

Policies to Protect Youth: Suicide Prevention in New York State Schools



Abstract

Schools play a critical role in suicide prevention and intervention efforts for youth in crisis. The Trevor Project volunteers and staff recently conducted a comprehensive review of New York State's school district suicide prevention policies to determine whether districts have a suicide prevention policy in place, as well as the extent to which existing policies align with best practices of suicide prevention in schools, including language specific to LGBTQ youth. The Trevor Project found that over 1/3 of New York school districts do not currently have a suicide prevention policy. Further, we estimate that well over 2 million youth across New York state are enrolled in schools that are not covered by LGBTQ inclusive suicide prevention policies.

Introduction

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2017 1,696 individuals died by suicide across New York State (CDC, 2019). The rate of suicide in all age groups has continued to steadily rise in the last decade, and the rate of suicide among children ages 10 to 14 has doubled. The CDC reports that in 2017 alone, 17.4% of high school students in New York State seriously considered suicide, and 10.1% made non-fatal suicide attempts (CDC, 2018).

Nationwide, 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. Youth who identify as transgender report attempting suicide at almost five times the rate of their cisgender peers (Johns et al., 2019). These youth spend the majority of their waking hours surrounded by school faculty and staff, who have a unique opportunity to recognize signs of suicidal ideation. Additionally, the majority of LGBTQ youth with thoughts of suicide report sharing them, with one in four sharing with a teacher or school counselor (The Trevor Project, 2019). It is critically important that schools equip their faculty and staff with the knowledge, tools, training, and procedures to respond to such signs and save young lives.

The Trevor Project is the world's largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for 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 New York State's school district suicide prevention policies to determine whether districts have a suicide prevention policy, as well as the extent to which existing policies align with best practices of suicide prevention in schools, including language specific to LGBTQ youth.

Methodology

Using information available from the New York State Education Department, The Trevor Project staff generated a list of 723 school districts serving students in K–12 schools in the state of New York. Volunteers then searched the school district websites and completed a general internet search to locate a suicide prevention policy for each district. After an initial internet search was completed, school districts that had not yielded a policy were searched a second time by Trevor staff.

If no policy could be identified via internet search, Trevor staff then attempted to contact the school districts directly. To do so, The Trevor Project identified a primary point of contact for each district, typically an administrator for school mental health, a school board administrative assistant, or a school district clerk. If contacts for these positions were not available, the school superintendent or the superintendent’s office was utilized as the primary point of contact. The primary contact was called twice by phone. If these calls were not answered, Trevor staff left a message requesting a response. The primary point of contact was also contacted once by email asking for the school to send their suicide prevention policy or to confirm that no such policy presently exists. If no response was given, staff identified a secondary point of contact who was then emailed the same request.

The 304 policies that were collected were then analyzed and evaluated by a staff member for their inclusion of six components of best practices of suicide prevention in schools (1) prevention, (2) intervention, (3) postvention, (4) teacher training, (5) suicide prevention included in student curriculum and (6) consideration of high-risk youth, in particular LGBTQ youth.

The [Model School Policy](#) developed 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, provides an example of a comprehensive school suicide prevention policy incorporating all six key components evaluated by this study. Throughout the research process, 118 school districts were sent this document in an effort to encourage the development and adoption of high quality local school suicide prevention policies.

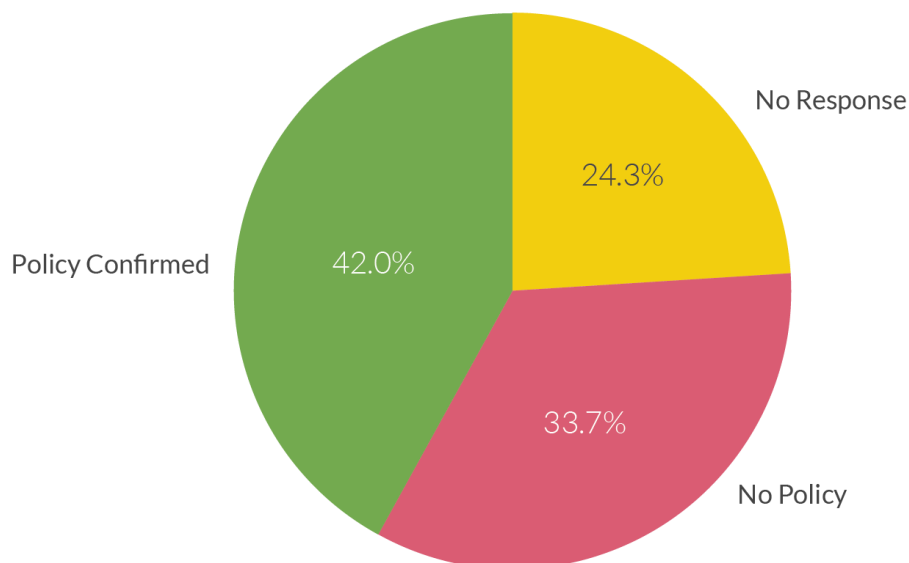
New York State school districts are mandated by law to have a policy that addresses threats of violence in school. While tracking these policies was outside the scope of this project, it appears most schools have this policy in place; when asked about suicide prevention policies, some districts noted this policy as the policy in their district that addresses suicide. Though these policies mention threats of suicide, they are not comprehensive and only address intervention when a direct threat of suicide is made. “Threat of violence” policies do not typically include any of the other five critical components examined in this policy analysis.

