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How to say gay: what should happen in Australia

By Kahlia Seeley and Alison Bedford

The recent resurgence in anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment promoted by far-right conservatism poses a threat to the safety and mental health of LGBTQIA+ people, and particularly LGBTQIA+ students. LGBTQIA+ rights and visibility have improved substantially in many nations around the globe since the 1990s but there is now a backlash.

And our research shows, young LGBTQIA+ people are at significantly greater risk of absenteeism from school because they feel unsafe in their educational environment, [in part due to a lack of visibility and gender-affirming actions](#).

The most stark example of this concerted effort to push LGBTQIA+ identities back into the closet and out of public discourse is [Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' laws](#), which restrict the teaching of gender and sexuality in Florida schools.

This was later compounded by the [Stop the Wrongs to our Kids and Employees \(W.O.K.E\) Act](#), which allows parents to oppose the inclusion of books in school libraries and curricula.

So far, [just 11 parents have been responsible for more than 600 of the 1000+ complaints about books in the 2021/22 school year](#), many on the basis of references to gender and sexuality. This

far-right conservatism also underpinned the repeal of *Roe v Wade*, restricting everyone from accessing reproductive health care and impacting their bodily autonomy.

Think it can't happen in Australia?

Anti-trans activist Posey Parker found an audience for her ideas in her visit to Melbourne, with neo-Nazis present in support. [The closure of the Safe Schools program](#), which offered LGBTQIA+ gender and sexuality education is another example of the general reduction in support for LGBTQIA+ inclusion in schools. The legislative landscape in Australia has not suffered the same reversals as the United States, with anti-discrimination legislation at both a state and federal level offering protection.

This finds its way into schools through state government requirements that schools provide a safe and inclusive learning environment. Our recent research reveals this is not consistently enacted in school policy. As we said earlier, our research shows LGBTQIA+ students are at significantly greater risk of absenteeism from school. [In our findings](#), the disconnect between policy and practice was clear. In 2021, the Queensland Department of Education developed the [Diversity Policy](#) to reflect [legislation](#) to support, affirm and protect LGBTQIA+ students.

But when we looked at one Queensland school region during our research, only four out of thirty-six state secondary schools had an LGBTQIA+ specific inclusion policy that was publicly available to LGBTQIA+ students and their families.

What we found in Australia

And if you were looking to the [Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority \(ACARA\)](#) for LGBTQIA+ voice and representation, it's clear LGBTQIA+ people and their experiences are invisible in statements regarding diversity and in the Australian Curriculum itself.

On a separate site, intended to enhance the Australian Health and Physical Education Curriculum, schools are encouraged to use the materials from the Queensland Government's [Respectful Relationships Hub](#). Here, students may have one lesson during years P-12 on the human rights of all diverse peoples, with LGBTQIA+ people briefly mentioned, in Year 11. Just one lesson in 13 years. Just one.

Our research showed the [devasting impact](#) upon mental health, wellbeing, and longitudinal outcomes for LGBTQIA+ people when not supported through policy, inclusion, visibility and representation in schools. The [Writing Themselves In](#) surveys conducted by La Trobe University, spanning from 1998 to 2021 consistently demonstrate most LGBTQIA+ youth experience discrimination, lack of affirmation and feelings of unsafety while at secondary school.

Our scoping review of literature regarding the experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth in Australia identified six ways to include, affirm and protect LGBTQIA+ students in schools. We also found the literature unanimously showed [the benefit of LGBTQIA+ specific inclusion and anti-bullying policies](#) and LGBTQIA+ representation in the curriculum. But Queensland school policy does not consistently include LGBTQIA+ students, and some actively stymie gender-expression through restrictive uniform policy.

Include, affirm, protect

The six key themes identified in inclusive school environments were:

- schools having LGBTQIA+ specific inclusion policies
- LGBTQIA+ specific anti-bullying and harassment policies

- an inclusive curriculum that acknowledges and affirms LGBTQIA+ identities and relationships in both general and sex education classes.
- Beyond policy, the creation of affirming school structures such as choice in uniform and toileting facilities,
- The creation of LGBTQIA+ groups and spaces
- staff professional development to further support these school structures were also identified as strong supports for LGBTQIA+ youth.

In much of the literature reviewed, there was an overarching finding – that a combination of these strategies could be adopted to develop a whole of school approach to LGBTQIA+ inclusion. As our research and the findings of others suggest, there is work still to be done to ensure the physical and psychological safety of LGBTQIA+ young people in schools. Through a combination of policy reform, changes to school structures and the development of a more representative curriculum, schools can achieve meaningful change. For the benefit of LGBTQIA+ people the disconnection between [Australian law](#), Australian school policy and individual schools' application of these laws and policies must be amended.



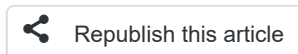
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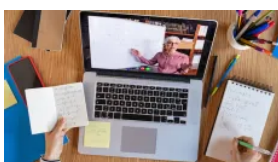
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