential to reduce school violence and bullying among LGBTQ+ students. Nonetheless, a significant body of research still indicated the rising risk of suicidality among LGBTQ+ students. Next, I will explore the research about comprehensive sexual health education and our LGBTQ+ students.

Just as Velte discovered the backlash bills in policy, Van Leent and Moran (2023) uncovered a backlash against a backlash in health policies. Fearing that many parents would listen to far-right groups' fearmongering, numerous school districts have implemented knowledge-only sexual health education. A qualitative case study explored complex

comprehensive sexual health education by obtaining rich and in-depth descriptive data about parental attitudes and values toward Relationship and Sexual Education. The findings indicated that several parents hoped sexual diversity would already be present in their child/ren's sexual health education at school, and they assumed that presenting diverse genders and sexualities within the context of understanding and learning about healthy relationships was standard practice. This contradicts previously held notions that teachers are concerned about parental reactions to diversity in relationships and sex education. Educators need to reexamine their perspectives, which differ from the all-consuming fear that teachers and schools experience regarding backlash from parents. Next, I will look at the research recommendations going forward, especially in light of the impact of COVID.

Policymakers and school leaders need to address the structural and significant harms that LGBTQ+ students experience as schools transition back to in-person learning. Gill & McQuilian (2023) conducted a content analysis and correlational research study (2018 vs 2021) involving a sample of 40,904 public middle and high school students, and examined changes before and during COVID. They found that suicide attempts decreased at a greater rate for LGBTQ+ students during the COVID-19 lockdown. Some students may have lost access to supportive school environments and were forced to spend increased time with unsupportive family members compared to before the pandemic. Consequently, LGBTQ+ students faced heightened anxiety during the lockdown, while peer victimization decreased more significantly for this group. Next, I will look at what the research says about the emotional well-being of LGBTQ+ students.

***Psychological***

The psychological impacts of a hostile school environment on LGBTQ+ students can range from isolation and depression to suicidal ideation and attempts. LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula, supportive educators and allies on campuses, comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies, and student clubs (e.g., GSAs) all contribute to improved school climates. Both Jones (2024) and Harper (2022) found an association between LGBTQ+ students' state law protections and school districts' increased recommendations or requirements for establishing gay-straight alliance (GSA) student support groups, as well as decreased LGBTQ+ student health risks, suggesting that state laws providing protections should be prioritized. Safe and supportive school environments are achieved when all school staff are familiar with current LGBTQ best practices and terminology, including the use of appropriate pronouns and addressing myths and misconceptions that can lead to inequities and violence. School staff should use gender-inclusive, non-heteronormative language. The influence of the religious right can be somewhat mitigated with policy protections in place for LGBTQ staff and students.

Another aspect of the right's overreach was a study by Goldberg (2023) looking at families having to relocate. By employing qualitative-quantitative analysis, data from interviews and surveys with several open-ended questions were collected, and the researchers examined the concerns and experiences of LGBTQ parents in Florida shortly after the expansion of the Parental Rights in Education Act was signed into law. This mixed-method study included 107 LGBTQ+ parents in Florida (82 white and 66% identified as cisgender women) who were recruited immediately following the expansion of Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law in 2023 to encompass all grades. The findings indicated that participants' open-ended comments revealed

connections between anti-LGBTQ protections and policies and feelings of worry and distress, leading to a desire to move to a more tolerant district for their child. Quantitative data show that more than two-thirds of participants wanted to relocate. The qualitative data reveal the mental and emotional strain and conflicts that LGBTQ+ students' parents experienced. Some voiced concerns about their desire to move, coupled with anger at being in a situation where they felt compelled to relocate. This article demonstrated the extent to which LGBTQ families are willing to go to escape hostile political climates.

The available evidence suggested that transgender youth are at significantly higher risk of experiencing hostile school climates compared to their non-transgender peers. Several studies emphasized the importance of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, supportive educators and campus allies, comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies, and student clubs (e.g., Gender-Sexuality Alliances, or Gay-Straight Alliances [GSAs]), all of which improve school climates and face opposition from the religious right. Next, we will explore how far-right conservative groups are using anti-obscenity laws to prevent GSAs from meeting in public schools.

As Foucault (1970) has pointed out, prohibitions do not stop discourse; rather, they invite more. Mayo (2008) conducted a content analysis of court cases involving religious rights, spanning from *the Lubbock Civil Liberties vs. Lubbock Independent School District* and the Equal Access Act of 1984 to 2006. He found that despite legislative and policy obstacles, GSAs continue to increase in number and membership, although access to the groups increasingly depends on the region. Even in areas where GSAs are denied school space to meet, they find alternative spaces and form alliances to challenge the policies that restrict them.

Several states have reportedly pressured schools, hospitals, clinics, and professionals providing gender-affirming care to TGD youth to withhold such care through legislation and funding restrictions (Jones, 2024). Of the 500 bills introduced in states across the country from 2018 to 2022 aimed at restricting transgender and gender-diverse young people's gender identification, nearly 30% affected their healthcare (Jones, 2024). If the number of bills surged suddenly in 2022, as reported by Jones (2024), the current efforts by the religious right to cut healthcare for TGD individuals have been staggering. As of 2025, 26 states have passed laws restricting or banning gender-affirming care for minors (NPR, Feb. 2025). Jones (2024) noted that the religious right claims that girls' rights are constrained by TGD youth and suggest that transgender girls have 'biological advantages' over and pose sexual dangers to other girls, while disregarding the science that shows that after twelve months of hormones, these students' testosterone levels significantly decrease. As Tiffany Justice, founder of Moms4Liberty, states, "We've seen that this transgender cult has hijacked women and the women's movement" (Learning for Justice, 2024). Again, ignoring the science that indicates that after twelve months of hormone blockers, these students' testosterone levels plummeted. Next, we will examine how transgender students are forced to navigate oppression in their schools.

Transgender and non-conforming students are increasingly targeted on campuses across the country and must navigate their educational journeys. Shank and Troshinski (2024) explored how transgender and gender non-conforming youth face oppression and how discrimination against them can be reduced. Strict enforcement of comprehensive anti-bullying policies is essential for decreasing harassment. The presence of gender and sexualities alliances (formerly Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs), inclusive curricula, and supportive educators is vital for

enhancing self-esteem and fostering a sense of belonging. The researchers recommended providing necessary accommodation, such as restrooms, locker rooms, acknowledgment of pronouns and names, and inclusion in school-sanctioned activities.

The existing literature identified aspects of school climate that help mitigate the negative relationships between school victimization, academic achievement, and health, such as having supportive relationships at school, LGBTQ+ teacher allies, and GSAs. While previous studies documented hostile school environments for LGBTQ students as a group, limited research has specifically focused on transgender youth. Transgender youth not only experience more general victimization than their non-transgender peers, but they also face six times higher odds of missing school due to feelings of unsafety or engaging in substance use (Day et al., 2018). This was noted in 2018, before Moms4Liberty emerged. As the research indicates, transgender youth have significantly more negative perceptions of school climates compared to their cisgender counterparts. Additionally, higher rates of attempting and completing suicide have been observed in transgender youth in comparison to sexual minority youth (Vaughn, 2018).

Although many of the articles' findings came directly from GLSEN, I was surprised to find very little research tracking the coordination of LGBTQ advocacy groups with specific school districts in this country. In a critical discourse analysis and observational study using qualitative research, Uttamchandani (2021) explored Chroma, an LGBTQ advocacy group whose members trained educators and others on working with LGBTQ youth. She found that educational communication is of utmost importance, not just between educators and students or among students and their peers, but also across all partnerships in the classroom, including advocates and teachers. Relationships in advocacy spaces must be constructed to support

everyone's ideas in future organizing, while recognizing and valuing individual perspectives and experiences. "Educational intimacy is critical for learning; it enables Chroma youth to effectively create presentations, envision how their schools could be, and critique one another to make their advocacy as effective as possible" (Uttachamdani, 2021, p. 70). I will elaborate on this in the discussion section.

