Belong To LGBTQ+
Youth Ireland

The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey —Key Findings

Experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer young people in Irish second-level schools.

Welcome

This trailblazing report uncovers the reality of life at school for 1,208 lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) students across Ireland.

Despite significant positive progress in recent years in Irish society in terms of legislation, national strategies, and policies to protect LGBTQ+ people in Ireland, the clear message emerging from the 2022 School Climate Survey is that school is still not a safe place for LGBTQ+ students.

In recent decades, we have reached major milestones for LGBTQ+ rights in Ireland, from Marriage Equality and the Gender Recognition Act in 2015 to more recent moves to revise SPHE/RSE in schools and a review of the National Action Plan on Bullying.

Such progress is fragile. In the past two years, we have witnessed the rollback of LGBTQ+ rights internationally, the growth of the far right, and horrific violence inflicted on members of the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland. There is still a long way to go for these changes in laws and policies to translate into change experienced in the everyday lives of LGBTQ+ young people.

This year, once again, Belong To partnered with the Teachers College, Columbia University, to conduct the School Climate Survey to understand the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth at schools in the Republic of Ireland today. With a 53% increase on our 2019 research sample, this is the largest-ever research study of LGBTQ+ youth at school in Ireland. The report explores the challenges they face in schools today, the effect of supports and protective factors, and the impact of the school 'climate' on LGBTQ+ students' wellbeing.

This report builds on the 2019 study and on our long-term commitment at Belong To towards creating safe and supportive schools for LGBTQ+ students. The findings show that while progress is slow, hope is on the horizon thanks to the actions of supportive school staff, practices, and policies.

An alarmingly high number, 76% of LGBTQ+ students, do not feel safe at school in Ireland. Many participants report experiences of bullying and physical, verbal, and sexual harassment because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The study reveals an increase in the proportion of LGBTQ+ students avoiding school spaces and experiencing feelings of isolation, exclusion, and subsequent mental health challenges. This can lead to disengagement from studies and prevent LGBTQ+ students from reaching their full potential.

Despite the slow progress, there are positive indicators creating hope for future generations. While the results of this research are distressing, students also reported how effective school-based interventions can improve the lives and experiences of LGBTQ+ young people. An astounding and heart-warming 99% of LGBTQ+ students told us that they know at least one school staff member supportive of LGBTQ+ identities. We have seen a year-on-year growth in participation of Stand Up Awareness Week, Belong To's annual anti-LGBTQ+ bullying campaign, with 75% of second-level schools participating in 2021. Earlier this year, we were thrilled by the volume of schools that applied to participate in our year-long whole-school community LGBTQ+ Quality Mark.

Findings show that this level of support leads to LGBTQ+ students being more likely to feeling accepted by their peers, having an increased sense of belonging, and being less likely to miss school to avoid victimisation. Inspiring teachers, principals, guidance counsellors, and schools across Ireland have worked on LGBTQ+ school safety and inclusivity for years and have saved lives through these interventions.

This research highlights the urgent need for educators, parents, schools, policymakers, and politicians to listen to LGBTQ+ youth and to learn from them. Within this report, you will find solutions to overcome the challenges faced by these students and recommendations to improve the lives of all students.

Together, we can create a better future for LGBTQ+ young people at school - a future where they feel safe, equal, and valued.

Moninne Griffith

Moninne Griffith (she/her)
CEO, Belong To

Key Findings

1,208
LGBTQ+ young people took part in the research.

69%
of LGBTQ+ students hear homophobic remarks from other students.

76%
of LGBTQ+ students feel unsafe at school.

58%
of LGBTQ+ students heard homophobic remarks from school staff.

1 in 3
LGBTQ+ students have skipped school to avoid negative treatment due to being LGBTQ+.

45%
of LGBTQ+ students were taught positive things about LGBTQ+-related topics.

99%
of LGBTQ+ students knew at least one school staff member supportive of LGBTQ+ identities.

1 in 10
LGBTQ+ students are unsure whether they will complete the Leaving Certificate.

1 in 3
LGBTQ+ students reported that other students are not accepting of LGBTQ+ identities.

Unsafe
Bathrooms, PE, sports facilities, locker rooms, and lunchrooms are spaces LGBTQ+ students are most likely to avoid due to feeling unsafe.

About the School Climate Survey

This is the second iteration of the *School Climate Survey* research being conducted in Ireland, published by Belong To and the Teachers College at Columbia University, New York.

