February 2015

School Experiences of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students in Wisconsin

Maurice N. Gattis, M.S.S.W., Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
University of Wisconsin-Madison
School of Social Work

Sara L. McKinnon, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Department of Communication Arts

Illustrations and Layout by Rhea Ewing www.rheaewing.com

Maurice N. Gattis is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research focuses on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender health and homelessness. He can be reached at gattis@wisc.edu.

Sara L. McKinnon is an Assistant Professor of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research focuses on constructions of gender in legal and political institutions, rhetoric, and qualitative research methods. She can be reached at smckinnon@wisc.edu.

RECOMMENDED CITATION
Gattis, Maurice N. & McKinnon, Sara L. School Experiences of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students in Wisconsin. Madison, WI: GSAFE, 2015.

Glossary

The glossary is designed to provide basic definitions of words and phrases used throughout this report and frequently heard in transgender and gender nonconforming related talk.

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender: That which a society deems "masculine" or "feminine"; Gender is a social construction that is not necessarily the same as an individual's biological sex.

Gender Identity: A person's innermost concept of self as male, female, both, or neither. A felt sense of self that is not contingent on the individual's biological sex.

Gender Expression: Refers to the ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, haircut, voice, and other forms of presentation. Gender expression should not be viewed as an indication of sexual orientation.

Gender Non-Conforming (GNC)/ Non-Binary Gender: Terms for people whose gender expression differs from stereotypical expectations, such as "feminine" boys, "masculine" girls, and those who are perceived as androgynous. This includes people who identify outside traditional gender categories or identify as both genders or neither. Other terms that can have similar meanings include gender diverse or gender expansive.

Genderqueer: A person who has a gender identity and/or gender expression that does not conform to the gender they were assigned at birth. People who identify as "genderqueer" may or may not also identify as "transgender."

Intersex: A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. Some intersex people identify as "transgender."

Personal Pronouns: The pronoun or set of pronouns that a person would like others to call them by, when their proper name is not being used. Examples include "she/her/hers" or "he/him/his." Some people prefer gender-neutral pronouns, such as "ze/hir/hirs," "zie/zir/zirs," "ey/em/ eirs," "per/per/pers," "hu/hum/hus," or "they/them/theirs." Some people prefer no pronouns at all.

Sex: Refers to a person's biological status and is typically categorized as male, female, or intersex. There are a number of indicators of biological sex, including sex chromosomes, gonads, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia.

Sexual Orientation: The inner feelings of who a person is attracted to emotionally and/or physically, in relation to their own gender identity. Some people may identify as "asexual," "bisexual," "gay," "lesbian," "pansexual," "queer," "straight," and many more.

Transgender: A person whose gender identity and/or expression is not aligned with the gender they were assigned at birth. "Transgender" is often used as an umbrella term encompassing a large number of identities related to gender non-conformity.

Trans: An umbrella term that can refer to all of the identities within the gender identity/expression spectrums, including transgender, genderqueer, gender fluid, gender non-conforming, Two-Spirit, agender, gender questioning, etc.

A Note on Gender Neutral Pronouns:
Often trans and GNC people prefer pronouns other than those that reflect the gender binary (i.e., he/him/his and she/her/hers). In this report, we utilize participants' preferred gender pronouns (PGPs), and those include both the singular use of they/them/their as well as gender neutral pronouns such as zhe/hir/hirs or zhe/zhim/zhis.

Executive Summary

What little is known about transgender (trans) and gender non-conforming (GNC) students in Wisconsin's K-12 public schools indicates that these youth often face exclusion, isolation, and/or discrimination in school life. The purpose of this research is to systematically document the experiences of trans and GNC students in Wisconsin schools to fill in the knowledge gaps about their unique needs. Drawing on data generated through four focus groups with trans and GNC youth and one with the parents of trans and GNC youth, this report offers a preliminary discussion of our findings. We address six themes: learning environment, physical facilities, health and wellness, safety, institutional and social support, and acceptance and respect.

Background & Purpose

Trans and GNC students in Wisconsin's K-12 public schools often face exclusion, isolation, and/or discrimination in school life. Trans and GNC youth are not protected against discrimination under Wisconsin's Pupil Non-Discrimination Law (Statute 118.13), because it does not include "gender identity/expression" as a legally protected class. Some schools and school districts have adopted non-discrimination measures of their own. For example, approximately 11 Wisconsin school districts include "gender identity/expression" in their student non-discrimination policies, including Madison Metropolitan, Wisconsin Rapids, Janesville, Beloit, Middleton Cross Plains, Elkhorn, Appleton, Green Bay, Shorewood, Stoughton, and Oregon. Additionally, 65 districts have non-discrimination/equal access to educational opportunities that include "transgender status, sex change, or gender identity." This provides protections for transgender students, but it is uncertain how clearly this language provides protections for students who express their gender in non-conforming ways. These school-initiated steps help to facilitate the protection of trans and GNC youth in Wisconsin schools, but they do not replace more comprehensive policies designed to meet the needs of trans and GNC youth.

Trans and GNC students report that they experience daily harassment at school, are not referred to by their preferred name or gender pronoun, are excluded from field trips or sports, and are not allowed to use the bathroom or locker room of their choice or do not have access to a safe bathroom or locker room (Grant et al., 2011). As a result, many trans and GNC students report being less connected to their peers, frequently being late or absent from school, dropping out of school, and/or having lower grade point averages at higher rates than their cisgender (non-transgender) peers. The national transgender research survey Injustice at Every Turn found the following: "Respondents who have been harassed and abused by teachers in K-12 settings showed dramatically worse health and other outcomes than those who did not experience such abuse. Peer harassment and abuse also had highly damaging effects" (Grant et al., p. 3). This assessment parallels what little is known about Wisconsin trans and GNC youth. In 2012, the Dane County Youth Assessment added a question allowing respondents to identify as transgender for the first time. Survey results

indicated that compared to their cisgender peers, trans students were:

- More than three times as likely to be enrolled in Special Education classes
- Almost twice as likely to have skipped school in the past month
- Nearly five times as likely to have carried a weapon to school in the past month
- Nearly four times more likely to have no adults to rely on for social support other than their parents
- More than twice as likely to have been pushed by other students
- More than three times as likely to have been in a physical fight
- More than 15 times as likely to have been in juvenile corrections or prison for more than 30 days in the last 12 months
- Almost three times as likely to have suicide ideation
- More than five times more likely to have attempted suicide, and
- Two and a half times more likely to get aggressive, hit, yell, or scream.