### **Summary**

Each article I have examined presents diverse and rich perspectives. While Jones (2024) outlines backlash bills proposed by states against LGBTQ youth, and Harper (2022) parallels the state's anti-discrimination statutes with individual districts' Gay-Straight Alliances, Velte (2016) discussed how the Right uses those antidiscrimination statutes to shift the narrative toward a form of victimization based on their religious beliefs. Both Garry (2015) and Brendlar (2017) emphasized the importance of librarians maintaining extensive collections on all topics, regardless of any single librarian's personal beliefs. Meanwhile, Goldberg (2023) highlighted the real consequences of families needing to relocate from their home states in search of a more inclusive district for their child. The struggle to impose conservative religious values in schools is also being waged at the state level, with bills introduced in houses across the country this year addressing everything from banning LGBTQ+ books to prohibiting gender-affirming care for youth, displaying the Ten Commandments in classrooms, and even hiring religious chaplains to serve as school counselors.

Several studies highlighted different reasons for the rise of the new rallying cry of religious identity. Baumgardner (2021) stated that religious freedom advocates became political beneficiaries of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States due to the actions of the Pandemic

Court. Other studies I have examined suggested that grassroots parents' rights groups promote religious self-identity (Day, 2018; Kayzak, 2023; Yoshikawa, 2023) while additional studies indicated that legislators in state houses play a role (Coleman, 2024; Goldberg, 2024; Jones, 2024).

Researchers note that these issues must be addressed to ensure students' and teachers' understanding of their legal parameters and responsibilities. For example, Wellenreiter (2020) discussed preservice teachers' feelings regarding the need to evaluate whether students' concerns about not reciting the POA were valid. This is illegal and has been upheld in courts on several occasions, beginning with *West Virginia v. Barnette*. Each study I cited examined the problem of negative influences from the religious right from a different perspective; for instance, Goldberg (2024) addressed the issue from the LGBTQ parents' viewpoints, while Velte (2016) concluded that the religious right is altering the narrative. Moms For Liberty has launched a new faction of their parent group called M4LU, which claims to be "educating parents" about the dangerous "woke indoctrination" of our children. (Moms4Liberty, April 2025) Unfortunately, white nationalists have allied themselves with anti-inclusion "parental rights" groups to undermine education, and they now have the backing of "anti-woke" initiatives from the Trump administration. (Nalani & Yoshikawa, 2023) This project has aimed to examine the impacts of the religious right's agendas in education and on LGBTQ students in those schools.

I have examined three themes that emerged from the research: the representation, or lack thereof, of LGBTQ+ individuals; policies surrounding parental rights, freedom of speech, students' rights, and backlash bills; and the health disparities affecting LGBTQ+ students. In these politically charged, Trumpian times, there is a clear urgency and a significant need for

educator guidance and support. The following section discusses recommendations for Washington state policies regarding these issues.

### **Action Plan**

The literature review examined the research on how the agendas of the religious right impact the health and well-being of our LGBTQ+ students. The right's heteronormative agenda includes book bans, the removal of any representation of LGBTQ+ individuals, their accomplishments, and their contributions to their communities, bans on Pride flags, the halting of gender and sexuality alliances in schools (Gay-Straight Alliances or GSAs), the termination of anti-bullying campaigns, and the cessation of all gender-affirming care within schools. It is crucial to consider how the mental health emergency in secondary schools intersects with the agendas of the religious right and their influence on the representation, or underrepresentation, of vulnerable communities in the curriculum. I have only scratched the surface of how their emphasizing heteronormativity in the curriculum has affected the mental health of LGBTQ students and how the elimination of some anti-bullying campaigns and GSAs at campuses across the country has impacted these students' physical and mental health. Investigating this connection can provide valuable insights for creating a more inclusive educational environment.

Again, while I initially intended for this project to be unbiased and non-political, many of the current administration's policies and the prevailing political climate of 2025 have shaped this narrative. This influence extends beyond the current federal administration; it also affects the agendas of right-wing advocacy groups and the legislation of state lawmakers.

This study identified three recurring themes based on the research: 1) LGBTQ+ representation in curricula and on campuses, 2) policies related to protecting LGBTQ students'

rights and those concerning parental rights, and 3) health disparities between LGBTQ+ students and their cisgender peers.

The action plan outlines what the literature suggests in row one of each table. In row 2, I examine what Washington State is doing as my comparison site. Therefore, I will focus on practices in Washington State, as I plan to engage with state or district policies. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> row, I address some of my recommendations not only to my district's state representatives but also to the OSPI Office of Equity and Civil Rights, the Washington State House Education Committee, the Senate Early Learning and K-12 Education Committee, the ALA (representation), and the Washington State Department of Health.

### **Underrepresentation in Curricula and on Campuses**

In this table, I examine how inclusive Washington state's curricula are. The inclusivity of a particular school's educational program largely depends on the school board, the school principal, and the availability and willingness of teachers to implement such curricula; the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction establishes most state school policies in Washington. In 2024, Governor Inslee signed SB 5462, making Washington the seventh state in the country to pass a law that requires LGBTQ+ inclusion in curricular standards (Movement Advancement Project, 2025). Over the past two years, hundreds of laws have been proposed in the U.S. aiming to limit information and instruction about LGBTQ history and contributions. Dozens of states now explicitly censor discussions of LGBTQ people or issues in schools (Henderson, 2023). The significant rise in book banning in recent years corresponds with the political divides stemming from the Trump Presidency. For LGBTQ+ students, having books that authentically reflect their lives without stereotyping is crucial.

**Table 1**

*Underrepresentation in Curricula*

What the research says...	Practices in Washington State...	What I recommend...
<p>Inclusive curricula help promote positive school environments that can increase the well-being of LGBTQ students, including a reduction in attempted suicides (Adhia, 2023; Vaughn, 2022).</p>	<p>Washington state law mandates LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula by October 1, 2025.</p>	<p>In addition to their state law requiring LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula, I recommend that districts have a certified librarian on site at all schools in the state to round out the LGBTQ+ selections available.</p>
<p>Research recommends access to E-books and audiobooks, especially for LGBTQ+-themed books that have been banned. Some library systems have responded to book bans by expanding technology-based access (providing free electronic access to books that are banned in various districts across the USA through out-of-state electronic library cards), especially for books that target marginalized youth (Brendlar, 2023; Nalani, 2023).</p>	<p>In 2024, the Washington State Legislature passed HB 2331 to prohibit Washington schools from banning instructional materials, including books, solely because they were written by or about protected class members. HB 2331 ensures that books cannot be banned because they center marginalized voices or topics, such as race, religion, gender identity, or sexuality. Parents of students who attend the said school district are the <u>only</u> people capable of challenging instructional materials, barring community members and other organizations from advocating for book bans in districts where they do not have students enrolled.</p>	<p>I recommend keeping this law in place but amending it to include an additional review board after the school board. According to HB 2331, any complaint or challenges about a book or instructional material must be made by a parent or legal guardian of a student who is currently enrolled in the district and must be submitted in writing to the school principal, which will be reviewed by the certified teacher, school principal, district superintendent and school board, in that order. Unfortunately, because of the influence over school boards and other school actors that Moms4Liberty has, I recommend that an additional independent review board be added after the school board has weighed in.</p>
<p>Research recommends implementing inclusive and comprehensive sexual health education programs across</p>	<p>According to RCW 28A.300.475, in 2022, Washington State started requiring that sexual health</p>	<p>I recommend including enforcement provisions in SB 5395, the 2022 law that mandates comprehensive</p>