The *School Climate Survey* asks second-level students who identify as LGBTQ+ about their feelings of safety, instances of LGBTQ+ discrimination, experiences of harassment, and availability of school-based support and resources for LGBTQ+ students, in the most recent academic year.

The 2022 *School Climate Survey* was conducted online from June to August 2022. To obtain a representative sample of LGBTQ+ youth nationally, we conducted outreach through national, regional, and local organisations that provide services to or advocate on behalf of LGBTQ+ youth; sent posters about the survey to LGBTQ+ youth services and local community spaces; liaised with our allies, network of young people, and professionals to disseminate the survey; and utilised social networking sites, including TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook to promote the survey.

A full copy of the report is available on **www.belongto.org**

Who responded to the survey?

The final sample consists of **1,208 LGBTQ+ students** between the ages of 13 and 20, a **53% increase** on our 2019 sample of 788 participants. Once again, all **26 counties** in the Republic of Ireland are represented.
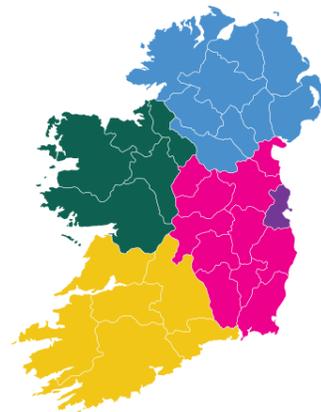
LOCATION

27% Dublin
30% Leinster (excl. Dublin)
26% Munster
13% Connacht
4% Ulster
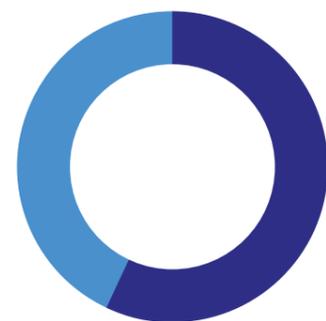
AGE

57% 13-16 Years
43% 17-20 Years
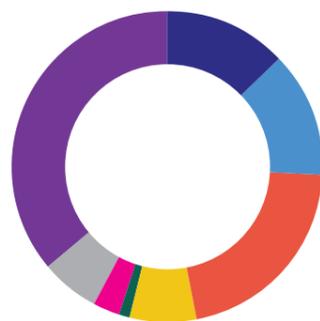
SEXUAL ORIENTATION

13% Gay
13% Lesbian
21% Bisexual
7% Panesexual
1% Straight
3% Questioning
6% Queer
36% Other & Multiple* Orientations
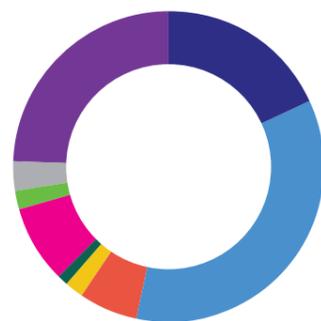
GENDER IDENTITY/EXPRESSION

18% Cisgender Man
35% Cisgender Woman
6% Trans Man
2% Trans Woman
1% Trans Masculine
0% Trans Feminine
8% Non-Binary
2% Gender Non-Conforming
3% Genderqueer
24% Other & Multiple*

Pizmony-Levy, O. and Belong To (2022). *The 2022 Irish National School Climate Survey Report* Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University.

* Survey participants were given the option of selecting multiple responses for the categories of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.

The Problem

Use of homophobic, transphobic, and biphobic language and the harassment, abuse, and exclusion of LGBTQ+ students remains rife throughout second-level schools in Ireland. This stark reality creates a hostile school environment for many LGBTQ+ students, presenting significant risks for their wellbeing, mental health, and educational outcomes.