(Dane County Youth Commission, 2012)

The purpose of this research is to systematically document the experiences of trans and GNC students in Wisconsin schools to fill in the knowledge gaps about their unique needs. This report offers a preliminary discussion of our findings. As data collection and analysis is ongoing, our findings may be further clarified and additional details may be added in later reports.

Method

As the above data demonstrate, trans and GNC youth likely experience marginalization in school settings. Marginalization can lead to feelings of stigma, which can make people hide feelings, diminish the importance of events, forget troubling experiences, or silence themselves as coping strategies. These dynamics can pose a barrier to research, as individuals on their own may find it hard to describe and explain experiences that they have hidden, diminished, or forgotten. Recognizing that trans and GNC youth are likely to have experienced marginalization for their gender identity and expression, we chose focus group methods as the primary means of data collection. Focus group methods are well suited to overcome the muting effect that marginalization can cause, because they involve assembling a group of people with similar identities to collectively share their experiences, thoughts, and reflections (Morgan & Kruger, 1993). Focus groups allow participants to speak about their experiences with others who have similar identities and enable participants to identify the structural components of marginalization, to feel affirmed and not alone in their experiences, and to give language to previously unnamed experiences (Madriz, 2001; Montell, 1999; Pollock, 2003; Wilkinson, 1998).

Working with the Wisconsin non-Profit GSAFE (formally known as Gay Straight Alliance for Safe Schools), a total of 21 trans or GNC-identified youth participants were recruited from four different metropolitan areas throughout the state of Wisconsin: Green Bay (8 participants), Madison (5 participants), Milwaukee (5 participants), and Racine (3 participants). The youth were from various socioeconomic backgrounds based on eligibility for free/reduced lunch, self-identified religious backgrounds, and racial identities including Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, and American Indian (See Appendix). Additionally, three parents of trans and GNC youth participated in a parents-only focus group in Madison. Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling strategy in collaboration with five community organizations that provide services to LGBTQ-identified youth.

Members of the research team facilitated each focus group. All facilitators identified as LGBTQ. At least two facilitators were present at each focus group, with one leading the discussion and the other taking notes. Facilitators also recorded field notes of observations and sense-making to inform data analysis. During the first focus group session there was a technical malfunction with the recording equipment resulting in no recording for the first hour

of the session. In this instance, extensive field notes collected by two note takers were used as data. The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed by trained graduate and undergraduate students not connected to the current study and were validated by the focus group facilitators. Each focus group lasted approximately two hours and participants were compensated for their time. The University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board approved the study.

Initial questions addressed experiences of "coming out" as trans or GNC including the people that youth are "out" to, and what that "coming out" process was like for them. Questions specific to school experiences asked participants if their school is a "safe" place for trans and GNC youth. Additional school related questions asked about the level of support from school personnel and knowledge of peers and school staff related to trans identities. Students were also asked how they keep themselves safe, what encouragement they receive from school personnel, and what plans they have for the future. The questions asked during the parents' focus group were adapted from the questions asked of the youth participants. The focus group questions were pilot tested on a group of trans and GNC youth before data collection began. All participants were assigned pseudonyms and all references to people that participants mentioned were anonymized during the transcription process. The data were analyzed using a multi-step coding process using Nvivo, qualitative data analysis software (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researchers used open coding methods to derive first-level descriptive and in vivo codes and recoded the data twice to ensure the codebook was comprehensive, consistent, and organized. The subsequent meaning making process involved relationship exploration and clustering of codes into larger themes. Some codes were included in multiple themes, and themes were determined by reading the context and content of the data in which the code was found. Throughout this process the research team developed theoretical memos notating interesting emergent themes and points of connection in the data. The research team integrated these memos into the meaning making and theory building process. What follows is a summary of the most salient themes: learning environment, physical facilities, health and wellness, safety, institutional and social support, and acceptance and respect.

What We've Learned from Youth and Their Parents

Learning Environment

Activities. Several Wisconsin schools have worked hard to accommodate trans and GNC students so they can participate in numerous activities ranging from athletics and arts, to student clubs including Gay-Straight Alliances. The efforts of schools, and on occasion, individual staff members may serve as models for others. For example, one parent described the changes that her child's school made for the student:

The climate at school with the other students was surprising. Over the past year then, especially after hockey was over where he just decided that he is going to tell everybody, friends. And that was good, it was all very good. The school made accommodations, the counselor would even be one step ahead of me. There were times that I called or emailed her to ask her "Okay you know PE's coming out next semester. What are we going to do about changing?" "Oh I took care of it already." She was on the ball. He changes in the nurse's office or goes to the bathroom in the counseling office. I don't, he's not really clear about whether he would feel comfortable using the boys bathroom at school. He uses the men's bathroom everywhere else. He still feels there's a climate of student, he says, the same kids who are racist are the kids who would harass me so he just wants to avoid those kids. And what else? Oh PE. Oh at swimming, he changed at the family locker room and his PE teacher said swimming is a non-issue. Nobody cared. No kids made it a big deal. The Vice Principal, I emailed him about working on the policy change to change the non-discrimination policy to include transgender and gender non-conforming and he just kind of brushed

it off to another administrator within the district who is wonderful. And he as well as many people in the school are working with GSAFE to change that policy, so really the experience was been way better than we could have ever thought.

This same parent noted that her son has also made friends from the track team who only know him as a boy and have helped him generally to feel more accepted. This experience suggests what may be possible when key actors in the school—ranging from staff to other students—work together to include trans and GNC students, enabling their full participation.