<p>the state. The literature indicates that well-designed, comprehensive sexual health education programs play a crucial role in fostering better school climates for all students. Schools that have adopted such education, which respects diverse sexual experiences, have seen a reduction in bullying and victimization, decreased pregnancies and STDs, and homophobic and transphobic negative beliefs when compared with a knowledge-only sexual education curriculum, thereby improving student health, school climate, and educational outcomes (Adhia, et al. 2023; Keslar, et al. 2023; Mayo, 2008; Van Leent, 2023).</p>	<p>instruction include language and strategies for all students; however, after talking to the OSPI, I realized that the law itself is very vague, and districts have much latitude in how it is implemented. OSPI began sending out reporting surveys to see how each district was progressing, starting in the school year 2022-2023, and saw a significant increase in districts implementing these policies from 2023 to 2024.</p>	<p>sexual health curricula. Additionally, provide tools for enforcement and a method to track which school districts are collaborating with which advocacy groups to develop sexual health lesson plans. Educators need the support and training necessary for understanding and discussing gender identity, assigned sex, and sexual behavior.</p>
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**Policies on Backlash Bills, Protections of LGBTQ Students’ Rights and Parents’ Rights**

In this section, I will examine how the literature addresses policies regarding protections against anti-LGBTQ backlash, specifically focusing on how cases and state laws have favored religious freedom over LGBTQ issues in schools. I will also explore the policies concerning parental rights. Several studies have indicated that many religious right groups are now reframing the discussion around their objections to any LGBTQ themes in classrooms as an attack on their religious beliefs.

**Table 2**

*Parental Rights, Backlash Bills, and Students’ Rights*

<b>What the research says...</b>	<b>Practices in Washington state...</b>	<b>What I recommend...</b>
<p>Research shows that in recent years, legislation targeting transgender and gender diverse individuals has surged in the United States, particularly legislation focused on TGD youth. Additionally, literature indicates disparities in school experiences and perceptions of school climate between transgender and non-transgender youth (Campbell-Fox et al., Day et al., 2018; Jones, 2024; Kessler, 2023).</p>	<p>Washington’s policies to protect students from discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression are detailed in SB 5689, a state law that outlines the administrative requirements for school districts concerning gender-inclusive school policies and procedures, notifications, and designated coordinators. However, it specifies only one individual in the school district as the primary contact for policies and procedures related to transgender students.</p>	<p>I would recommend amending RCW 28A.642.080 to require each school must designate one person as the primary contact regarding the policies and procedures relating to transgender students at each school site. I recommend establishing enforcement on all campuses in the state.</p>
<p>Research shows that overly extended claims concerning girls/women’s rights, religious rights, and parental rights were advanced in opposition to LGBTIQ+ youth rights and as part of wider rights attacks. Bills used anti-rights and pro-rights discourses to mask as ‘backlash’ (Jones, 2024; McLaughlin, 2023).</p>	<p>Washington state has strong protections and laws in place protecting both women’s rights and LGBTQ rights, and the strategy of using one pro-rights narrative to push another anti-rights agenda is so new and untested that Washington state courts have to sift through each claim and put it through the sniff detector.</p>	<p>I recommend raising awareness of the religious right’s additional new strategy through media campaigns with alliances and counter-narratives from different advocacy groups and progressive religious organizations to counter extremist beliefs and inform the public and the courts of their tactics (for those courts that are not already aware of this latest tactic).</p>

**LGBTQ+ Health Outcomes and Disparities**

In this table, I will examine another theme that emerged from the literature: LGBTQ+ health outcomes and disparities. By this, I mean the differences in physical and mental well-being between LGBTQ+ students and their cisgender peers. Four key recommendations arise from this theme regarding suicidality, teacher allies, GSAs, school climates, victimization, and bullying.

**Table 3**

*LGBTQ+ Student Health Outcomes and Disparities*

<b>What the research says...</b>	<b>Practices in Washington state...</b>	<b>What I recommend...</b>
<p>Research finds that state policies that support GSAs lead to decreased health risks for LGBTQ+ students (Jones, 2024; Harper, 2022).</p>	<p>Each school district must implement a gender-inclusive school policy that complies with state requirements. Washington State mandates adherence to RCW 28A.600.477, which prohibits harassment, bullying, and intimidation. The state encourages the establishment of GSAs in each district, but it is not mandatory. Washington State Safe and Supportive Learning Environments, 2024; OSPI, 2024)</p>	<p>To coincide with the findings that GSA presence on campuses decreases LGBTQ student health risks, Washington state should enact a state law mandating that all districts in the state require GSAs or similar student-led clubs that support supportive environments for LGBT+ students and their allies, and checklists should be sent to school administrators with information and instructions on how to set them up.</p>
<p>Studies have shown that suicidal ideation rises due to cultures of internalized homophobia, transphobia, and religious conservatism. In contrast, increased social support and optimism confer resilience against suicidal behaviors in LGBTQ+</p>	<p>Discrimination based on gender identity and expression is explicitly prohibited under two Washington laws and their accompanying regulations, the Washington Law Against Discrimination, which applies to K-12 public schools as</p>	<p>I recommend transparent reporting and response strategies from on-site teachers and administrators to the district and state levels. There is a strong need for trustworthy and supportive school staff, including in the</p>

<p>students (Vaughn, 2022; Campbell-Fox, 2024; Day, 2018).</p>	<p>places of public accommodation, and the Equal Educational Opportunity Law, which applies specifically to K-12 public schools.</p>	<p>reporting and disciplinary process.</p>
<p>Research finds that several states have reportedly pressured schools, hospitals, clinics, and professionals providing gender-affirming care to TGD youth to withhold it using both legislation and funding restrictions (Jones, 2024; Campbell Fox, 2024; Day, 2018).</p>	<p>Washington state has some strong policies and protections for its LGBTQ+ students. The state of Washington has 4,312 codes and protections ensuring gender-affirming care for LGBTQ+ students. (Washington State Legislature, leg.wa.gov, 2024)</p>	<p>Most of the attempts were mainly concentrated in Republican-governed states. Washington State is doing an excellent job of protecting gender affirming care for public school LGBTQ students; they should expand those laws to private and religious schools.</p>
<p>Research finds that a school’s sociopolitical and socioeconomic contexts shaped teachers’ LGBTQ+ advocacy efforts (Shelton, 2020; Day, 2018).</p>	<p>Washington State OSPI Equity and Civil Rights Office prohibits discrimination in Washington public schools based on gender expression and identity (RCW 28A.642.010). The state has developed guidelines to help school districts and public charter schools implement these laws and regulations; however, the law is hard to monitor and enforce in the rest of the state.</p>	<p>Olympia is not Eastern Washington, and policies are not always implemented as intended. I recommend that the state of Washington mail out reporting surveys from the OSPI, similar to the sexual Health Ed status updates, asking districts how individual schools are supporting their LGBTQ students on campuses.</p>

**Summary**

In this section, we examined recommendations from the literature and analyzed a statewide site to see how policies reflect those recommendations. Over the past three years, there have been dramatic increases in LGBTQ+ book bans and underrepresentation, with book challengers and anti-inclusion activists becoming more organized and collaborating in coordinated groups to pressure library boards and school districts. Washington State passed a

new law in 2024, HB 5462, mandating inclusive curricula. Additionally, the state enacted HB 2331 to protect LGBTQ+ themed books from being challenged.