Findings

The Trevor Project was able to account for 75.8% (521) of New York State school districts. Trevor acquired current school district policies from 42.0% (304) and confirmed the lack of a policy for 33.7% (244). The school districts with confirmed policies or confirmed lack of a policy represent nearly 2.1 million students.

Based on 2018–19 New York State public schools enrollment data, over 1.5 million students are benefiting from a suicide prevention policy in their school district. However, we estimate that well over 2 million youth across New York state are enrolled in schools that are not covered by LGBTQ inclusive suicide prevention policies.

NY STATE SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICIES

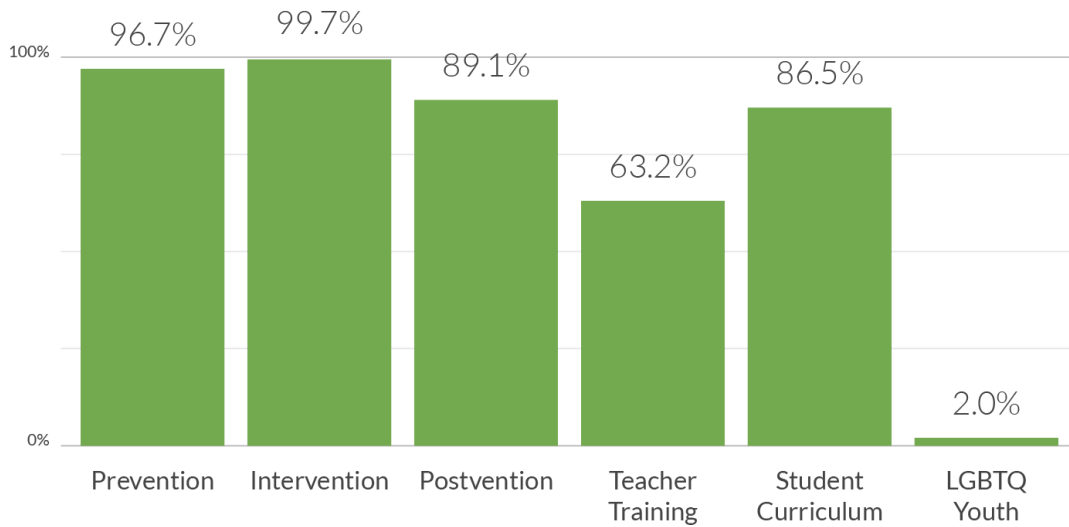


Quick Facts:

- More than 1/3 of New York school districts currently do not have a suicide prevention policy, leaving more than 500,000 students without protective measures in place in their schools
- Only 2% (6) of identified existing policies address LGBTQ youth
- 99.7% (303) of existing policies provide intervention provisions
- 76.6% (233) of existing policies include prevention, intervention, and postvention

We estimate that well over 2 million youth across NY state are enrolled in schools that are not covered by LGBTQ inclusive suicide prevention policies.

COMPONENTS OF EXISTING POLICIES



Equipping School Staff & Students Through Policy

Addressing the problem of youth suicide is complex and will take a variety of resources and efforts. Schools play a critical role in suicide prevention and intervention efforts for youth in crisis and have a significant responsibility in addressing the aftermath of a youth suicide. Teachers, administrators, school mental health professionals, and other school staff need to be provided the resources necessary to assist youth in crisis and protect their well-being. Students should also be included in suicide prevention efforts by building their resilience and by creating a positive school climate and culture that is critical for the prevention of suicide (NYSED, 2018). School districts that adopt a comprehensive suicide prevention policy take the first step in ensuring that school staff and students are equipped with the necessary tools to prevent youth suicide.

Conclusion

The Trevor Project plans to work closely with the New York State Assembly and New York State Education Department to encourage all school districts to implement policy that is consistent with best practices for suicide prevention. The specific inclusion of the needs of LGBTQ youth and their status as a high risk population will be a critical component of this work. The Model School Policy and A Guide for Suicide Prevention in New York Schools both provide comprehensive suicide prevention policy guidelines that New York state school districts could utilize in developing their own policy. The Trevor Project also plans to expand this analysis to include other states, thus encouraging the adoption of comprehensive and inclusive suicide prevention policies nationwide.

*Note: New York City Schools is comprised of 32 school districts. Though all district policies are governed by the New York City Department of Education, the implementation of the policies are largely left to the individual district. To maintain consistency across various states The Trevor Project has evaluated, the data reported here treats the 32 districts as separate entities, though they share the same suicide prevention policy.

**Some schools referenced “sexual identity issues” as a risk factor. This language was not deemed sufficient as addressing LGBT youth in crisis as this language does not follow current best practices and further it fails to recognize transgender youth.

References

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