Others in this study reported that their (or their child's) gender identity impacted their ability to fully participate in school-related activities, which is consistent with extant literature about trans students' involvement in school activities (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, Russell, 2010; Sausa, 2005). For example, another parent reported a different experience at her child's school saying, *"our athletic director didn't know the answer to that question [what team her trans son could play on] and he was open to me, telling him, but he didn't know the answer at first to that, you know, and there were some apprehension. My son was thinking about playing lacrosse, but some of those guys are really tough like they're the classical macho-y type, and he changed his mind not to play and he wouldn't admit it completely, but I have a feeling that that was maybe some of the reason."*

Lack of knowledge, failure to act, or acting Lack of knowledge, failure to act, or acting by putting the responsibility on the parent to figure out the appropriate course were responses from administrators when students wished to be involved in school activities. Parents of trans boys, in particular, articulated the difficulties for their children regarding athletics whether due to institutional barriers or their children's concerns about other team members. According to some of these parents, their children were unable to play due to their small size or physical strength compared to the other boys even if they were very competitive on girls' teams when they were younger. One Madison student, Sasha, explained another key barrier that prevented zhim, from participating in athletics: *"the fact that sports are divided into male and female really poses a problem for me and other people who don't identify as male or female."*

Whereas sports presented a unique set of concerns, other kinds of school activities created other challenges and opportunities. Some students reported that they felt most comfortable participating in arts-based activities. Zion, a student from Racine, noted a very affirming experience at her school: *"our teacher in the arts program and the drama department and music department, they're all very supportive like my choir teacher. Nobody seems to think that she's supportive just cause she doesn't wear a ribbon or anything but she, you know, she was talking about like 'if you're transitioning and you get the right hormones, I will move you to a different voice section. If you start off as an alto and now you're a boy and you want to be a tenor, you know, as long as you can still be in that range I will move you.'"*

Some students, though certainly not all, found similar supportive environments in GSAs as well as in other LGBT-related events including drag shows and LGBT proms. Many students found a sense of belonging in GSAs, some becoming leaders and helping to organize events. Zane shared, *"I've actually been really, really lucky to have a lot of resources. As soon as I moved to Madison that is, there's GSAFE, and there's my GSA and with GSAFE we actually formed a trans youth group."* Yet, others, like Sasha, explained that sometimes it is difficult to find a staff advisor who understands trans issues. Zhe described the current GSA advisor at zhis school: *"She consistently refuses to use my correct pronouns, I don't think I've ever heard her use the right ones."* Sasha also said the advisor holds *"cookie-cutter events that she basically says she goes all in for, like day of silence, she's had us print things off the day of silence website, which I feel very uncomfortable with, cause our GSA, like the students are very motivated and very ready to talk about trans issues and be more inclusive."* The contrast between Zane and Sasha provides evidence that trans and GNC students have a wide array of experiences with involvement even in the activities designed to help them feel most included and affirmed.

Grades. Many students interviewed reported on various ways that their grades and overall school performance were negatively impacted as a result of others' discomfort or maltreatment in response to their gender identities. This finding is consistent with what other trans and GNC youth have reported about their ability to achieve academic success (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009). In this study, the primary course where students felt impacted was gym class. One Madison student explained, *"I always have a really big passion for swimming, like I used to be a swimmer in another state, and so I was like, I'll take lifeguarding, cause I knew the teacher, and I knew she was really cool and I knew some of the kids who were taking it, and they were all cool with me. But I took it and there were a lot of complications with that, and so I dropped out of that gym class and ended up having to take an online gym class which is bull."* Another student, also from Madison, described how significant problems with gym class can be in actually preventing students from graduating high school: *"And I've just had like a lot of bad experiences with gym and with locker rooms and a lot of things along those lines, where it's just like, there should be a way for me to get out of this without having to compromise how I'm going to graduate, or just my ability to graduate early. Cause by the end of this year I'm going to be done with everything I need to graduate; technically, I could graduate early but because I don't have this gym credit I can't."* While some students reported that they had teachers who accommodated them in finding an alternative place to change clothes (such as is represented in the earlier statement by one of the parents we interviewed), or who offered them other kinds of support, gym class provoked anxiety in many of the students interviewed.

Yet, gym was only one concern about grades that students expressed. Other students, many who self-reported having very high grade point averages, told stories of facing harassment from school staff, suspension, or expulsion as a result of conflicts related to their gender identities. A Milwaukee youth revealed a conflict with the school security guard that led to her expulsion. While here we only get her perspective, what remains clear in the mind of the youth is that the conflict arose from concerns regarding gender identity. Amari described, *"I was actually expelled from the school, even though I'm a 4.0 student. Why I was expelled was because the security guard attacked me outside. And he was like 'you need to get your life together,' and like I don't [know if he] thought I was gonna swing on him, but he swung on me, so I had to swing back, but he swung on me. And I just felt as though he was just prejudiced."* Another student explained what happened to her as she was transitioning and also began dating the son of one of her teachers: *"…she started callin me 'he' in classes even though I was tellin her don't do that stuff, and she was like, she just put her, she just turned off the projector and was like 'I knew you beforehand when you was a boy, you was a boy back then, and you a boy to me now,' just like that and*

I just looked at her, I don't know, I said 'fuck you.' Then I grabbed my books and I left after class and I pushed her projector. I did. I didn't get in trouble, I didn't get in trouble though because she was on suspension cuz they just, like my teachers they were, I had a bond with the people in the school, so they knew I was always on the list for 4.0 and all that, and I have never been a trouble maker, I was into all the extra-curricular stuff so they knew that she was really wrong and that's when they found out it was a personal thing." Though not all students had their learning disrupted or their school performance otherwise impacted due to issues related to their gender identity, this theme was consistent enough to warrant attention. Certainly we cannot conclusively determine from patterns in focus groups that school performance and grades are always negatively impacted for trans and GNC students, but the possibility of such patterns deserves attention.