The research shows that support systems, in the forms of GSAs, teacher allies, anti bullying programs, inclusive curricula all work to support our LGBTQ+ students. Washington State recently enacted SB 5689, a law outlining administrative requirements for school districts regarding gender-inclusive school policies and procedures, notifications, and designated coordinators relevant to transgender students. Washington State law also prohibits discrimination in public schools based on gender expression and identity (RCW 28A.642.010). I will return to the questions I posed in the rationale in the next section.

### **Discussion Section**

In this section, I examine the research on how LGBTQ+ students are affected by religious right agendas. First, I analyze the literature and my state's context to address the questions posed in my rationale. Following that, I provide implications and recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers across all fifty states, then I outline the project's limitations, and conclude this paper.

This study has identified three recurring themes based on the research: 1) the underrepresentation of LGBTQ+ individuals in curricula and on campuses, 2) policies concerning LGBTQ student protections, parental rights, and backlash bills from the right, and 3) health disparities experienced by LGBTQ+ students compared to their cisgender peers.

In this paper, I discussed “my site” extensively; by “my site,” I mean Washington State. Washington State's legislative efforts aim to address the impacts experienced by LGBTQ+ students due to the agendas of religious rights groups. I have reviewed the policies surrounding

the protection of vulnerable student populations, and based on Washington State's approach, they have taken a strong stand in supporting most policy recommendations, which can be applied nationwide.

### **Discussion of Findings**

In this section, I address my initial questions: 1) How has conservative Christian policy activism impacted the physical and mental health of LGBTQ+ students according to the research? 2) How can state policies require each district to implement LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula based on the research? And 3) How can educators collaborate with advocacy groups to better support our LGBTQ+ students? First, I examined threats to physical health among transgender students and sexual minority youth. I also highlighted the importance of anti-bullying programs and sexual violence prevention initiatives. Next, I explored the significance of gender-sexuality alliances, other student-led clubs, and campus representation. I further investigated the positive effects of dependable and supportive teachers and staff on students' experiences. Additionally, I addressed the need for consistent monitoring and implementation across districts in the state, and finally, the importance of fostering coordinated efforts between school districts and advocacy groups on the ground and in the classrooms.

#### ***Impacts of Conservative, Christian Policies on LGBTQ students***

My first question in the rationale was, how have conservative Christian policies impacted LGBTQ+ students' physical and mental health according to the research? The variety of policies in the conservative Christian agenda, such as ending anti-bullying programs, lacking access to essential school resources, perpetuating anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination, the absence of teacher allies, and the lack of an inclusive curriculum or representation, significantly affects our

LGBTQ+ students. The effects of religious right agendas on LGBTQ+ students are extensive and well-documented.

I begin by examining some of the risks to the physical and mental health of LGBTQ+ students. I also recognize the necessity for anti-bullying and sexual violence prevention strategies. Next, I draw a parallel between Gender-Sexuality Alliances and other student-led clubs, highlighting their role in fostering positive school climates. Finally, I will establish a connection between access to supportive and reliable teachers and staff on students' campuses and the cultivation of a sense of safety and trust.

Hostile school climates have had a significant impact on LGBTQ+ students' health. Conservative Christian parents have aligned themselves with religious right political organizations, targeting not only LGBTQ+ students but also their representation in curricula and programs designed to promote their self-esteem. Research finds higher rates of attempting and completing suicide in transgender youth than in sexual minority youth (Vaughn, 2022). Researchers found that an increased religious context of schooling led to higher rates of victimization (bullying, threats of violence, partner violence, and sexual abuse) and elevated rates of substance abuse and depression (Harper, 2024; Jones, 2024; Velte, 2016). In contrast, increased social support is associated with resilience against suicidal ideation (Adhia, 2023; Vaughn, 2018). Although several studies cite the obvious drawbacks that religious right agendas have on LGBTQ students (Brendler, 2017; Day et al., 2018; Gill, 2022; Goldberg et al., 2024; Harper, 2021; Strand, 2024), there were no immediate study replications following the two Brigham Young articles (Clark, 2023; McLaughlin, 2023). Both articles only implicate the pro-

social aspects of religion (of which there are many, but not when they impose their standards on other children). Direct replication can help identify potential biases in the original study.

A significant number of LGBTQ+ students face bullying and harassment in schools, with nearly 60% reporting such experiences due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression, and over 90% encountering anti-LGBTQ+ language. An expanded religious context in education can therefore lead to increased rates of victimization; however, schools' connectedness, supportive teachers, and inclusivity contribute to positive school environments, which in turn help reduce isolation and suicidal behaviors among LGBTQ students.

The presence of gender & sexuality alliances (formerly Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs), and supportive educators is crucial for enhancing self-esteem. In various studies, students noted their unmet needs for supportive and reliable staff (allies on campus). Including youth input and perspectives can help schools develop better strategies to create positive school climates. Alongside staff training, students identified modifiable school-level factors to prevent and address victimization. The first factor was increased mental health support, specifically, accessible LGBTQ+-competent therapists (Adhia et al., 2023). Supportive teacher allies are essential for the physical, emotional, and academic well-being of LGBTQ+ students” (Shelton, 2020). While their advocacy is significantly shaped by the socio-political and economic contexts in which they operate, teachers remain indispensable in supporting LGBTQ+ students. Since moving to Washington two years ago, I have noticed significant divides between the urban and rural areas of the state. Policymakers need to gain a deeper understanding of these intersections to better support educators in their ally work.

Schools pose significant safety risks for transgender students. These students are more likely to feel unsafe on campuses, which leads them to skip school, experience victimization, and face bias-based bullying. They also report more negative perceptions of the school climate (Day et al, 2023). Notable disparities exist in health behaviors between transgender youth and their non-transgender peers (Day, et al., 2018; Keslar & Gerber, 2023; Shank & Troshinski, 2024). However, transgender youth remain vastly underrepresented in educational literature, particularly when separated from sexual minority youth. Based on my experience and review of the literature, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students are often grouped with transgender and fluid students. However, there is insufficient literature that explicitly addresses the distinctions between them. This area requires urgent exploration, as transgender students increasingly face significant challenges.

According to the latest GLSEN School Climate Survey, many LGBTQ+ students face restrictions on their LGBTQ+ expression: 20% were disciplined for public displays of affection (PDA), while non-LGBTQ students did not face similar consequences; 12% were barred from discussing or writing about LGBTQ+ topics in extracurricular activities, and another 12% in class assignments and projects, while 8% were limited in wearing clothing that supported LGBTQ+ issues. Numerous LGBTQ+ students in encountered discrimination at school related to their gender; 20% were not allowed to use their chosen name or pronoun, 18% were denied access to the bathroom that matched their gender, 17% were prohibited from using the locker room that aligned with their gender, 11% were restricted from wearing clothing deemed “inappropriate” based on gender, and 11% were prevented from participating on the sports team consistent with their gender. Finally, transgender and nonbinary students, in particular, faced

gender-based discrimination, specifically being prevented from: using their chosen name or pronouns (27%), using the bathroom that aligns with their gender (27%), using the locker room that aligns with their gender (24%), wearing clothing considered “inappropriate” based on gender (13%), and playing on the school sports team that corresponds with their gender (14%). (GLSEN, 2025)

Research has found an association between LGBTIQ+ students’ state law protections and school districts’ increased recommendations or requirements for establishing gay-straight alliance (GSA) student support groups, as well as reduced LGBTIQ+ student health risks (Jones, 2024; Harper, 2022). Some states do have anti-discrimination laws and, therefore, follow that research recommendation; however, they encourage but do not mandate the establishment of GSAs in every district. States need to require GSAs across all campuses and implement guidelines that incorporate student feedback to create them.