School Safety

— 76% of LGBTQ+ students feel unsafe at school.
— 3 in 10 LGBTQ+ students missed at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.
— LGBTQ+ students avoid certain spaces and activities due to safety concerns:

BATHROOMS 45%
PE 39%
SPORTS FACILITIES 29%
LOCKER ROOMS 28%
LUNCH AREA 22%
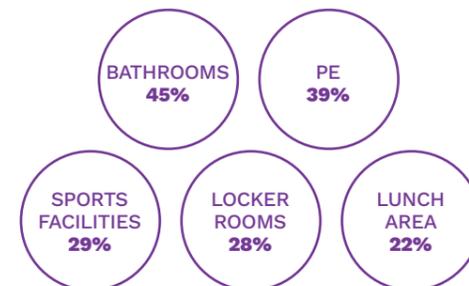
Anti-LGBTQ+ Remarks

— 69% of LGBTQ+ students heard homophobic remarks from other students. These comments bother or distress 59% of LGBTQ+ students.
— 53% of LGBTQ+ students heard other students make negative remarks about trans people.
— 58% of LGBTQ+ students reported hearing a homophobic remark from a teacher or staff member.
— 36% of LGBTQ+ students reported hearing a transphobic remark from a teacher or staff member.

> I think the worst thing is the casual comments like 'that class was so gay', because they slip by so easily. Years of hearing them really builds up. Nobody saying anything or doing anything about it really makes you feel unsafe."

> The worst experience I had was in PE. We were doing push ups and I wasn't keeping my back straight. Someone commented I had my ass in the air because I was gay. I laughed it off, but afterward he and two other students attempted to assault me."

Harassment and Assault

Compared to the general Irish youth population,[1] LGBTQ+ students are:

— x9 times more likely to report being deliberately excluded by peers (86% vs 9%).
— x9 times more likely to report being the focus of rumours or lies (71% vs 8%).
— x4 times more likely to report being verbally harassed, including name-calling and being threatened (72% vs 16%).
— x5 times more likely to suffer physical harassment, including being shoved or pushed (33% vs 6%).

Additionally, in the past year:

— 12% of LGBTQ+ students were physically assaulted, including being punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon, 9% based on their sexual orientation, and 8% because of their gender expression.
— 46% of LGBTQ+ students were sexually harassed, including unwanted touching or sexual remarks.
— 41% of LGBTQ+ students were cyberbullied over social media, phone, or email.

1 OECD (2019), PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Students' Lives, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/education/pisa-2018-results-volume-iii-acd78851-en.htm

The Impact

Experiencing homophobic, transphobic, and biphobic harassment and abuse causes many LGBTQ+ students to feel isolated and fearful at school. This impacts their sense of belonging in school, their feelings of self-worth, and their academic performance.

Sense of Belonging

— 1 in 3 LGBTQ+ students reported that other students were not accepting of LGBTQ+ people.

— LGBTQ+ students who experience higher rates of homophobic and biphobic harassment and assault are 21% less likely to feel accepted by the student body (59% vs 38%).

— LGBTQ+ students who experience higher rates of harassment and assault on the basis of gender expression are 31% less likely to feel accepted by the student body (65% vs 34%).

Compared to the general Irish youth population,[2] LGBTQ+ students are:

— x4 times as likely to feel lonely at school (58% vs 14%).

— x3 times as likely to feel like an outsider at school (22% vs 6%).

— x2 as likely to face difficulties making friends in school (55% vs 24%).

— x3 times as likely to feel disliked by other students (38% vs 11%).

> "They had a Pride week and I thought it was great until Pride flags were ripped, burned and flushed in toilets. A week that should've been great for me and fellow LGBT students was hell, and I didn't come in for the rest of the week, fearing my safety and feeling sick with the events."

Isolation

In the past year:

— 86% of LGBTQ+ students felt deliberately excluded or 'left out' by other students.

— 71% of LGBTQ+ students had mean rumours or lies spread about them.

— 59% of LGBTQ+ students said their peers never intervened when hearing homophobic remarks.

— 60% of LGBTQ+ students never reported incidents of LGBTQ+ bullying to school staff and 58% never reported to a family member.

— 70% of LGBTQ+ students felt school staff intervention was ineffective.

> "I think a big part of my depression in life has been since I found out I'm gay when I was 14-15. At first I hated myself because of it, I used to pray and wish I was 'normal' because that's how students in school treated LGBTQ+ people."

Absenteeism and Academic Aspirations

— 1 in 3 LGBTQ+ students missed at least one day of school in the past month on account of feeling unsafe because of their LGBTQ+ identity.

— LGBTQ+ students who experience higher levels of harssment and assault are twice as likely to miss school due to feeling unsafe than those who experience lower rates of harassment (42% vs 16%).

— 1 in 10 LGBTQ+ students are unsure whether they will complete the Leaving Certificate.