Policy

There appears to be some disconnection between the existence of policies specifically relating to trans and GNC students, knowledge of their existence, and policy implementation. Despite the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA) policy regarding trans student participation in sports, implementation is uneven and some are not even aware of the policy. Darcy, a parent in Madison mentioned: *"he has had such positive results through the athletic department you know about being allowed to play on any boys team he wants. Our athletic director didn't know the policy either, the WIAA policy. He's like I need to read into it; he never got back to me. I kept calling. I think eventually Diane had to step in for me and help me with this. This was when he was going into ninth grade and then I finally got a call back – 'Yes he can be on any team he wants, but that's it.'"* Margaret in Madison explains the efforts of an individual in navigating and understanding the policy mechanisms at her child's school: *"I think we got lucky with our homeroom teacher. She has gone out of her way to read books on transgender*

this last year. She has done I guess presentations to other staff members. She was one of the guiding forces last year when the school district went to the 'you can use any bathroom you want' and thing they had on that."

Yet, across all of our focus groups, youth and parents reported inconsistency regarding both the presence of policies around names and pronouns for registration purposes, as well as school staff and administrations' use of youths' preferred names and pronouns. In practice, this can result in embarrassing situations for trans and GNC youth. Darcy recalls that a policy was implemented in her son's school for changing names on registration forms, which allowed her son to change his name on school forms. This change, unfortunately, was not shared with the company who took the school pictures for the yearbook. When the yearbook was distributed it included her son's photo with the wrong name, which meant that her son was identified as trans to the entire school. Other examples of inconsistences in name and pronoun usage involved staff and administrators telling students that they could only use their preferred names or pronouns after they had been "legally changed" or just plain refusal to use them when referencing trans and GNC youth. This point about name and pronoun usage was so salient across all of the data, in fact that we see it as central to trans and GNC youths' experience of school climate.

Physical Facilities

A number of the students spoke about the presence of gender-neutral bathrooms and locker rooms in their schools as key factors that made the school climate for them either positive or precarious. Students reported the following as steps their schools had taken toward making physical facilities work for trans and GNC students: Creating non-marked single stall bathrooms, gender-neutral bathrooms and gender-neutral locker rooms, as well as formal and informal policies allowing trans and GNC youth to use single-stall staff/nurse/counselor bathrooms, or staff telling students that they

could use the bathrooms of their choice. When these accommodations worked well, students reported experiencing their school as a more positive place. For example, Taylor from Madison explained, *"I haven't had that problem in school because we had single-stall bathrooms so I didn't necessarily have to deal with the bathroom thing. Because growing up I hated using the bathroom in school so I never did, soon as the single-stall bathrooms were installed for student use that was the place to go."*

In addition to these positive accommodations in the physical facilities, students reported that their schools were changing their policies, and often consulting trans and GNC youth, to develop inclusive options that work for this population. A number of the students explained that their schools were "good about including the youth, trying to figure out what's wrong with the school," and when policies were implemented it helped with navigating facilities. Finally, a number of students reported that the option to take PE online provided a mechanism to navigate uncomfortable and unsafe interactions in physical facilities that are often challenging for trans and GNC youth.

In line with the scholarly literature on the trans and GNC negotiations of physical facilities, the majority of students and parents reported that gender neutral bathrooms, locker rooms, and safe public spaces were not available, or available, yet inconvenient, making navigation of their daily life in school even more challenging (Beemyn, 2005; Grossman, Haney, Edwards, Alessi, Ardon, Howell, 2009; Kafer, 2013; Spade, 2011). The parents we spoke with talked about their children managing a lack of access by not going to the bathroom while at school, sometimes "holding it" all day so that the student could wait until they got home. A number of the students we spoke with reported that when gender-affirming facilities were available, the location of these bathroom and locker room options could be a problem. Sasha explained, *"there is one, but that one is in the field house, which is like a mile from anywhere else in the school. So basically, it's ok if you have gym class otherwise you're screwed."* Zane, also from Madison,

expressed happiness that there was a gender-neutral locker room option, but simultaneously explained, *"unfortunately it's like under one of our gyms, so you have to, its in this sketchy hallway [laugh], and its unmarked, with a sticker, [laugh] and its got roaches everywhere, and dust bunnies, and its just creepy to be in there."* This duality of having literal access to gender affirming options, yet those options being inconvenient or unpredictable was common across much of the data.

Another way schools accommodated trans and GNC youth was by making nurse, staff, or disability-accessible bathrooms available for their use. Practically, this seemed like a quick and simple solution, yet it sometimes created unforeseen awkward interactions for the students. Austin from Madison explained that, *"in middle school I completely avoided using the bathroom at all times cause it was the nurse's office bathroom, not going to do that, it's a lot of work."* Others reported having received approval to use disability-accessible bathrooms by school administrators, but then getting "kicked out on a daily basis" by school staff when they went to use it, having to sign in, or having time limits on how long they could be away from class for bathroom use—all actions that made access more challenging. Much like our findings about names and pronoun usage policies, some students reported that accessible facilities were only made available after they legally changed their name or began using hormones. Amari was allowed to use the neutral bathroom only after she identified publicly as trans and then was able to use the appropriate locker rooms only after she began hormone treatment.

One outcome that emerges from the unpredictable access to, inconvenient locations, or complete lack of gender-neutral bathrooms and locker rooms, is the experience of harassment. One student, Austin, described an experience from gym class and in relation to locker rooms. He explained that he was going to change in the girl's locker room because he wasn't out to his classmates as trans. Another student waited for Austin by the door to the gym, and when Austin returned from changing, the student said, "'*you look like a trannie,*

you look like a trannie, you look like you had uh, surgery to become a dude,' he's like 'you're a girl.'" Austin asked the student to leave him alone, but the student escalated the situation insisting, *"let me feel your chest, do you have boobs?"* Austin told him, *"no, you're not gonna feel my chest no, you can't, you can't do that, that's like, that's sexual assault, like harassment if you touch me."* Austin also described having been yelled at for using the girl's bathroom and yet feeling unsafe in using the boy's facilities. Zane affirmed this point, explaining that before taking testosterone for several months, he never felt safe using the boy's bathroom. Even after using the hormones and being "very out," Zane still said he knows bathrooms are a "very unsafe place."