Finding a balance between the religious right’s freedom of expression and the health and well-being of our LGBTQ+ students has been the focus of extensive scholarly research presented here. Overall, the studies suggest that, regardless of one’s stance, hetero-activism is not a battle that should or could be fought in schools.

### ***Districts Implementing LGBTQ Inclusive Curricula and Climates***

My second focal question was: Based on the research, how can state policies ensure districts implement LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula and climates? Unfortunately, there is no real research on successfully implementation LGBTQ curricula. In this section, instead, I am going to examine the forces that states face that have led to diminishing efforts to be inclusive.

Research indicates that in recent years, legislation targeting transgender and gender diverse (TGD) youth has surged in the United States. Additionally, the literature demonstrates disparities in school experiences and perceptions of school climate between transgender and non-transgender youth (Campbell-Fox et al., Day et al., 2018; Kessler, 2023; Shank & Troshinski, 2024). These disparities must be addressed.

A substantial body of research demonstrates that inclusive curricula promote positive school environments, enhancing the well-being of LGBTQ students and reducing attempted suicides (Adhia, 2023; Vaughn, 2018). However, the last three years have seen dramatic increases in LGBTQ+ book bans and underrepresentation, as book challengers and anti-inclusion activists have become better organized and work together to pressure library boards and school districts. PEN America's (2022) report indicates that LGBTQ+ themed books or those featuring LGBTQ characters are the most likely to be banned from school libraries.

Book banning has evolved into a coordinated effort driven by extremist groups like Moms4Liberty and political maneuvers (Coleman & Lange, 2024). In recent years, attempts to censor what our children are exposed to have significantly increased in public schools, largely due to the widespread and highly organized efforts of women in organizations like Moms4Liberty. Moms4Liberty is a far-right group that self-identifies as a parental rights organization, operating under the principles of Christian nationalism and justifying censorship by urging parents to protect their children from the perceived harms of public schools. The reality is, for LGBTQ+ students, having books that authentically reflect their lives without stereotyping is crucial—when they discover a book that mirrors their experiences, they feel represented for the first time. Therefore, removing LGBTQ+ books from classrooms and libraries is never just

about banning books; it is about banning childhoods. Excluding the stories of queer and trans kids parallels banning their lives, histories, and futures. Furthermore, children from dominant cultures need to see diverse representations, recognize their connections to others, and understand that they are only one of many ways of being.

Several studies indicate that the religious right has shifted from an aggressive anti-LGBTQ narrative to one now concealed under the guise of religious freedom (Kayzak, et al., 2023; McLaughlin, 2023; Velte, 2016). Research advocates for access to e-books and audiobooks, particularly for LGBTQ+-themed books that have been banned. Some library systems have addressed book bans by enhancing technology-based access, providing free electronic access to banned books through out-of-state electronic library cards and offering free electronic access to books that are prohibited in various districts across the USA (Brendlar, 2018; Nalani, 2023).

Studies show that inclusive curricula are essential for fostering better school climates for all youth by reducing beliefs that can lead to bullying, violence, and victimization (Gill & McQuillan, 2022; Kesler & Gerber, 2023). In addition to inclusive curricula in the classroom, I explored research on the development of inclusive collections of LGBTQ+-themed materials in libraries.

Several barriers hinder the provision of inclusive collections that represent LGBTQ\* individuals in libraries. These challenges can result in librarian self-censorship when developing collections; school librarians may hesitate to purchase LGBTQ+ materials due to fears of retribution from administrators and parents (Brendler, 2018). Community or religious opposition, fear of being challenged, and increased concern about inadequate support from school

administrators in the event of a challenge are often present. Having a certified librarian on site who is educated and committed to access and inclusion can significantly influence the balance between a diverse and limited collection (Garry, 2015). Another challenge is students' fear of self-identification when checking out and reading LGBTQ+ positive materials from the library. Given the ongoing hostility toward LGBTQ+ teens indicated in the GLSEN report, providing materials that do not require a visit to the physical library enhances access without the potential ramifications of confronting library staff or carrying visible materials (Brendler, 2018).

Even though many studies have demonstrated direct connections between inclusive school climates and student well-being, a school's sociopolitical and socioeconomic contexts shape teachers' LGBTQ+ advocacy efforts (Shelton, 2020; Day, 2018). Generally, there are significant attitudinal differences between urban and rural areas in some states, and policies are not always implemented as intended. Some parents are withdrawing students from schools that prioritize equity. Others have signed petitions and led protests and rallies in response to curricula that include LGBTQ+ identities.

The religious right is trying to make our students ignorant. Currently, there is legislation pending in several states to eliminate the requirement for a master's degree for school librarians. (Coleman & Lange, 2024). Numerous LGBTQ+ students are struggling to find a group to fit into. LGBT YA lit helps them realize that they are not alone and they are not worthless. Some states prohibit schools from banning books or materials without proper procedures. A complaint will be submitted to the principal, reviewed by the certified teacher, then the school principal submits it to the district superintendent, and finally it goes to the school board, in that order. Unfortunately, this needs to be amended to include an additional independent review board after

the school board due to Moms4Liberty's influence over school boards and other school actors. Based on the literature, having an additional independent review board after the school board has weighed in would be better aligned with what is necessary.

When Governor Jay Inslee signed SB 5462 into law in March of 2024, Washington state became the seventh state in the U.S. requiring LGBTQ+ inclusion in curricular standards. Every school district in the country must adopt curricula that include the “histories, contributions, and perspectives” of marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ people.

After consulting with the Office Superintendent of Public Instruction, I realized that several state laws and student protections are somewhat vague, allowing districts considerable latitude in their implementation. State departments of education must send out reporting surveys to monitor each district's progress with all protections and programs.

Many educators are working to interpret their states' new policies and the vague language surrounding inclusive curricula. As they face a lack of official guidelines from several state departments of education, some researchers suggest detailed steps for teachers to proactively prevent any book bans (Coleman & Petra, 2024).

Most anti-LGBTQ education legislation targets middle and high school students, but researchers indicate that some begins in the primary grades. These attacks highlight the need for LGBTQ+ content in elementary-level curricula. Bickford (2018) states that characters in junior high school-level books experienced more social and interpersonal hostility and aggression. Older students were exposed to a more realistic worldview.

This question leads to a bigger question. How can we create more positive school climates as we discussed? To do that, advocacy groups must partner directly with classroom teachers.

*Direct Coordination Between Advocacy Groups and Educators in the Classroom*

My third focal question was, how can educators collaborate with advocacy groups to better support our LGBTQ+ students? There needs to be increased collaboration between school stakeholders and advocacy groups. School districts should enhance coordination with advocacy groups to work directly with educators in developing lesson plans and supporting LGBTQ+ students. It is important to promote coordinated efforts of both school districts to collaborate with advocacy groups in the community and the classrooms.

If students shut down due to disengagement from their pedagogy because the curriculum does not resonate with them or if their mental well-being is at risk, they may perceive the learning environment as unpleasant. Consequently, they might struggle to develop a growth mindset that fosters lifelong learning. However, I did not find many examples of advocacy groups partnering directly with teachers to create classroom activities.

