

# SAFE SCHOOLS RESEARCH BRIEF

## DISTRICT POLICIES AND TRAININGS

Research consistently shows that feeling unsafe at school or experiencing harassment at school is linked to health and behavior risks for youth, as well as poor school performance. Recent research shows that bias-motivated harassment is all too common in California’s schools. At the same time, school non-discrimination policies have been shown to promote school safety and are a key strategy to prevent negative health and academic outcomes for youth.

**What is the state of school safety policy in California?** We conducted a survey of one-third of California’s school districts – here is what we learned.

### Key Findings

#### The good news

The vast majority of school districts report that they have non-discrimination policies that enumerate all of the categories covered in the state non-discrimination law. Therefore, the majority of California school districts report that they protect students from discrimination and harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation.



#### The bad news

Implementation of district policies does not occur in many school districts and when implementation occurs it is often not thorough or consistent.

A majority of districts include gender as an enumerated category.



While the majority of districts report that they include the enumerated category of "gender" in their non-discrimination policies, these policies lack a definition of gender that makes clear that transgender and gender non-conforming students are protected from discrimination.

Some districts are training staff and additional districts are willing to do more training on these issues.



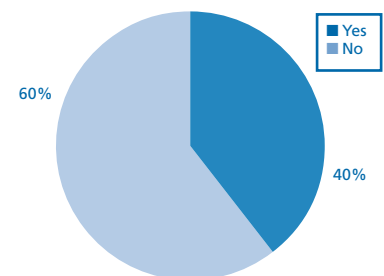
Some districts are unaware of the need for training, while some are unable or unwilling to address the need to implement non-discrimination and harassment policies.

### DISTRICT POLICIES

While California school districts are making progress by passing inclusive non-discrimination policies, there are far too many school districts still NOT in compliance with California law.

- 94% of districts report having a policy specifically prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation.
- Only 40% of districts have policies that prohibit harassment based on gender identity, appearance or behavior. **This means 60% of school districts are in direct violation of California law.**

POLICIES THAT PROHIBIT HARASSMENT BASED ON GENDER IDENTITY, APPEARANCE OR BEHAVIOR



### ADMINISTRATOR NOTIFICATION

In the last year, 47% of school districts had notified school site administrators about their district’s non-discrimination policy through an assembly or training (it is important to note that the content of these trainings or assemblies is unknown). These results show that many school districts do conduct in-person trainings of faculty: nearly half are conducting some type of training or assembly to inform school site administrators of the district’s discrimination policy. Unfortunately, a majority of school districts are taking a passive approach: the primary form of notification is through posting a bulletin or including the information in an employee handbook. Moreover, 5% of school districts acknowledged that they did not notify administrators at all, which is a direct violation of California law.

## STUDENT AND PARENT NOTIFICATION

Most of the time, parents and students are passively notified about school safety policies: 71% of school districts notified parents and 77% notified students by handbook only. A much smaller proportion, **11% of school districts notified parents and 23% notified students, by a training, meeting or assembly.**

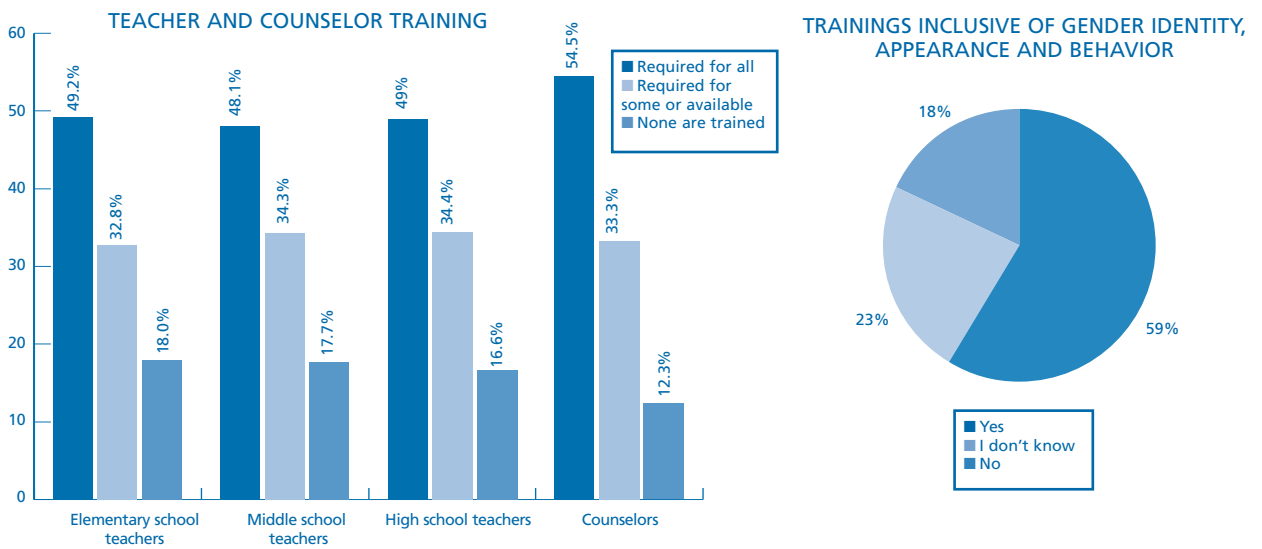
Just under 4% of school districts acknowledge that they did not notify parents or students at all, which is a direct violation of California law. The State requires that districts notify students and parents of the district's non-discrimination policy and about how to file a complaint about discrimination.