Reasons for this include:

Anxiety, stress, depression, or other mental health challenges	71%
Hostility from other students	29%
Feeling unsafe at school (including harassment and assault)	18%
Hostility from school staff	17%
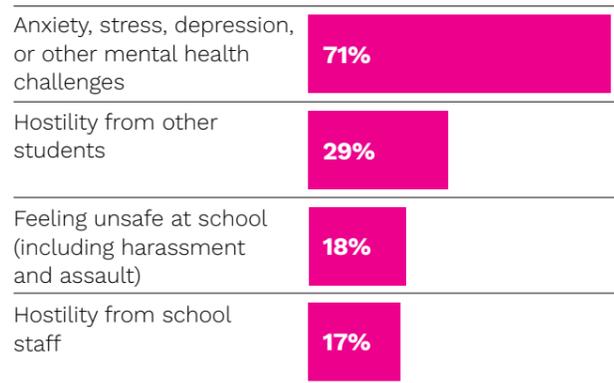
Compared to the general Irish youth population,[3] LGBTQ+ students are:

— 11% less likely to intend to progress to third-level education (69% vs 80%).

2 OECD (2019), PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Students' Lives, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/education/pisa-2018-results-volume-iii-acd78851-en.htm

3 OECD (2019), PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/publications/pisa-2018-results-volume-ii-b5fd1b8f-en.htm

The Solution

Safe and supportive schools with LGBTQ+ inclusive staff, positive representation of LGBTQ+ experiences in the curriculum, and proactive intervention by staff upon hearing homophobic, transphobic, and biphobic remarks results in increased feelings of safety and belonging among LGBTQ+ students.

Seeking Support

— Almost all LGBTQ+ students (99%) identified at least one school staff member supportive of LGBTQ+ students.

— Half of LGBTQ+ students could identify 10 or more supportive school staff.

— Half of LGBTQ+ students feel comfortable speaking with their school counsellor or teacher about LGBTQ+ topics.

— Two in three LGBTQ+ students have never taken part in an LGBTQ+ youth group or programme outside of school.

Effect of Support

In schools with higher levels of staff support for LGBTQ+ youth, LGBTQ+ students were:

— 35% more likely to feel accepted by the student body (54% vs 19%).

— 33% more likely to feel they belong in their school (57% vs 24%).

— 21% less likely to miss days of school due to feeling unsafe (27% vs 48%).

Staff Intervention

— 49% of LGBTQ+ students reported that staff did not intervene if present when homophobic remarks were made.

When staff members intervened in homophobic remarks, LGBTQ+ students were:

— 13% more likely to feel accepted by the student body (43% vs 30%).

— 14% more likely to feel they belong in their school (49% vs 35%).

— 3% less likely to miss days of school due to feeling unsafe (36% vs 39%).

> "I'm lucky to be in a school that has some very supportive staff, who helped me set up an LGBTQ+ club 4 years ago. There's been a huge change in the general attitude of the school to LGBT students, and while there is still bullying, there's far less, and we have a safe space for LGBT students to meet at lunch."

Curriculum

— Half of LGBTQ+ students reported that LGBTQ+-related topics were not covered at all in the 2021-2022 school year.

— 12% of LGBTQ+ students reported being taught negative things about LGBTQ+-related topics.

— 45% of LGBTQ+ students were taught positive things about LGBTQ+ topics.

Subjects with the highest reported positive representation of LGBTQ+-related topics include:

SPHE 35%	HISTORY 13%	ENGLISH 12%

Including positive things about LGBTQ+-related topics in the curriculum means LGBTQ+ students are:

— 11% more likely to feel accepted by the student body (49% vs 38%).

— 22% more likely to feel they belong in their school (58% vs 36%).

— 8% less likely to miss days of school due to feeling unsafe (28% vs 36%).

School Policies

— 64% of LGBTQ+ students were never taught about LGBTQ+ bullying in school.

— Only 87% of LGBTQ+ students were aware of their school's Anti-Bullying Policy.

— Only 1 in 3 students reported that their school's Anti-Bullying Policy specifically mentioned sexual orientation or gender identity and expression.

Changes in School Climate Over Time

Although the school climate for LGBTQ+ students has improved in some areas since the first iteration of this research in 2019, the situation remains stark. In 2022, school remains a place where LGBTQ+ students do not feel safe, with high rates of harassment and exclusion.