The literature addresses little about the need for advocacy groups to collaborate directly with schools to prepare classroom lesson plans and activities. A handful have been working with students in other countries, and I found one study that tracked a particular school coordinating with an advocacy group in Ohio. However, I was surprised that no studies closer to home were monitoring the collaboration of LGBTQ advocacy groups with specific schools or districts. Although the Trans Education Network (TEN) serves as a springboard for teacher advocacy projects, outward-facing student advocacy is not currently the organization's primary focus. One study specifically explored Chroma, an LGBTQ advocacy group whose members train educators and others on working with LGBTQ youth in Ohio. It found educational intimacy to be of utmost importance, not just between educators and students or among students themselves, but also

across all partnerships in the class, including advocates and teachers. Relationships in advocacy spaces must be built to support everyone's ideas in future organizing, recognizing, and valuing diverse perspectives and experiences. "Educational intimacy is critical for learning; it enables Chroma youth to create presentations productively, envision how their schools could be, and constructively critique each other to make their advocacy as effective as possible" (Uttachamdani, 2021, p. 70).

States lack specific codes or guidelines for teachers working with support groups to create lesson plans or address other needs. Currently, individual teachers must find effective lesson plans independently. Educators and staff play a vital role in shaping the school climate, yet they (the educational blob) receive inadequate training and support on LGBTQ+ issues, particularly TQ+. State departments of education provide a list of resources and organizations for all parties involved, but do not clarify how these resources should be utilized in each classroom.

States must find a way to track which school districts collaborate with which advocacy groups to develop lesson plans and classroom activities. Educators need support and training that enables them to understand and discuss LGBTQ+ issues, particularly gender identity, assigned sex, and sexual behavior.

The research highlights the importance of youth involvement in organizing online media campaigns (e.g., Adhia, A. et al., 2023). Youth-led social media initiatives should strive to inform and engage the public while building connections among themselves, advocacy groups, and educators.

***Fostering Positive School Climates***

Beyond the initial three questions, my research led me to examine the gaps between findings and practices in fostering a favorable school climate for everyone. It also helped me identify the limitations of nurturing a supportive school environment and highlighted future trends regarding the impacts of the religious right agenda on our LGBTQ+ students.

Based on my experience and what I have seen in the literature, situations are handled very differently among the various letters of the LGBTQIA+ acronym, particularly for transgender and gender diverse (TGD) students, as well as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students. There has been a concerning rhetorical shift regarding the trans community, and it is progressing faster than policy and advocacy can respond. *All* schools need to act swiftly against these attitudes and attacks by beginning to enforce states' nondiscrimination policies equally across all campuses, especially concerning TGD students. Society has become much more open and accepting of the LGB community; however, there needs to be a greater focus on TGD students in particular. Establishing Gender Sexuality Alliances and anti-bullying programs on every campus is a good start. Additionally, while educators and staff shape the school climate, they often receive insufficient training and support regarding LGBTQ+ issues, especially TQIA+. Nonetheless, LGBTQ+ youth report that the support of even one adult in the school can significantly impact their feelings of safety and belonging. These students believe that if teachers and other school professionals intervened more often, the school climate for everyone would improve (Shelton et al., 2020). Many educators genuinely want to be allies to these students; however, sociopolitical and socioeconomic contexts, along with some staff and community input

that is hostile or indifferent to these students' situations, can hinder this effort. Strong staff and teacher allies are effective in helping these students feel secure and develop a sense of belonging.

This country is witnessing a deterioration of rights and legal protections for vulnerable students. Yet, the right is manipulating mainstream narratives by pushing false claims about gender identity, suppressing certain voices and emotional curiosity. Critical thinking is an interactive process that requires participation from both the teacher and all students. Learning becomes most effective when everyone in the classroom acknowledges their responsibility for creating a learning community together. Sadly, children's passion for thinking often diminishes when they encounter obstacles in expressing themselves and their very existence. While encouraging students to use their voices and remain engaged within their communities and society at large, it is essential to help them develop individually, both intellectually and emotionally, cultivating their character so they will become lifelong learners. This is not happening now; in fact, the opposite is true. Certain politicians and organizations are trying to accelerate the dumbing down of America.

I felt it was important to join my local chapter of Moms4Liberty while conducting this research to receive updates on the policies and bills they are actively undermining at the state level. This morning, they sent me an email inviting me to the book signing of their new book, *When Harry Became Sally*. However, the email was framed within a very accepting and fresh narrative, beginning with the question, "What is the most loving response to a person experiencing a conflicted sense of gender?" . Once again, they have shifted the narrative from one where the right is the attacker of LGBTQ rights to one in which they are merely the loving victims of religious persecution.

**Implications for State Lawmakers, District Policies, and Teachers*****State Lawmakers and Policymakers***

In Chapters One and Two, I examined the literature surrounding how LGBTQ+ students are affected by various religious right agendas in schools. In Chapter Three, I analyzed my state. In Chapter Four, I apply what I have learned to every state lawmaker facing challenges from far-right conservative Christians. I want to communicate to all state lawmakers and policymakers across America what actions they should take. I have been out there. I have been on the ground; although it was just four years of substituting and one year of student teaching, I have been on the ground.

State lawmakers, schools in every district are facing increasingly hostile climates for LGBTQ+ students. Schools need inclusive representation in curricula and on campuses, supportive teachers and staff, antibullying policies, GSAs, and a positive classroom environment. States must fund certified librarians at every school to ensure a well-rounded collection of LGBTQ-themed materials. Additionally, states should support adding an independent review board for handling book complaints. Comprehensive sexual health education, including instruction on biological processes and social education regarding respect for boundaries, requires funding across all campuses. Along with inclusive representation in curricula and staffing, states need anti-discrimination laws and mandates for Gender-Sexuality Alliances on every campus. Schools require transparent reporting and response strategies involving teachers and administrators at both district and state levels and necessary funding for these procedures. The state must allocate resources for enforcement tools to ensure that all districts implement the required curricula and protections while administering surveys and guidelines for teachers. Every

school should designate a primary contact to monitor and ensure that the needs and protections of all LGBTQ, particularly transgender, students are met on each campus, with state funding for this role. The impact of victimization would decrease if LGBTQ+ students felt connected to at least one adult in their school. These programs have proven effective in fostering safety and a sense of belonging, so why aren't they mandated across campuses?

With the increase in attacks specifically targeting transgender and gender-diverse students, these issues must be addressed urgently. Policymakers must ensure that every district in their state implements the required protections and curricula equally. Policies and recommendations issued by the state capitol do not always align with what is implemented in other districts throughout the state. Based on my experience in the schools where I have worked and the literature, state departments of education need to create and distribute checklists and reporting surveys to every school in every district to monitor how each school supports LGBTQ+ students.

If states have not begun, they need to establish nondiscrimination policies, create GSA organizations, and implement antibullying programs on campus; this is a good start. Still, educators and staff shape the school climate, yet they receive far too little training and support on LGBTQ+ issues (especially those concerning transgender and queer youth). LGBTQ+ youth report that the support of even one adult in school can significantly influence their feelings of safety and belonging. They believe that if teachers and other school professionals intervened more often, the school climate for everyone would improve. Some states designate primary contacts within the district regarding policies and procedures related to transgender and queer

students. Based on my experience and the existing literature, a primary contact needs to be established at each school, not just at the district level.

The research highlights the significance of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, supportive educators, campus allies, comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies, teacher and staff training, and student clubs (Gender Sexuality Alliances [GSAs]), all of which contribute to enhanced school climates. However, these programs are targets of the Religious Right's efforts to dismantle them.

Keslar et al. (2023) established a clear connection between inclusive, comprehensive instruction and a reduction in homophobic and transphobic beliefs on campuses. Policymakers, you need to ensure that state departments of education are distributing tracking surveys to ensure inclusive curricula are the norm on every campus. However, a similar tracking method is needed to monitor which school district collaborates with which advocacy group to develop lesson plans. Yet, better coordination on the ground with advocacy groups is essential. A review of the literature indicates that Uttamchandani (2021) best clarifies how educators and groups can work together.

