

Protecting LGBTQ Youth Through Inclusive School Suicide Prevention Policies in California



Abstract: Passing legislation explicitly requiring the inclusion of LGBTQ concerns makes a difference on the ground, as a review of current school suicide prevention policies in California shows that only 3% of policies implemented before passage of California Assembly Bill 2246 included LGBTQ youth, compared to more than 90% of those written afterwards. Work still needs to be done, as nearly 25% of California's school suicide prevention policies still do not address LGBTQ students.

INTRODUCTION

Suicide is the second highest cause of death among youth ages 10–24. LGB youth are almost four times as likely to have attempted suicide compared to heterosexual youth and evidence suggests rates for transgender and gender-nonconforming youth could be even higher. These youth spend countless hours surrounded by school faculty and staff, who have a unique opportunity to recognize signals of suicidal ideation. It is critically important that schools equip their faculty and staff with the knowledge, tools, and training to respond to such signals and save young lives.

Beginning in the 2017–2018 academic year, California State Assembly Bill 2246 (AB 2246) required all local education agencies (LEAs) serving students in grades 7–12 to establish policies for suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention. The law requires these policies to be developed in consultation with school and community stakeholders, school-employed mental health professionals, and suicide prevention experts. These policies must also specifically address the unique circumstances of high-risk student populations, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth.

The Trevor Project is the leading national organization for suicide prevention and crisis intervention among LGBTQ youth. As part of the organization’s mission to protect young lives, The Trevor Project volunteers and staff recently conducted a comprehensive review of California local education agencies’ compliance with AB 2246, including an evaluation of whether established suicide prevention policies include language pertaining to LGBTQ youth and/or high-risk student populations.

METHODOLOGY

Staff members from The Trevor Project generated a list of 406 local education agencies in the state of California serving students in grades 7–12 which could be confirmed to have a suicide prevention policy in place. (California has 478 total LEAs serving this age group. For more information about the prevalence of school suicide prevention policies, see: *A Report of Suicide Prevention in California*). The collected policies were then analyzed and evaluated by a staff member for full compliance with AB 2246, based on five component provisions; (1) prevention, (2) intervention, (3) postvention, (4) needs of high-risk student populations, and (5) needs of LGBTQ youth.

The policies were also compared to California’s Model Youth Suicide Prevention Policy, the California School Board Associate Sample Board Policy, and the Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention collaboratively prepared by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), The American School Counselor Association (ASCA), The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), and The Trevor Project. If a policy duplicated the language of any of the above policies, it was deemed in full compliance with AB 2246.

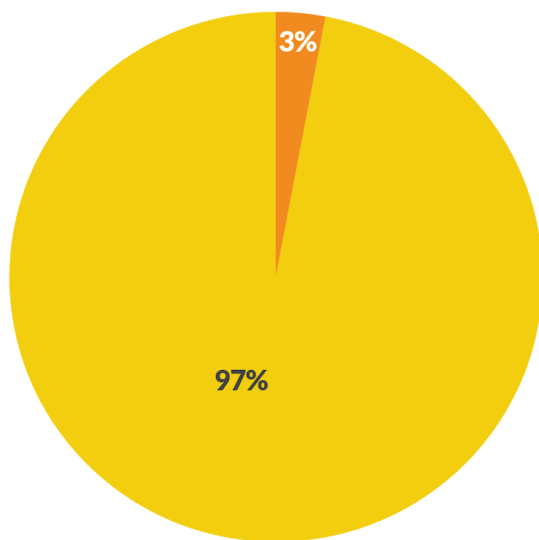
If a policy did not utilize one of the three model policies, it was analyzed for each of the five components required by AB 2246. Suicide prevention policies may contain any or all of three types of documents: board policies, administrative regulations, and supporting exhibits, such as handbooks. Primary board policies were examined first. If compliance was not met in the primary document, administrative regulations and supporting exhibits were subsequently examined. If, taken together, these documents failed to include any individual element, the policy was deemed non-compliant.

386 policies were available for review, representing 95% of known current suicide prevention policies in the state. For purposes of additional analysis, these policies were also categorized based on date of implementation before or after the enactment AB 2246. 17.4% (67) of reviewed policies were implemented prior to AB 2246, while 80.3% (310) of policies were implemented after AB 2246. 2.3% (9) policies had implementation dates which could not be determined.

FINDINGS

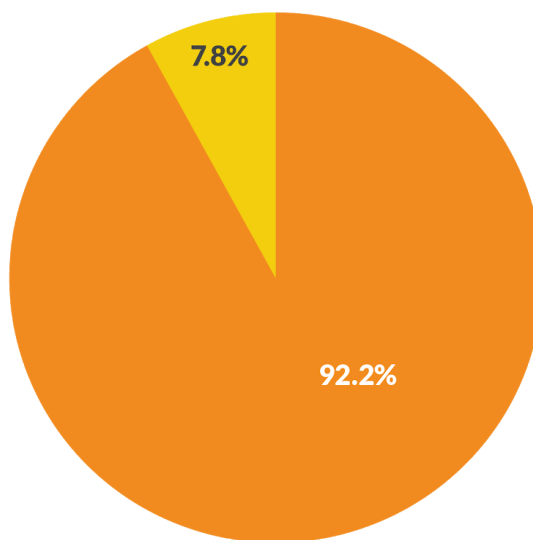
- Of LEAs with a suicide prevention policy enacted prior to AB 2246, only two, or 3%, contained language related to LGBTQ youth. By contrast, more than 90% (286) of policies enacted post-AB 2246 address the needs of LGBTQ youth.
- Nearly 90% (343) of the suicide prevention policies met the requirement of addressing all three elements of prevention, intervention, and postvention.
- 79% (306) of suicide prevention policies address “high risk youth.”
- But only about 75% of suicide prevention policies specifically address LGBTQ youth (291).

