



# Identifying supports needed for LGBTQ+ students in a large urban district

Rebecca Alt, Yasmine Al Abdul Raheem, PhD, Andrew Muriuki, PhD, and Marc Sanders, Department of Research, Assessment, and Data

## Background and Rationale

Research has shown that LGBTQ+ students often report higher levels of mental health challenges, such as higher rates of anxiety and depression, more frequent victimization from bullying, and lower levels of support from their school community (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024; Heiden-Rootes et al., 2020; Marshal et al., 2011; Myers et al., 2020; Nath et al., 2025; Sulzle & Kohout, 2024; WestEd, 2021). These negative experiences in school can have lifelong impacts on students' mental and physical health, including an increased likelihood of engaging in risky health behaviors, such as substance use and abuse and suicidal behaviors (Bontempo, & d'Augelli, 2002; Heck et al., 2013; Russell et al., 2011), and potentially negatively impacting their social and economic well-being well into adulthood.

The present study investigated self-reported LGBTQ+ students' mental health, engagement in risky behaviors, and feelings of safety compared to non-LGBTQ+ students to better understand the unique needs of LGBTQ+ students in MPS and how various departments across the district can work with the Department of Gender, Identity and Inclusion (GII) to better support vulnerable students academically, socially and emotionally. Specifically, the study sought to uncover whether LGBTQ+ students report higher rates of engagement in risky behaviors, defined here as engaging in substance use/misuse, higher rates of mental health challenges, and/or feeling less safe and secure in their environments than their non-LGBTQ+ peers, and, if so, whether the differences were statistically significant.

## Research Questions

- Do LGBTQ+ students report engaging in risky behaviors, defined as engaging in substance use or misuse, at significantly higher rates than their non-LGBTQ+ peers?
- Do LGBTQ+ students report higher rates of mental health challenges than their non-LGBTQ+ peers?
- Do LGBTQ+ students report feel less safe and secure in their environments than their non-LGBTQ+ peers?

## Methods

The study used data from the 2023 YRBS survey, which was administered to all MPS students in grades six through twelve. Over 19,000 students were surveyed, of which 4,115 (21.1%) identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Two separate questions were used to generate the LGBTQ+ group, one that asked students to identify their sexual orientation and one that asked them to identify their gender. Chi-square tests were conducted on self-reported outcomes between LGBTQ+ students and their non-LGBTQ+ peers. Individual survey items were combined to form constructs for safety, substance use/misuse, and mental health challenges.

## Results

LGBTQ+ students reported significantly different outcomes compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers on all three constructs. All results were significant at the  $p < .001$  level.

RESULTS FROM CHI-SQUARE TESTS OF SAFETY, MENTAL HEALTH, AND SUBSTANCE USE/MISUSE <sup>A</sup>					
	Not LGBTQ+		LGBTQ+		
	N	%	N	%	
Feelings of Safety and Security					
NO	6,459	57.3	2,309	64.2	
YES	4,806	42.7	1,287	35.8	
Self-Reported Mental Health Challenges in the Past Year					
NO	5,201	39.6	590	15.4	
YES	7,939	60.4	3,252	84.6	
Self-Reported Substance Use or Misuse					
NO	9,030	70.5	2,074	54.3	
YES	3,780	29.5	1,743	45.7	

<sup>A</sup> Estimates are based on unweighted data from the YRBS dataset. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings have implications for how MPS can close the gap between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth in their schools by implementing policies and promoting programs that have been demonstrated in research to increase LGBTQ+ youths' social and emotional well-being. While establishing the Department of Gender Identity and Inclusion and expanding the training, resources, and support offered to both students and schools is an important first step, the gaps between sexual and gender minority students and their heterosexual and cisgender peers remain significant and alarming given the well-documented long-term negative consequences of engaging in risky health behaviors and feeling stigmatized and victimized by one's school community.

See accompanying paper for more details and a list of references cited.