States and policymakers must ensure that teachers receive adequate training to implement these strategies and be prepared to answer young people's questions. Some educators and facilitators struggle to deliver inclusive sexual health education due to their inherent stigma or perceived inadequacies in addressing such topics, which stem from a lack of information and training. Educators need training that provides a comprehensive understanding of concepts related to sexual orientation, gender identity, assigned sex, and sexual behavior. Before the state began distributing surveys with a checklist of topics needing attention, the teachers were

admittedly uncertain about what needed to be covered. States need to offer and require Professional Days on LGBTQ+ issues specifically.

While some states fund robust school library programs, they allow individual school districts to determine their implementation. Consequently, some districts may lack a certified teacher-librarian at every school site, which means some students may not have access to a comprehensive collection of materials. States need to fund and mandate the presence of a certified librarian on all school campuses, and this should be established as law. Several legislative actions have been initiated to counter exclusion and book challenges specifically. While previous federal administrations included a book ban coordinator in the Department of Education to help schools understand that they risk creating hostile environments that could violate federal civil rights laws if they continued to target books written by and about marginalized communities, the Trump administration dismissed those efforts.

States need to include an additional independent review board after the school board reviews a book challenge. Unfortunately, due to Moms4Liberty's influence on school boards and other participants, I suggest establishing a separate independent review board following the school board's assessment.

The presence of GSAs on campuses decreases LGBTQ+ students' health risks. States must enact laws requiring all schools to establish GSAs or similar student-led clubs that foster supportive environments for LGBTQ+ students and their allies. The state needs to mandate GSAs in all schools, and policymakers should also provide districts with guidance on implementing them on every campus. They implemented this with CSE, why not with GSAs?

Regarding GSAs on campuses, the best available research is the Harris study (2021), which serves as a guiding principle for best practices.

I have pointed out that the narrative of the religious right has shifted away from an outwardly aggressive stance in recent years; the tables have turned, primarily from attacker to victim, as evidenced by their use of religious exemption laws, which they refer to as “religious freedom” laws. The good news is that Walker (2023) found few direct effects of religious liberty frames. Discussing anti-LGBTQ legislation in the context of protecting religious liberties did not impact public support for the legislation, nor did it influence attitudes toward the groups making claims about religious liberties. These results indicate that widespread American support for religious freedom is not enough to sway previously held beliefs about LGBTQ protections. (Walker, 2023). Moms For Liberty has launched a new splinter group called M4LU, which claims to be “educating parents” about the dangerous “woke indoctrination” of our children. Unfortunately, white nationalists have allied themselves with anti-inclusion “parental rights” groups in their attack on education, and they now have the backing of “anti-woke” initiatives from the Trump administration.

The Roberts court has ruled in favor of religious individuals and groups over 83 percent of the time, compared to about 50 percent for other courts since 1953. In most cases, the winning religion was a mainstream Christian organization. Since every state lawmaker is faced with aggressive conservative Christian policies, states and policymakers need to ensure that advocacy groups and youth-sponsored social media campaigns are in place to alert the general public to the deceptive and misleading new packaging of the religious right’s new strategy to change the narrative. I suggest utilizing media campaigns alongside alliances and counter-narratives from

various advocacy groups and progressive religious organizations to challenge extremist beliefs and inform the public.

In researching several DEI policies, it was found that nothing has been updated since the beginning of the current federal administration in 2025. MAP's latest report analyzes state bills introduced over the past two years and finds that at least 42 states have introduced more than 440 bills attacking DEI in various ways, with over half (23) of those states enacting at least one such law or policy during that time frame. This was as of the end of 2024. Considering that state legislatures are most active from January to April each year, I assume that the number has doubled in the last three months. A substantial body of research has revealed that the number of 'backlash bills' proposed by the right has increased significantly in response to these policies. Regarding backlash bills, the best analysis was compiled by Jones' (2024) study, which everyone should follow.

Finally, while Washington state prohibits the use of public funds for religious exercise or worship, the Supreme Court has ruled that certain forms of government aid to religious schools are permissible and do not violate the Establishment Clause. Based on my observations and the recommendations found in the literature, state lawmakers need to implement policies to ensure that all schools receiving public funding, for any purpose, adhere to fundamental principles of non-discrimination and inclusion. Regarding religious instruction in public schools, the most reliable resource is the Yoshikawa study (2023), which should be followed.

### ***Implications for Teachers***

Teacher training on LGBTQ+ inclusion better prepares educators to support LGBTQ+ students. School staff shape the learning environment, yet they often receive inadequate training

and support regarding LGBTQ+ issues, especially those affecting transgender and queer youth. They must be equipped to answer questions and advocate for students at every opportunity. While most educators know where to access necessary lesson plans and understand what protections are in place, not all do. Again, teachers need proper training to implement these strategies and be ready to answer young people's questions. Some educators and facilitators struggle to deliver inclusive sexual health education due to their own inherent stigma or a perceived inability to tackle such topics, stemming from a lack of information and training. Educators require training that helps them broadly understand the concepts of sexual orientation, gender identity, assigned sex, and sexual behavior. Some teachers admitted to being unaware of what required coverage. To illustrate how open most parents are to having their children receive comprehensive instruction, the best available resource is the Van Leet and Moran study (2023), which all school stakeholders should follow. instances of bullying and sexual violence, teachers and administrators need to implement transparent reporting and response strategies at the district and state levels. There is a strong need for trustworthy and supportive school staff, particularly regarding reporting. Students report feeling a greater sense of school connection and safety when teachers and officials actively take measures to prevent bullying. Regarding transparency in reporting issues, the best available resource is the Shelton study (2020), which should be followed.

Teachers typically welcome diverse perspectives and viewpoints and engage in debates in the classroom. However, they occasionally overlook academic opportunities to encourage students to contribute their own experiences and frames of reference.

**Implications for Future Research**

The research I examined explores how implementing these standards affects students' social and emotional learning. I have been involved in this area for four years as a substitute teacher and one year as a student teacher, although I have not been directly engaged in the field for a couple of years. However, I have read the literature regarding the implications of these standards. I have observed the uneven implementation of protections across districts, and this should be the focus of upcoming research.

I have often seen transgender and gender diverse students grouped with lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in research. Little investigation has been conducted specifically on the T (trans) in LGBTQ+ students, separating the T from the LGB in research, and my research has identified a significant gap in this field. I would also appreciate more research on intersex and asexual individuals. Based on my experience and after reviewing the literature, not much attention has been given specifically to the T, and even less to the I or A. These issues need addressing not only for the students themselves but also for teachers' understanding of their legal responsibilities, especially since the T has faced more scrutiny and attacks than ever compared to the LGB. Research that addresses T students separately from LGB students is essential and should also be the focus of future studies. Transgender students are increasingly under attack today in 2025. Having examined the field as a whole, the separation of the T from the LGB requires further study. Several states across the U.S. have policies outlining protections for students based on sexual orientation; however, far fewer have policies addressing protections related to gender identity and expression. Future studies, both quantitative and qualitative, are essential to illuminate the distinct school experiences concerning sexual orientation diversity

among transgender youth, especially over the past four years, a period during which transgender students have faced increasing attacks.

Besides not seeing the T specifically addressed separately from the LGB and not finding research recommendations for tracking surveys sent to each district, there was very little research on advocacy groups coordinating with teachers in classrooms. This area needs significant research. Among the few articles I found, only a handful were peer-reviewed and directly related to classrooms and supporting teachers by creating lesson plans and activities. Furthermore, that research focused on the state of Ohio. More in-depth exploration is necessary regarding how educators can collaborate with LGBTQ advocacy groups.