Lack of access to gender-neutral or appropriate bathrooms and locker rooms is only one factor in the harassment that students face. Other students experience harassment on a regular basis simply by walking down the halls. Eden from Green Bay told a story about an especially bad hallway occurrence: *"And there was one day right before I was going to class, I was walking to my locker, and she had made some extremely, extremely lewd comment, it's just—it was horrible and I just—I literally just dropped all my books and I started hitting her. And I blacked out. And then I got in trouble for that because I got upset with how she was treating me and no one else was doing anything about it and I just kind of blacked out and, yeah. So it was resolved in a bad way, but at least she stopped picking on me."* Zion from Racine described a similar experience, *"but just every day after she would instigate me and she'd stand in front of my locker and refuse to move and I would just be like physically trying to move her fat ass to try to get her to move so I can get my books and go home. And I didn't talk to my parents about it."*

Lunchrooms and other communal spaces are also sites of harassment for trans and GNC students. London from Green Bay explained that they avoid the lunchroom completely: *"I don't even go to the lunch room to eat lunch. I quickly grab my food and sit in the hallways."* Lyric from Racine affirmed this point about commu-nal spaces as fraught with challenges. In speaking with us she detailed an interaction with someone she thought was a friend that escalated with the presence of a police officer: *"we got into an altercation in the cafeteria and it made me mad because she was sittin' there antagonizing me. I wasn't sayin' anything to her. I was eating my lunch. When the police officer came over there they asked us to be quiet and I said, 'No because I wasn't sayin' nothin' to this girl and she gonna turn around and start talkin' to me and be stupid. I'm not gonna stand for it, I'm not. I'm eatin' my lunch mindin' my own business'…And so we got into it. But when the officer came over, he stepped towards me. I'm like 'dude, I'm not even the one yelling so why are you coming at me?' And he was like, 'well go to your subschool,' and so I went down there and I started snappin' because I didn't feel like that was fair. 'Why you gonna bring me down here? She's still sittin' there eating her lunch. That's not fair.' They said, 'Well we can give you a disorderly conduct ticket, go ahead.'"* Lyric not only felt harassed by this former friend, but unfairly targeted by the police officer.

Health & Wellness

Consistent with Minority Stress Theory, another theme that emerged was the mental and emotional stress that living in a world that does not accept and respect trans and GNC youth can produce (Meyer, 2003). Eden from Green Bay stated: *"Honestly, I have anxiety – I have like disturbia or something like that, which is like an extreme form of depression apparently. And I've been in and out of psych wards and stuff. And it's mainly because of my dysphoria. I feel like I don't belong anywhere and it makes me truly uncomfortable with everything in life, and when people misgender me it just makes it that much worse. And I have to look at myself every single day and see that I don't have the right parts, it makes that even worse and it's just having all that stacked on top of each other. It makes you feel like absolute shit all the time – excuse me – but just, it's really hard to like actually want to move forward in life knowing that I*

possibly not have all the things that I want in life."

Negotiating this mental and emotional stress while at school can be compounded further when there is a lack of access to gender-affirming health care options. Youth noted that existing health care options were often lacking in their awareness of the needs of trans and GNC youth. Armani from Milwaukee noted: *"a lot of people are not used to um, transgender, being around it. So they gear the programs more just towards the homosexual men, and its kind of like the programs that are for women, you can't go to because you're transgender because you're biologically a male. The programs that are geared for men, you can't do it cuz you don't identify as a man, so you're kind of stuck in the middle."* In addition to the lack of resources, respondents noted misinformation regarding hormones and medical care specific to trans and GNC youth. Amari mentioned: *"it's a whole lot of myths when it comes to side effects about hormones, like different things that people invent like you could piss this type of prescription out or you can ejaculate this prescription out or you can take this and nothing happens versus if you take a lot of this and something happen. I think it is about getting the knowledge and facts."*

Secondly, youth also expressed that gender affirming health and wellness options were often not affordable or covered by insurance. As Eden from Green Bay explained further: *"You know, not actually being able to be (inaudible) who I want to be and that I could just even – just getting a start on it is really hard because I can't afford good counseling. And I've had people helping me with that stuff, so I've kind of got that figured out but it's not actually in the process yet. And it's such a long process because I'm starting at – I started at 18 and since then it's just been – I dress like a boy, I cut my hair and people call me a girl and that's pretty much it. Like I can't change who I am at all. And just seeing everything everyday when you're –it hurts like really bad. And it sucks."* These youths' concerns about appropriateness and affordability of gender-affirming health and wellness options reflect experiences among trans and

GNC youth that is supported by research in other states (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007; Grossman et al., 2009; Grossman, D'Augelli & Frank, 2011; Spade, 2011).

Safety

Feeling Safe. Several students reported feeling safe in a number of instances as trans and GNC. As Kira from Green Bay put it, trans and GNC students feel safe when they are surrounded with "people who make me feel more accepted than others." Moreover, students reported that access to gender affirming services and programs (like counseling services, extracurricular activities, support groups) make them feel safer. Students also explained that supportive relationships with school staff like teachers and counselors made them feel like their schools were safer places for them, especially as they experienced challenging interactions with adults or peers. Taylor explained that there was a particularly supportive counselor who knew immediately what to do when the counselor met him: *"The first time I met her I had to tell her my legal name to get my paperwork, and so, she said, 'Ok this is your legal name, what do you want to be called?' Great. I love this. And I came out to her and she, like, wanted to help me 'in whatever way I can.' I was always welcome to come into the office and talk to her about any troubles I was having."* These moments of individuals helping to make a school safe are important to contextualize. These individuals play an important role in helping trans and GNC youth feel safer in schools—a point that the subsequent section Institutional and Social Support elaborates on—but all students did not report having these individual relationships, nor did these individual relationships encapsulate the entirety of the students' school experience. Alongside mentions of feeling safe and supported, students also mentioned precarious moments with other staff members and their peers.