## TEACHER TRAININGS

**A majority of school districts do not require trainings on how to address discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation for their elementary, middle or high schools teachers. Only 54% of districts require that all of their counselors receive such training.**

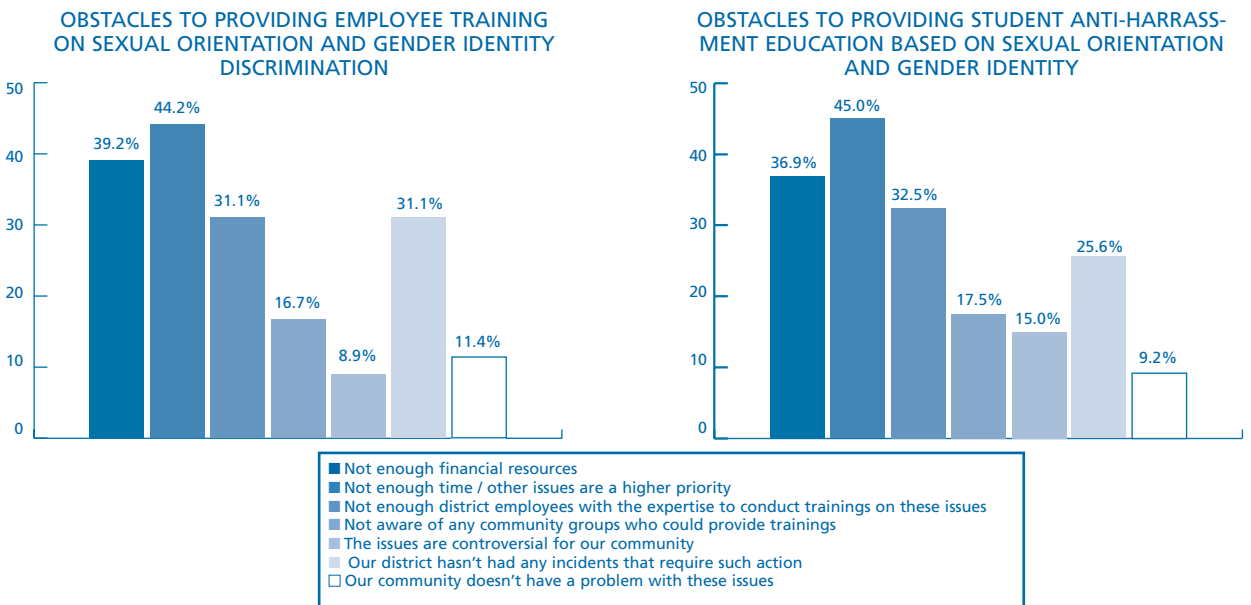
Of the trainings that do occur, only 59% of school districts report that they include information about addressing harassment based on gender identity, appearance and behavior. In addition, 23% of school districts do not know whether trainings include such information.

California law explicitly protects students on the basis of gender identity, appearance and behavior. Teachers, counselors and other school personnel need training in this area, but such training is uncommon.



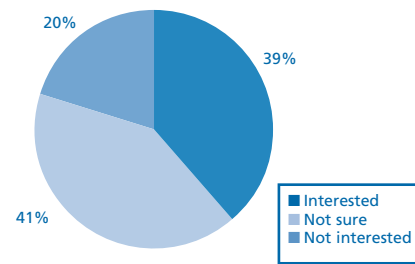
## DISTRICT OBSTACLES TO TRAINING

Resources, expertise and time are the greatest obstacles to staff and student training for districts. The *California Healthy Kids Survey* shows that there are incidents of anti-gay harassment and bullying in every school district in the state. However, almost a third of the districts do not think they have had incidents that necessitate training for employees and over a quarter do not think they have had incidents that necessitate training for students.