While qualitative research is the most suitable for this project, I noticed some quantitative data but would have appreciated seeing more. Additionally, there needs to be more ethnographic research on this topic, particularly focusing on how different cultures develop curricula that are inclusive and foster positive school climates for their LGBTQ+ students. Most of the studies employed non-experimental research designs, with no variables manipulated. Although behaviors were observed, I felt this was one situation where an experimental design incorporating ethnographic research would have been beneficial. I wanted to utilize data collected from researchers using as much qualitative, categorical, and nominal data as possible to conduct an in-depth analysis of observed behaviors and interviews, summarizing participants' feelings and experiences. I sought a thorough and extensive discussion revolving around the participants' viewpoints, not just data presented in graphs. I found a considerable amount of research and was fortunate to discover studies utilizing various methodologies—from content analyses (Mayo, Gill, Yoshikawa) to qualitative content analysis (Bickford), narrative inquiries

(Benus, Weinstein), historical research, correlational research, quantitative surveys (Keslar), thematic analysis (Adhia), and grounded theory, to qualitative research (Shank).

Another limitation in the existing literature is the sample sizes of some studies. While a few studies, particularly one by Van Leent (2023), are fascinating, they are notably small. The lack of detail regarding the methodology used to collect data in the two studies I examined also posed a challenge (Isaac 2013; Wellenreiter, 2020). This vagueness hindered my ability to interpret the results of those studies. All other sources were robust, allowing me to gather reliable and interpretable data. In most research, LGB and transgender students have been grouped together. Why didn't I find more studies focusing specifically on the T? Given that TGD students are currently under significant attack, there should be more emphasis on their safety. This is problematic because each group has very distinct experiences in schools. My research has identified this significant gap in the field. Several states throughout the U.S. have policies outlining protections for students based on sexual orientation, but far fewer include protections for gender identity and expression. Future studies, both quantitative and qualitative, are needed to shed light on the distinct school experiences based on sexual orientation diversity among transgender youth, especially in the last four years, during which transgender students have faced increasing attacks.

Another aspect of the current literature I found was the emphasis on Christianity with the exclusion of other religions. Although it is extremely difficult to implement, districts could establish requirements for teaching about various religions, cultures, and perspectives, while also providing opportunities for intergroup contact and exposure to diverse individuals. I would have liked to see research on this.

**Limitations of the Project**

The studies' date ranges highlight research mostly from 2022 to 2024. While one study I cited was from 2008 and a few were from around 2015, most of the studies I included were conducted between 2022 and 2024. I also included some studies offering international perspectives, as they provided progressive and novel ways to examine my topic.

Over the last few months, this issue has become very near and dear to my heart; therefore, the search terms I used throughout the research led me down multiple avenues. They were all topics I wanted to include. However, I initially focused on “religious right agenda intersect with the depression felt by students / mental health crisis? (not represented in curriculum, LGBTQ)” with no results due to my awkward wording. So, I tried “religious right and LGBTQ students in schools,” which yielded thousands of results. I pulled one or two and conducted more specific searches, such as representation AND textbooks AND book banning, representation AND textbooks AND LGBTQIA, representation AND LGBTQIA students, and representation AND textbook AND conservative. I found many resources but selected several, and new themes kept emerging in all the literature I had read earlier. I then started searching for LGBTQ student health disparities, and more themes continued to surface in the literature. This prompted me to search for policies and protections for LGBTQ students, as well as GSAs and the campus climate for transgender students, including parental rights and many more perspectives that kept coming up. After seeing numerous articles about the religious right changing the narrative to a very secular argument for parents' rights, I focused on that too.

In addition to the UW direct site, the databases utilized included a combination of EBSCO and ERIC. However, while writing this paper, significant databases went offline because

the Trump administration, determined to undermine higher education, cut funding to several federal and research grants. As the term progressed, I could no longer access the articles fully through them. I started with the standard search bar in the UW library but found many available articles, though not through the basic UW site. Consequently, I began exploring the University Law website and Hein. One site from which I retrieved articles in January was ERIC.

Unfortunately, over the subsequent months, most of the content from that site was removed from University access (thank you, current Trump administration). When I reached the stage in the Action Plan where I needed specific information about what the state was already doing, I visited the OSPI site (the Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction), the WAC site (the Washington legislature site), and MAP (Movement Advancement Project), which proved incredibly helpful due to their detailed equity maps for each state. GLSEN was also very beneficial as they provide information on each state. I gained substantial knowledge from speaking directly with the people at PFLAG and their local chapter.

I intended to include a few international studies for comparison; besides that, I concentrated on U.S. studies. To avoid biased results, I steered clear of studies that heavily highlighted the positive, pro-social effects of religion, which often ignored their underrepresentation of the LGBTQ+ community. However, to ensure balance, I incorporated two studies from the Brigham Young Law Review. I excluded studies published before 2020 unless they provided valuable information. I also omitted studies with very low sample sizes (N). Furthermore, I disregarded studies irrelevant to my research or specifically related to school and district policies and encompassed a much larger population. Over time, the studies I focused on became more specific, and I concentrated on three key themes.

I faced several personal challenges while researching for this paper, including life difficulties such as time constraints and balancing work with this project. Additionally, I had to manage my own health issues, specifically colitis. The flare-ups of colitis occur when I become too stressed. Although I enjoyed researching this topic, I pushed myself quite hard. Ultimately, during this research, I experienced two very sudden and traumatic family deaths.

My positionality as someone who has worked both as a teacher and as a legislative aide at the state level presents both strengths and potential biases. In my first year of teaching middle school, I realized that going beyond the Pearson textbook was essential, and I quickly discovered that I could reach many more students through educational policy. In case it has not yet been obvious, I feel very strongly about maintaining safe and positive campus climates for vulnerable and marginalized students across the board. Being left of liberal and working in both politics and education, I have always believed I was pretty “pro” students’ rights. However, once I started delving deeper into the literature and recognized just how dire the situation is, and how much these bat shit crazies threaten students, our students, only then did I realize how crucial it is to fight for students’ rights. From my reading of this literature, I came away with a strong bias towards students’ rights.

I believed it was important to join my local chapter of Moms4Liberty while conducting this research to receive updates on the policies and bills they actively challenge at the state level. I could not have done this paper justice without enrolling in the Moms4Liberty local chapter, which provided insider information on their strategies, meetings, as well as the legislation they are currently engaged in, yet have no idea what they are talking about.. Concerned that my strong personal beliefs, assumptions, and biases might predispose me to influence data toward a

particular conclusion (reflexivity), I researched various sources and reached out to several organizations conducting similar research, while also engaging in personal peer debriefing. I must point out that although I originally intended to approach this project in an unbiased and non-political manner, many of the current administration's policies and the political climate in 2025 have shaped this narrative. I have utilized both my professional experience as an educator and a legislative staffer, along with conducting a thorough review of the literature surrounding LGBTQ students' SEL, to formulate my conclusions and recommendations. Teachers often say they welcome different perspectives, viewpoints, and debates in the classroom, yet, too often, academic opportunities to encourage students to bring their own experiences and frames of reference to the table are missed.

### **Conclusions**

In these politically charged Trumpian times, there is a clear urgency and an increased need for educator guidance and support on how to protect our LGBTQ+ students. Across the U.S., LGBTQ+ students face hostile climates and decreasing representation in policy, curricula, and state governance. In this paper, I have reviewed the research examining the impact of conservative movements on LGBTQ+ students and made concrete recommendations for policy and educational practice.

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