How Students Keep Themselves Safe. Students reported a variety of measures they took to keep themselves safe from immediate and perceived threats of violence,

harassment, micro-aggressions and other forms of mistreatment. One very common strategy was simply to avoid confrontation or remain silent in the face of it. Lyric from Racine described her approach: *"I just keep to myself because I want to avoid a lot of drama. A lot of situations, people target gay people and I can't stand it and they try to pick on ones that are different."* Austin, a student in Madison shared a very similar method of staying safe. He said, *"I just avoided people mostly—I avoided conversation with them."*

In addition to avoiding conversations or difficult physical locations to remain safe, some students simply opted for silence as a safety strategy. Sasha described zhis approach, *"I mean, I just, most of the time I just, kind of, stay uncomfortable, and like, don't try and correct people with my pronouns and I don't really take the effort much at school to educate classmates, that are like, actually friends or people I know well, which I mean, that feels really uncomfortable for me and um, but I've just learned, sometimes there's places where it's not worth the effort."* Taylor echoed Sasha: *"I was mean to people so that they would not come near me so that would not question, so that I would not have to answer awkward questions, I hated people for awhile. But, nowadays it is um, basically stay quiet stay safe."*

Other students stayed safe by managing their space and learning self-defense practices. For example, London described how they used physical objects and space to manage their feeling of safety: *"Well, to keep me safe in school, just generally, I used to like always--I always changed up backpacks and stuff and I would have these oversized backpacks with like two books in it. But, that's just for my personal safety, cause when people get too close or--I have anxiety and stuff--past traumas. So, like, I always kept something noisy like a necklace or a bracelet so that people knew that I was coming and I always averted populated areas and, at one point it got so bad that I didn't even go to the lunchroom to eat lunch. I quickly grabbed my food and sat in the hallways and stuff and talked to the facilitator...who just happened to be the GSA advisor."* Another student, Luz

from Racine explained how he learned to practice martial arts and other physical forms like boxing and kickboxing as a way to be able to protect himself and feel safer at school. Luz rationalized this choice: *"I will not put my hands on nobody if I do not have to. If it's not a life or death situation, I will walk away from you. I'll let you piss me off because there is just so much you can say. But, it's a good investment because it can keep you safe because if someone knows you know how to kick box and fight and judo throw somebody and break your arms and legs and shut your whole body down, they're not going to mess with you because if they don't know how to fight they're not going to fight you."*

Some students were able to negotiate their safety without engaging in violent or aggressive behaviors, yet others felt that they had little choice but to take much more extreme measures to keep themselves safe. Ali from Green Bay reported, *"I kept it simple. I got big. [You get] beaten enough times throughout your childhood, you know, you get big. You get big, you get mean, you start to hate. And when people would get too close to me and they would start trying to do stuff, there were multiple times I fractured people's bones...you learn how to do that kind of stuff when you have to protect yourself."* Other students explained that they protected themselves both inside and outside of school by carrying weapons, including mace, knives, and brass knuckles. These solutions demonstrate the perceptions of unsafe environments that trans and GNC students feel they are subjected to in their schools at the hands of peers and security officials. They are also evidence of the inadequacies in the way schools often respond to trans and GNC youths' safety concerns, a point confirmed by the national research on violence against trans and GNC persons (Clements-Nolie, Marx & Katz, 2006; Lombardi, 2009; Lombardi, Wilchins, Preising, & Malouf, 2002; Spade, 2011).

Technology. One space that proved to be rife with safety concerns was student life beyond the walls of classrooms in digital, virtual worlds. This finding is in line with the extant literature about youth bullying

online (Bossler, Holt & May, 2012; Blumenfeld & Cooper, 2010; Finn, 2004). There was awareness among participants that information and communication platforms like chatrooms, social media (Facebook, Twitter), and cell phones could make trans and GNC youths' life more precarious. One student explained that they avoid these virtual environments as much as they can: *"[I] don't go to places where they're like, like a Q&A kind of chatroom…don't do that, because there will be people who are offensive, there will be people who don't necessarily agree with your gender but they have an idea of their own."* When students didn't avoid these spaces they reported finding them replete with the possibility for interactions that didn't feel safe and affirming. Amari explained that people tried to harass her on her Facebook page: *"this young man didn't like me because I was trans and he kept trying to chase after me, like he was interested in me to the point where he was writing me on Facebook cuz we had mutual friends. And I just tell him like 'I'm transsexual if you didn't know, so what do you want? Like, leave me alone, I don't want you. Like, you just a student at my school in my class, that's it, that's all.'"*

Jordan from Madison reported receiving death threats online: *"he has posted very fantastic Facebook statuses informing me that I should in fact kill myself, which is very definitely not ok."* Lyric explained that cell phones were used in a similar way as a medium for peer-to-peer harassment: *"I've had somebody try to bully me through text messaging. She attempted…And it got to the point where I was just cuttin' my phone off and setting it down. And I told my mom about it and she was just like 'how long has it been going on?' And when I told her and she was like, 'Um, we're gonna have to do something about this because I'm not about to have somebody sit there and antagonize my child.' And my mom don't promote violence at all."*

These digital interactions often did not stay digital. A number of students reported a connection between concerns about safety online and in face-to-face interactions. Harassment and intimidation bled between venues and spaces. As Rio from Racine summarized, *"I had people*

Facebook, text messaging, and at my face threaten to jump me." Lyric noted that the harassment experienced via the cellphone then happened again with that student in face-to-face interactions: *"So okay, the other day I was walking through the hall and this girl who me and her got into it over something, I feel like its childish so I just let it go. And she pretended to get a fake phone call and I feel like the only thing she could say, cause I had heels on… and she's like, 'Oh hey girl, girl this boy look a mess today.' And it took everything I have not to turn around and sock her in the mouth. Because, you're picking. You're antagonizing me and I'm not doing anything to you, I'm just going to the house. Why do you keep bothering me?"* It was the constancy and permanence of the digital platforms that bled into real life situations that made them so challenging to trans and GNC youths' sense of safety.

