



# The Importance of School Support on the Mental Health of LGBTQIA2S+ Youth in Québec



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## Context

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LGBTQIA2S+ youth face unique stressors. Québec is fairly inclusive as the province has prohibited discrimination of gender identity and sexual orientation in section 10 of the Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms and urges for sexuality education to be a part of school curriculum. Although the province's efforts have likely provided some relief to LGBTQIA2S+ Québec youth, reports of bullying and lack of support remain significant, especially in rural regions. Homophobic discrimination is directly and indirectly related to well-being as it can lead to feelings of isolation, which in turn leads to poorer mental health (Blais et al., 2014; Garcia et al., 2020). This is especially true for rural towns across Québec as the lack of queer representation prompts homophobic remarks and leads queer youth to feel alone (Dicaire, 2021). Given the amount of time youth spend in high-school, support within these facilities is essential. Research demonstrates that support systems for LGBTQIA2S+ youth, as well as education about this community within high-schools, may better the mental health of queer youth. In the absence of these tools, their mental health may languish.

## Methodology

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Data was collected through an in-person youth consultation done in the form of a five question structured group interview and an eight question online survey with participants between the ages of 13 to 30. The consultation was conducted in June 2022 in Fort-Coulonge, Québec, and received 24 participants from the rural Outaouais region. The survey was distributed in June 2022 and received 13 respondents from the Montréal, Laval, and Laurentides regions collecting data including respondents' age, region of residence, and if their area of living is considered rural, urban, or suburban. Both the consultation and the survey collected qualitative data through structured, open-ended questions concerning individuals' experiences and opinions about the prevalent discourse found in the literature.

Existing research and news articles provided a basis for Y4Y's questions and were used in combination with consultation and survey results to analyze how school support affects the mental health of LGBTQIA2S+ youth across Québec.

## School Support and Effects on Mental Health

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The mental health of LGBTQIA2S+ students is often influenced by their experiences at school. Little staff support, harassment, and feeling unsafe has been correlated with diminished thriving in students (Peter et al., 2021). According to a survey conducted across Canadian high-schools in 2021, 64% of youth heard homophobic comments in school every day, 62% reported feeling unsafe at school, and 30% of queer students have been victims of bullying compared to 8% of cisgender heterosexual youth (Peter et al., 2021). Notably, 85% of queer youth reported feeling like their mental health had suffered, due in part to feeling a lack of support (Peter et al., 2021). A study by Jacmin-Park et al. (2022) also found that sexual and gender minorities reported significantly poorer mental health than cisgender heterosexuals.

Although Québec has implemented a mandate for educators to teach about sexualities within their curriculum in an effort to reduce stereotypes and homophobic remarks, it is poorly defined. Consequently, although this education is compulsory, these topics are often never discussed nor addressed, as teachers in Québec schools report feeling uncomfortable about dealing with topics surrounding sexuality and having a limited knowledge (Burns, 2022). Therefore, this effort for inclusion and support through education is not presently effective in creating a safe and comfortable school climate for gender and sexual minorities and must be enforced more heavily. As bullying is fuelled in part by stereotypes, educating students about differences in gender or sexual expression may help keep an open mind for some (Cénat et al., 2015). Education can impact students' understanding of this community especially in rural regions of Québec where representation is limited (Dicaire, 2021). Aside from educating stu-

dents, educating teachers is also important. With teachers being properly informed on topics of sexuality, they will be able to appropriately address them and teach students about them in a productive manner as their comfort level increases (Burns, 2022).

Support in the form of open, positive education about the LGBTQIA2S+ community and peer associations in schools may help improve queer students' well-being as this has been shown to minimize victimization and depressive symptoms (Rose, 2015). Negative mental health outcomes are a result of many factors, including stigmatization, feelings of rejection, and perceived loneliness (Garcia et al., 2020). However, social support networks are effective at buffering negative effects of adverse experiences and are especially beneficial in mitigating depressive symptoms in LGBTQIA2S+ youth (Jacmin-Park et al., 2022). Explicit support through proper education and peer associations may allow students to feel a sense of safety, belonging, and inclusion while also providing validation for them as individuals and community members.

## *Why Now?*

Addressing these issues is essential as the province has made tremendous progress over the past decade. However, we should not become complacent. Just in 2019, the highest amount of hate crimes targeting sexual orientation in over a decade was reported in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2021). This indicates that attention must still be devoted to the victimization this community continues to face. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light inequalities regarding quality of mental health and the lack of support and services available for LGBTQIA2S+ Québec youth (Reid, 2021). Amplified by the pandemic, insufficient support results in a struggle to cope, in turn leading to feelings of isolation and poor mental health (Scotten, 2021).

It is important to note that the government of Québec has implemented a binding legislation against discrimination based on gender identity, has obliged sex education, and has provided recommendations for inclusivity of trans and gender

non-conforming youth in schools. These are issues that LGBTQIA2S+ youth are nonetheless still confronted with, and must receive ongoing attention.

## *Recommendations*

Y4Y recognizes and celebrates what has been done in Québec to protect the LGBTQIA2S+ community in recent years, including the aforementioned laws and guidelines. However, we urge more stringent efforts from the provincial government to enforce existing supportive measures. The queer youth of Québec feel as though education and safe spaces are essential to improve their well-being. If educators lack the tools and knowledge to teach about the LGBTQIA2S+ community and to intervene in instances of bullying, the provincial government should enforce training and education for teachers and high-school staff. Additionally, funding should be provided to organizations that provide workshops and training about the LGBTQIA2S+ community such as CAEO Québec and CCLGBTQ. The provincial government should make sessions with organizations like these mandatory during the school year in order to foster an understanding of the community through training staff to handle such topics and educating students. Active support from schools may facilitate a deeper understanding among cisgender heterosexual individuals, resulting in less victimization by way of normalization rather than stigmatization (Peter et al., 2021). Parents should also be given the opportunity to attend workshops teaching about allyship, in order to foster a more holistic inclusive and supportive environment for youth. Educating the youth of today will also help in creating a more welcoming society for future generations.

Moreover, creating safe spaces in schools such as LGBTQIA2S+ clubs and peer associations serve as great protective measures for negative psychological effects, and increase feelings of connectedness and community (Cénat et al., 2015; Jacmin-Park et al., 2022; Peter et al., 2021). Therefore, if the desire for any one is expressed by an ally or a queer student or staff member, it should remain confidential and should be made available within a reasonable timeframe.

In sum, Y4Y calls for:

- The strict enforcement of the mandates regarding sexuality education for students;
- The provision of mandatory sexuality education and training for teachers and staff;
- Accessible safe spaces to be mandatorily created upon request in places like high-schools.

Y4Y recognizes that these recommendations may concern parents or school staff due to the sensitivity of such topics; however, if done with proper care, a positive environment can be cultivated and ameliorate the mental health of LGBTQIA2S+ youth.

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