The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey — Key Findings

Experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer young people in Irish second-level schools.
Despite significant progressive 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 93% 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 (she/her)
CEO, Belong To

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

76% of LGBTQ+ students feel unsafe at school.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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:
  - 40% for bathrooms
  - 29% for the lunch area
  - 28% for locker rooms
  - 22% for the sports facilities
  - 21% for lockers
  - 19% for the PE area

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.

Harassment and Assault

Compared to the general Irish youth population, LGBTQ+ students are:
- 9 times more likely to report being deliberately excluded by peers (86% vs 9%).
- 9 times more likely to report being the focus of rumours or lies (77% vs 8%).
- 4 times more likely to report being verbally harassed, including name-calling and being threatened (72% vs 16%).
- 5 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.

I think the worst thing is the usual 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 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 37% less likely to feel accepted by the student body (65% vs 34%).

Compared to the general Irish youth population, 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.”

Absenteemis 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 harassment 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, LGBTQ+ students are:
— 11% less likely to intend to progress to third-level education (69% vs 80%).

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 staff members.
— Half of LGBTQ+ students feel comfortable talking 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 39%).
— 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 44%).

Staff Intervention

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

When staff members intervened in homophobic remarks, LGBTQ+ students were:
— 12% 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%).

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.

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 LGBTQ students, and while there is still bullying, there’s far less, and we have a safe space for LGBT students to meet at lunch.”
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.

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<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
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<td>2019: 73%</td>
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<td>Feeling Unsafe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unsafe Spaces</td>
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<td>Other Students’ Behaviour</td>
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<td>Other Students’ Behaviour</td>
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<td>Identity and Visibility</td>
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<td>Coming Out</td>
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<td>LGBTQ+ School Population</td>
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<td>Bullying</td>
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<td>Positive LGBTQ+ Representation</td>
<td>2019: 43%</td>
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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 across school policies and curricula.
  - Encourage school leadership, including principals, deputy principals, and Board of Management members, to take part in LGBTQ+ inclusion training.

Recommendations to Schools

- Policy & Procedures
  - Review and update school policies following Section 6 of the Department of Education’s Being LGBT in School: A Resource for Post-Primary Schools to Prevent Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying and Support LGBT Students.
  - Encourage the school Anti-Bullying Policy: outlines bullying education and prevention strategies and explicitly addresses homophobic and transphobic bullying.
  - Communicate school policies, particularly the Anti-Bullying Policy, to staff, students, parents, and carers regularly.

- 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.

- 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.

6. To learn more about Stand Up Awareness Week, training, and resources, visit www.belontos.ie/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...

“\nI 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 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.”

“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 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.”

“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.”

“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.”

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

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

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“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