## DISTRICT WILLINGNESS TO HOST TRAININGS

Almost 40% of districts expressed interest in working with community groups who provide low-cost or no-cost trainings and curriculum on addressing discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

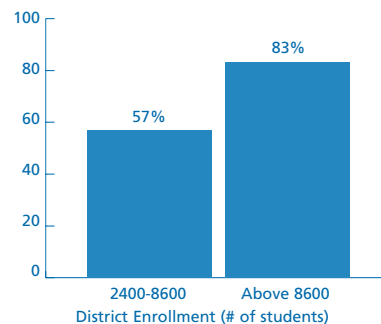


## How Do School Districts Compare to Each Other?

### DISTRICT SIZE

Larger school districts were more likely to report that they notify and train students, staff, and parents about school safety policies. Nearly all larger districts provided notification about non-discrimination policies through handbooks, while only about half of mid-sized and smaller districts notified in this way. Active training was less common: 1/3 (37%) of large districts reported having a training or assembly for students, and far fewer mid-size or small districts reported such trainings.

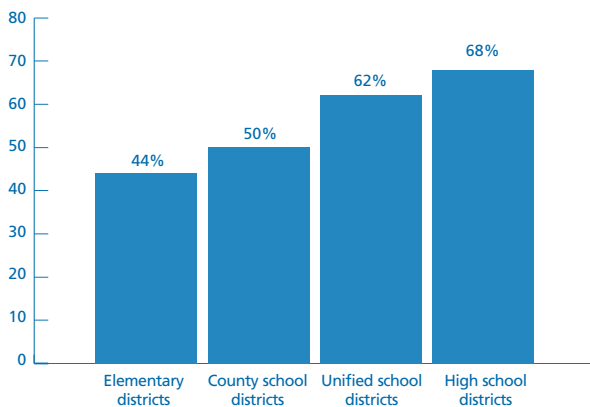
NOTIFICATION OF NON-DISCRIMINATION POLICY THROUGH HANDBOOK



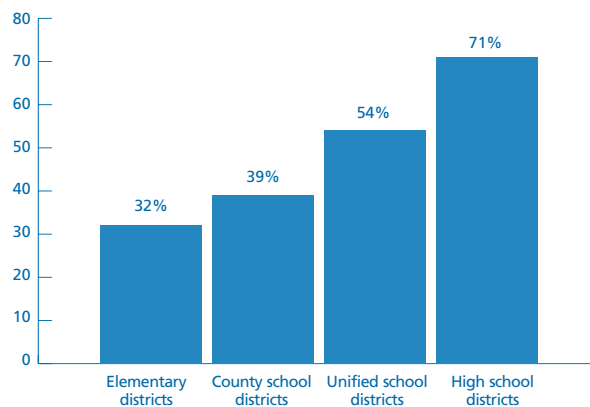
### STUDENT POPULATION

Compared to unified, high school, and county districts, fewer elementary school districts report having non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity. Further, in elementary districts, teachers and students receive much less training on school safety issues, and tolerance education programs are less likely to be fully inclusive of gender identity and sexual orientation.

TOLERANCE PROGRAMS INCLUDE INFORMATION ABOUT GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION



REQUIRED TRAINING FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS



### STUDENT ECONOMICS

Notably, there are few if any differences in district policies based on average levels of economic disadvantage among students; districts characterized by economic disadvantage are no more or less likely to have school safety policies in place. Nor are there conclusive findings regarding the racial and ethnic make up of school districts' student population. These findings make clear that it is important for all school districts, regardless of their demographic make-up, to implement non-discrimination policies that protect students based on sexual orientation and gender identity, appearance and behavior.

## Recommendations

**Pass non-discrimination policies that are inclusive of gender identity, appearance and behavior.** This is necessary in order for school districts to comply with California law.

**Recognize and acknowledge that passing a non-discrimination policy is only the first step** in creating a safe and non-discriminatory school environment. Verbal and written notification, mandatory training for staff and students, and inclusive curriculum are the keys to fully implementing a non-discrimination policy.

**Provide annual verbal notification about non-discrimination policies** and how to file a complaint through trainings and assemblies, in addition to annual notification in writing.

**Train teachers and staff** to intervene when they hear slurs or negative comments based on sexual orientation and gender, including gender identity, appearance and behavior.

**Introduce curriculum** that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and age-appropriate information about sexual orientation and gender identity.

**Utilize available community-based trainers** and support staff, parents and students who are interested in conducting trainings.

### ABOUT THE SURVEY

The California Safe Schools Coalition's Safe Schools Policy Survey was designed to improve understanding of successes and challenges in local efforts to create safe schools and reduce harassment in schools. In the summer of 2004 we mailed surveys to every school district in the state. We received responses from 359, or approximately 36% (out of 1219) of the districts in California, representing 3,478,000 students or 56% of the students in California schools. Thirteen (3.6%) were county offices of education, 157 (43.7%) were elementary districts, 144 (40.1%) were unified districts, and 45 (12.5%) were high school districts.

Reproduction of this text is encouraged; however, copies may not be sold, and the California Safe Schools Coalition, A Project of the Tides Center, should be cited as the source of this information. Comments, questions and requests pertaining to this Research Brief may be e-mailed to [info@casafeschools.org](mailto:info@casafeschools.org).  
©January 2006, Tides Center/California Safe Schools Coalition