Indicator	Change over Time		2019	2022
School Safety				
Feeling Unsafe	There has been a slight increase in the rate of LGBTQ+ students who feel unsafe at school.		**73%**	**76%**
	The proportion of students who feel unsafe because of their gender expression has increased sharply.		**27%**	**37%**
Unsafe Spaces	Rates of feeling unsafe in certain school spaces have increased for LGBTQ+ students.	Bathrooms	**34%**	**45%**
		PE	**37%**	**39%**
		Sports facilities	**22%**	**29%**
Other Students' Behaviour	There is a stark increase in the rate of verbal harassment on the basis of gender expression.		**44%**	**62%**
	The frequency of homophobic remarks from other students is mostly unchanged.		**68%**	**69%**
	Instances of physical assault on the basis of a student's sexual orientation have decreased slightly.		**11%**	**9%**
	Exclusion of LGBTQ+ students by other students remains very high.		**86%**	**86%**
School Staff Behaviour	The proportion of LGBTQ+ students who have heard school staff make a homophobic remark has increased sharply.		**48%**	**58%**
	LGBTQ+ students hearing negative remarks about gender expression from school staff has decreased significantly since 2019.		**55%**	**36%**
Identity and Visibility				
Coming Out	The proportion of LGBTQ+ students who have come out to at least one person about their sexual orientation remains unchanged.		**71%**	**71%**
	A higher proportion of LGBTQ+ students are now out to some or all of their fellow students.		**32%**	**42%**
	The rate of LGBTQ+ students being out to at least one parent about their sexual orientation has also increased sharply.		**43%**	**56%**
	There is a slight increase in the proportion of LGBTQ+ students who are out to most or all school staff about their sexual orientation.		**15%**	**18%**
LGBTQ+ School Population	There is a significant increase in the proportion of LGBTQ+ students who know 10 or more other LGBTQ+ students at their school.		**43%**	**62%**
Teaching and Curriculum				
Bullying	The proportion of LGBTQ+ students who have been taught about LGBTQ+ bullying has increased.		**22%**	**36%**
Positive LGBTQ+ Representation	The rate of LGBTQ+ students who had been taught positive things about LGBTQ+-related topics in class increased significantly.		**32%**	**45%**
	SPHE remains the subject in which positive LGBTQ+ topics are most commonly taught.		**23%**	**35%**
	The proportion of LGBTQ+ students taught positive LGBTQ+ representation in History has increased.		**6%**	**13%**
	The proportion of LGBTQ+ students taught positive LGBTQ+ representation in English has increased.		**7%**	**12%**

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our 2022 School Climate Survey indicates that for many LGBTQ+ students, school is still a hostile environment where they face ongoing challenges. We urgently need to take action to ensure that LGBTQ+ students feel safe at school. This report demonstrates the powerful, positive impact of inclusive and supportive teachers.

Recommendations to Policy-Makers

Teacher Training

— **Integrate** LGBTQ+ awareness and inclusion to undergraduate and postgraduate teacher-training courses.
— **Provide** comprehensive CPD training on LGBTQ+ inclusion to all teachers, prioritising Guidance Counsellors, Wellbeing Coordinators, and those teaching Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE).
— **Encourage** school leadership, including principals, deputy principals, and Board of Management members, to take part in LGBTQ+ inclusion training.

Policy Review

— **Build upon** the robust reviews related to the new Action Plan on Bullying and updated Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum to ensure evidence-based LGBTQ+ inclusion across school policies and curricula.
— **Implement** outstanding actions under Objective 1 of the *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2022*:
  – Review and update professional development supports for teachers.
  – Encourage schools to develop whole-school LGBTI+ inclusion policies.
  – Develop and pilot a student-centred peer support for LGBTI+ students and their allies within post-primary schools (gender-sexuality alliances).
  – Provide specific prevention initiatives for LGBTQ+ identity-based bullying in schools.
  – Review the feasibility of provision for gender-neutral/single stall bathrooms and changing rooms in the design guidelines for schools.

Recommendations to Schools

Policy & Procedures

— **Review** and **update** school policies following Section 6 of the Department of Education's *Being LGBT in School*[4] post-primary policy resource.
— **Ensure** the school Anti-Bullying Policy:
  – outlines bullying education and prevention strategies, and
  – explicitly addresses homophobic and, transphobic bullying.[5]
— **Communicate** school policies, particularly the Anti-Bullying Policy, to staff, students, parents, and carers regularly.
— **Implement** clear procedures for students and parents to report instances of harassment or discriminatory treatment by school staff.
— **Adopt** a school-wide zero-tolerance approach to homophobic, transphobic, and biphobic remarks by recognising, intervening in, and reporting all instances of such remarks.