Institutional & Social Support

Individualized Support. Despite experiencing difficulties with peers, school staff, family members, and outside community members, a number of the students reported that schools could be spaces of positive interaction in their lives. Much of the discussion of the positive interactions involved individual teachers and/or administrators who were prepared to address and advocate for trans and GNC students' needs. One parent called one of the teachers in their child's school "a saint." She explained, *"Seriously, if you have a problem, boy she's on it immediately. She cares and I thought, oh she must have a transgender child. She doesn't even have anybody but she just cares about this this topic. She was my source."* Students also reported that they had really positive experiences with school staff. Jordan found the staff in his school to be, *"really, really good, really, really supportive, like, they will fight tooth and nail for the rights of transgender and gender non-conforming youth."* Many of the students that we spoke with mentioned having one teacher, counselor, or staff member who they could turn to for support.
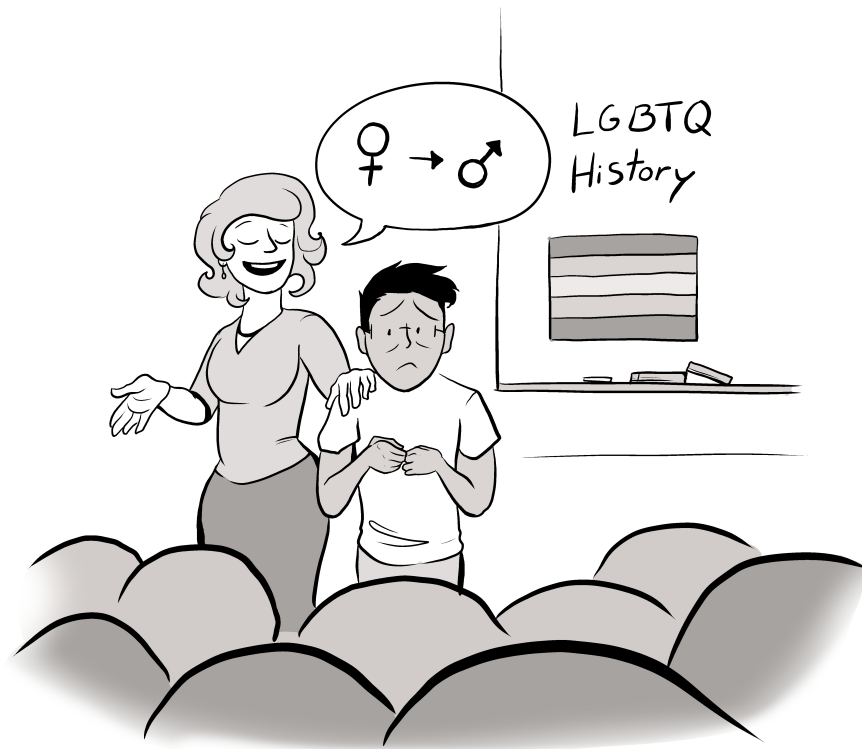
In terms of what social support looked like for trans and GNC youth, students spoke about feeling supported when school staff "tried their best with what they had," regularly used preferred pronouns and names, pushed for gender affirming bathroom facilities, encouraged them to take classes, get involved in activities, and had doors that were open for trans and GNC youth. One student recounted a particularly compelling moment where a guidance counselor pulled them aside and said *"Friend, I think we need to have a talk about this,"* in order to get them to think about the consequences of their actions before the student did something potentially precarious. For this student, the mere fact that a teacher was watching out for them made them feel like social support was available. In total, support within institutions meant, for these youth, that someone was watching, listening, and ready to take action when there were needs and issues regarding their gender identity and expression.

Uneven Support. A significant theme with the social support was what students perceived as a divide in support-ive staff and unsupportive administrators. Jordan, who above discussed having supportive staff in his school, later mentioned that administrators were lukewarm with their support: *"while they'll respect your name and pronouns because they legally have to, they will not respect you as a person."* Other students reported being *"treated incredibly badly by our principal"* or that their *"principal never really did anything about anything."* As one student explained, *"Our principal did not respect me, did not respect my pronouns. My guidance counselor sent him multiple emails about my coming out. Once my Dad kind of [asked] 'why aren't you respecting him,' his excuse was out. He was waiting for me to legally change my name which costs a few hundred bucks, and that was three months after I came out to the school. I don't know. He would purposefully say my name every single day, my legal name, and I did not feel comfortable speaking up to a person in power."* These gaps in feeling supported in schools made daily life in school a constant negotiation for trans and GNC youth. While students may have one ally to turn to, such as a counselor or teacher, they spoke candidly about significant gaps in feeling affirmed and safe in schools.

Acceptance & Respect

Much of what the students in our discussions expressed was how challenging and impactful it was to not be respected and accepted as who they are. In both instances of being affirmed or not, it was the mundane, seemingly minute interactions, or micro-agressions, that students spoke about as significant. Angel from Green Bay talked about the regular experience of not being respected: *"And I've never been in a room where people—where everyone— knows my pronouns are 'they,' and they use them. No, never happens. Happens every now and then, and when it does happen you're just like, 'Oh, man that feels so good.' And then like you know it goes back to like my mom accidently using he..."* Sasha also found people's regular mis-gendering of zhim to be a source of discomfort: *"I don't know, I just feel like mostly getting people to use my pro—my correct pronouns, for me at school is a lost cause. And there's also, I just notice so many instances of the gender binary. There was one teacher who I had last year who I really respect as a teacher and a person, but he would use the phrase 'ladies and gentleman' at least once every single day, usually many more times. And he was at a training that we did, and I think he was asleep for part of it. No I mean, like, literally asleep [laugh]. I don't know. We didn't specifically say anything about that phrase not being respectful and part of me is just kind of scared to talk to him about it, but there's instances like that all the time."*

Importantly, when everyday and mundane interactions are positive, they can also be the greatest source of acceptance and respect. As Sasha expressed, *"in my experience most people have been pretty ready use my preferred name."* Zane discussed social and support groups as spaces of affirmation: *"I've really found support in all these groups. There are just amazing people that have offered me nothing but support and good energy that, that's really been the way I've kind of gotten through the last three years cause it's definitely been a major transitional few years in my life, like, both figuratively and literally so yeah, that's been like my kinda experience."* Across the board, students reported that interpersonal interactions with peers, family, and school staff and administrators that were gender-affirming were the key to feeling respected and accepted in school.