ENACTED BEFORE AB 2246



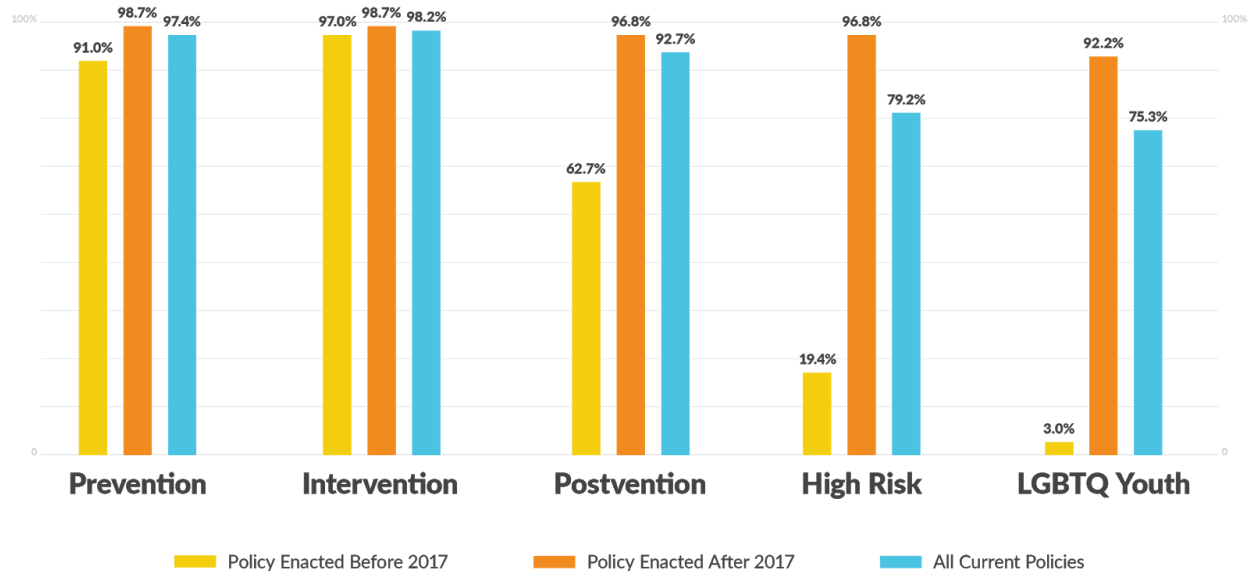
Address LGBTQ Youth
Do Not Address LGBTQ Youth

ENACTED AFTER AB 2246



Address LGBTQ Youth
Do Not Address LGBTQ Youth

COMPLIANCE WITH AB 2246



UPDATED POLICIES ARE NECESSARY

The field of suicide prevention is constantly evolving, and school suicide prevention policies must be regularly updated to stay in step with best practices. Analysis of currently identified policies reveals that those enacted prior to AB 2246 are significantly less likely to contain postvention procedures, address the needs of high risk students, and almost never include LGBTQ youth. In addition to the lower rates of compliance with the requirements of AB 2246, policies written prior to the law's implementation were found to frequently contain outdated and problematic language such as "in the event of an *unsuccessful* suicide" which is contrary to current best practices.

On September 17, 2018, California Assembly Bill 2639 (AB 2639) was enacted requiring all schools to update their suicide prevention policies every five years. Over 80% (53) of LEAs whose policies were implemented prior to passage of AB 2246 and found in this study to be out of compliance will thus be required to update their policies within the next school year, and 100% (65) will be mandated to do so within the next three years.

CONCLUSION

The Trevor Project plans to work closely with the California State Assembly and California Department of Education to encourage out-of-compliance LEAs to update or create suicide prevention policies consistent with resources such as the Model School Policy [<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/education/Model-School-Policy>]. The specific inclusion of the needs of LGBTQ youth and their status as a high risk population will be a critical component of compliance. Ensuring effective implementation of AB 2246 and AB 2639 will allow for future research into the effectiveness of school suicide prevention policies, including the Model School Policy, for suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention. The Trevor Project also plans to repeat and expand this analysis to include other states, thus encouraging the adoption of comprehensive and inclusive suicide prevention policies nationwide.

The Trevor Project is the leading and only accredited national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer & questioning (LGBTQ) young people.

The Trevor Project offers a suite of crisis intervention and suicide prevention programs, including [TrevorLifeline](#), [TrevorText](#), and [TrevorChat](#) as well as a peer-to-peer social network support for LGBTQ young people under the age of 25, [TrevorSpace](#). Trevor also offers an education program with resources for youth-serving adults and organizations, a legislative advocacy department fighting for pro-LGBTQ legislation and against anti-LGBTQ rhetoric/policy positions, and conducts research to discover the most effective means to help young LGBTQ people in crisis and end suicide. If you or someone you know is feeling hopeless or suicidal, our TrevorLifeline crisis counselors are available 24/7/365 at 1-866-488-7386.

www.TheTrevorProject.org