Staff Actions

— **Facilitate** and **encourage** all school staff to take part in training on LGBTQ+ awareness, identities, and experiences.
— **Run** Belong To's annual LGBTQ+ anti-bullying campaign, Stand Up Awareness Week.[6]
— **Include** LGBTQ+ identities and experiences across the school curriculum, in the library, and in teaching resources.

Student Supports

— **Set up** an LGBTQ+ group or club, supported by staff, to create a safe space for LGBTQ+ or questioning students.
— **Engage** the school community in reviewing what more the school could do to support LGBTQ+ students, focusing on the youth voice.
— **Develop** strong relationships with local LGBTQ+ youth groups and support services, displaying posters with details of these services throughout the school.

4 Department of Education and Skills and GLEN. (2016) *'Being LGBT in School A Resource for Post-Primary Schools to Prevent Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying and Support LGBT Students'*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/24762/729f5d8906184a6a8c4be0c5e2a349dd.pdf

5 Circular 045/2013 'Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools'. (2013). Department of Education and Skills: Dublin. Available at: https://circulars.gov.ie/pdf/circular/education/2013/45.pdf

6 To learn more about Stand Up Awareness Week, training, and resources, visit www.belongto.org/standup

In Our Own Words

As part of our survey, we gave LGBTQ+ students the opportunity to tell us about what they have enjoyed in school, and what they hope for LGBTQ+ students of the future. Here's what they had to say...

"I am lucky to have a large group of supportive queer friends which has made my school experience so much easier."

"I believe there is a lot to be done in schools for it to be an all-inclusive environment, but it is completely possible."

"I feel comfortable enough in my school's anti-bullying policies and senior staff that I can feel safe as a trans male in school."

"I had two teachers, in particular, who were incredibly supportive of my identity and helped me immensely throughout my senior cycle journey. They were the reason why I felt comfortable being out at all."

"In our school we have an LGBT+ group run by one of the teachers who is openly gay. During Stand Up Week, we put up posters around the school and flew the Pride flag outside."

"I enjoy school but I feel like teachers and staff aren't educated very well on LGBTQIA+ topics which can be frustrating. I find it hard to talk about these issues or talk about anything LGBTQIA+ related because I am scared of outing myself."

"I would love a Pride club that is a safe space for students to express themselves and learn more about the community and maybe themselves."

"I would love to learn about LGBTQ rights and the history of what people did to get these rights, just like learning about the women's suffrage movements."

"Stand Up Week helped a lot. I realised I was trans in second year and only started telling people in fifth year. Only after two years of Stand Up Week did I feel comfortable enough to tell people. I wouldn't have had the courage to do it if I hadn't known that at least some of my peers and teachers were supportive."

"I remember coming out to two of the boys in my class in 6th class, I was so scared I was shaking, but one boy supported me and even gave me a high five and congratulated me over text."

"It is so deeply important that SPHE classes, using the RSE program and more, encourage vital discussion and education on the real problems that face LGBTQ+ people today."

"

It's lonely. So very lonely. I never had anything in common with anyone and felt alienated. School just made me realise how lonely being queer truly is."

Belong To is a national organisation supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) youth. Since 2003, Belong To has worked with LGBTQ+ young people to create a world where they are equal, safe, and thriving. The organisation advocates and campaigns on behalf of young LGBTQ+ people and offers a specialised LGBTQ+ youth service including crisis counselling with Pieta, information, and the provision of LGBTQ+ youth groups.

Belong To supports educators and schools across Ireland. Stand Up Awareness Week, now in its 13th year, is an opportunity for educators and schools across Ireland to avail of teacher training and second-level school resources. Belong To's LGBTQ+ Quality Mark initiative supports second-level schools by helping them to create environments that are fully inclusive of LGBTQ+ youth. To find out more, visit

belongto.org

TEACHERS COLLEGE
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
A Graduate School of Education, Health & Psychology

Belong To LGBTQ+
Youth Ireland

**Belong To
13 Parliament St.
Dublin 2, D02 P658**

**01 670 6223
info@belongto.org
www.belongto.org**

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government supporting communities

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