Recommendations

Although every school district will have unique needs and concerns to address regarding their student body population, this report points to several general recommendations that can be taken up at the state and local levels

Policy

The research points to the need for comprehensive policies that address the concerns laid out in this report. The existence of comprehensive policies alone cannot create safer and affirming environments for trans and GNC youth, but they can provide youth and their parents with mechanisms through which to expect and ask for accommodations.

Training

State and district level policies must be coupled with appropriate training and implementation so that administrators, faculty, and staff know how to adhere to policies and best support trans and GNC youth in their schools. Implementation includes assessing school facilities and identifying options that are gender affirming and protect the safety and privacy of all students. In the absence of such policies, schools can and should implement best practices in supporting and including trans and GNC students. The Wisconsin Association of School Boards has developed model non-discrimination and implementation policies.

Affirmative School Organizations

Because such organizations have proved to be a lifeline for many trans and GNC students, schools should consider developing a GSA or other LGBTQ-affirmative student organization, or enhancing current organizations so that they focus specifically on the needs of trans and GNC youth. With proper support and resources from school administrations, these organizations could supply appropriate and adequate information regarding mental and physical health, social support, and other needs.

Community Education

Schools should consider partnering with families and communities to address stigma, discrimination, family disapproval, social rejection, and violence that many trans and GNC students face. This includes educating families and the community about gender diversity, and teaching empathy and gender diversity in age-appropriate ways at all grade levels.

Adopting Restorative Discipline Practices

Schools should consider adopting restorative discipline practices that seek to keep students in the classroom. Zero tolerance and traditional punitive discipline practices disproportionately impact trans and GNC youth, especially students of color.

Health Recommendation

Schools should consider comprehensive health curricula that includes information about trans health and wellness.

Appendix

Relevant Demographic Questions

What is your gender identity?
- 1 Agender
- 4 Female
- 1 Gender Neutral
- 1 Gender Fluid
- 2 Gender Queer
- 3 Male
- 2 Transgender MTF
- 1 Transgender FTM
- 6 Not Identified

Have you ever had free/reduced lunch?
- 8 No
- 7 Yes
- 6 Not Identified

What is your race?
- 1 Native American
- 3 African American
- 1 Asian
- 7 White
- 3 Multiracial (Asian/White-1, African American/Latino-1, Creole/African American-1)
- 6 No Response

Are you Hispanic or Latino?
- 3 Yes
- 12 Non-Hispanic
- 6 Not Identified

References

Beemyn, B. (2005). Making campuses more inclusive of transgender students. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education, 3,* 77-87.

Blumenfeld, W. J. & Cooper, R. M. (2010). LGBT and allied youth responses to cyberbullying: Policy implications. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, 3*, 114-133.

Bossler, A. M., Holt, T. J., & May, D. C. (2012). Predicting online harassment victimization among a juvenile population. *Youth & Society, 44,* 500-523.

Clements-Nolie, K., Marx, R. & Katz, M. (2006). Attempted suicide among transgender persons: The influence of gender-based discrimination and victimization. *Journal of Homosexuality, 51,* 53-69.

Dane County Youth Commission (2012). *Dane County Wisconsin Youth Assessment.* Dane County, Wisconsin.

Finn, J. (2004). A survey of online harassment at a university campus. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 19,* 468-483.

Grossman, A. H. & D'Augelli, A. R. (2007). Transgender youth and life-threatening behaviors. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 37*, 527-537.

Grossman, A. H., Haney, A. P., Edwards, P. Alessi, E. J., Ardon, M. & Howell, T. J. (2009). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender youth talk about experiencing and coping with school violence: A qualitative study. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 6,* 24-46.

Grossman, A. H., D'Augelli, & Frank, J. A. (2011). Aspects of psychological resilience among transgender youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 8,* 103-115.

Grant, J. M., Mottet, L. A., Tanis, J., Harrison, J., Herman, J. L. & Keisling, M. (2011). Injustice at every turn: A report on the national transgender discrimination survey. Washington, D. C.: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, queer, crip.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kosciw, J. G., & Diaz, E. M. (2006). The 2005 National school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in our nation's schools. New York: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. Retrieved August 18, 2008 from http://www.glsen.org.

Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A. & Diaz, E. M. (2009). Who, what, where, when, and why: Demographic and ecological factors contributing to hostile school climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. *Journal of Youth Adolescence, 38*, 976-988.

Lombardi, E. (2009). Varieties of transgender/transsexual lives and their relationship with transphobia. *Journal of Homosexuality, 56,* 977-992.

Lombardi, E., Wilchins, R. A., Preising, D. & Malouf, D. (2002). Gender violence: Transgender experience with violence and discrimination. *Journal of Homosexuality, 42,* 89-101.

Madriz, E. (2001). Focus groups in feminist research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 835-850). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McGuire, J. K., Anderson, C. R., Toomey, R. B., & Russell, S. T. (2010). School climate for transgender youth: A mixed method investigation of student experiences and school responses. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 39*, 1175-1188.

Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin, 129,* 674-697.

Montell, F. (1999). Focus group interviews: A new feminist method. *National Women's Studies Association Journal, 11,* 44-71.

Morgan, D. L. & Krueger, R. A. (1993). When to use focus groups and why. In D. L. Morgan (Ed.), *Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art* (pp. 3-19). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Pollock, S. (2003). Focus-group methodology in research with incarcerated women: Race, power, and collective experience. *Affilia, 18,* 461-472.

Sausa, L. A. (2005). Translating research into practice: Trans youth recommendations for improving school systems. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education, 3,* 15-28.

Spade (2011). *Normal life: Administrative violence, Critical trans politics and the limits of law.* New York: South End Press.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Press.

Wilkinson, S, (1998). Focus groups in feminist research: Power, interaction, and the co-construction of meaning. *Women's Studies International Forum, 21,* 111-125.

Glossary of terms and definitions provided by GSAFE and taken primarily from GLSEN Safe Space Kit and Intersex Society of North America.