



Black Parallel School Board

2022

# LGBTQ+ Listening Sessions Report



DWW

Black Parallel School Board

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# LGBTQ+ Listening Session Series Report

In partnership with Stonewall Foundation of Greater Sacramento, the Black Parallel School Board scheduled, planned, and facilitated a series of Zoom based “Listening Sessions” designed to expand the conversation of school related issues for LGBTQ+ youth that serve as barriers to gaining a well-rounded social, personal, and academic foundation necessary for high school graduation.

The sessions totaled three. The first was a listening session for LGBTQ+ students attending schools in Sacramento. The second was a listening session for parents who may or may not have children identifying as LGBTQ+. The third and final listening session was designed to include parents, students, and interested community members in developing answers to remove the many barriers to LGBTQ+ student’s success in school. Parents included those who may or may not have children identifying as LGBTQ+ participated as well as students who may or may not identify as having an orientation that was not LGBTQ+.

BPSB’s Zero Tolerance Student Committee members participated as notetakers for all three events. It is their notes that make up the larger portion of this report. A list of the questions for each session are included in attachment A at the end of this report.

## Session 1 (LGBTQ+ Students)

There were several overall goals for the student session:

- ★ First, we wanted to set the tone and create a safe online environment for LGBTQ+ students to participate comfortably and securely.
- ★ Second, we wanted to understand the participants’ experiences at school.
- ★ Third, we wanted to ascertain whether the participants would be willing to come back together to formulate a plan to improve the school culture and make the experiences of LGBTQ+ students more pleasant and productive.

For this session to maintain anonymity, students were given the opportunity to change their names. They were given two categories of words. In the first group of words, students were asked to choose a noun that resonated. In the second group, they were asked to choose an adjective that best describes the noun. Students were then left with a descriptor adjective and a

noun that they most appreciated. Thus, one student might choose a name like Super Tiger or Blue Swimmer. Next, they had to choose how they wanted to list the two words to create their name. For example, Swimmer Blue or Blue Swimmer.

**We did make a serious mistake in this session.** In the first session, we had close to twenty-five (25) student participants. Overthinking the situation, the facilitator thought it was logical and efficient to have the focus questions answered by students in groups hosted by a student leader. The facilitator shared his thinking with the participants and initiated the grouping process. To his surprise and dismay, five (5) participants quickly logged off not wanting to participate. As far as future meetings are concerned, we learned that safety too often is invisibility in community forums. The lesson that we learned moving forward is that we will always ask participants about grouping strategies to make sure they are comfortable before initiating activities.

In this first session, we asked participants what they liked about school? Most of the participants believed that attending school in Sacramento was an experience full of mixed feelings. For the most part, they felt it was annoying, repetitive, and predictable. They did not seem to love it or hate it. Typically, they felt the experience felt like a routine that others made uncomfortable at times. One participant who summed up responses to the first question said, “There are days when it's not bad and there are days when I feel bad-days when I've felt guilt, and there are days where I'm just kind of indifferent about it.”

Another participant said, “It's normal to go to school, but reporting with teachers and classmates most times creates uncomfortable atmospheres.”

In response to the second question of what the biggest stressor is, most participants said they felt very stressed when thinking they would or could be found out. They believed that other students (peers) would not only discriminate against them but would isolate and reduce them in stature causing undue mental stress.

A student using the moniker Woman of Wonders said, “Discrimination... lots of it! I think it's just worrying that if they come out or get revealed, they'll be ostracized by their peers and treated unfairly by the authorities.”

In response to the second question of can you tell us about a positive experience, one participant said that they have not had bad experiences at school.

Another student was quoted, “What got me through was that I looked up to another student in a previous school.”

Still another freshmen student said that they got an Art Award that a teacher said was reserved for upper class students. The student goes on to admit that they felt really accomplished.

Another student said, “I had kind of a teacher that understood what I was going through. And I could express how I was feeling, and I wouldn't feel rejected. So that made me feel happier at

times. So even if I had kind of been having a bad day, now I could just walk up to a certain teacher and say, Okay, fine, this is what I'm going through. And we'll just go through it together and try to figure out what to do. And I felt good; I feel cool about it. And yeah, the fact that I'm aware that there is a proposal for LGBTQ+ included studies in the curriculum now makes me feel better.”

Finally, one student declares, “We have a GSA meeting every week and although the numbers of participants have been going down, it's really good to have a space where we can vent about stuff going on in our lives.”

Most participants admitted they were treated differently. Another went on to say their experience was really bad because most peers were not knowledgeable of LGBTQ+ issues, and the teacher was really bad at educating students as well as their peers. Some students admitted to being bullied and that they did not have others to talk to. Others even admitted that they felt their teachers were disgusted with them and felt overall rejection.

According to some students, their rejection and humiliation led to severe consequences that have gotten better over time. Green Super said, “During my junior year was bad for me. I was dealing with severe depression plus gender dysphoria at the time.” Aqua Crusher added, “There was this teacher that was really good at making students feel inferior who continually made me feel that I disgusted him. I was tempted to take actions into my own hands.”

Still another student said that when they came out in high school, they were rejected, and nothing was done about the negative treatment. He continued, “I felt I was going crazy.” The student fell into depression but admitted to feeling better.

In relation to being disciplined in school, students in general felt that they were not properly disciplined and that they were suspended or sent to the office more often than cisgender/straight students. One student remarked that schools let a lot slide and/or go unnoticed when it comes to LGBTQ+ issues.

Woman of Wonders wrote in the chat, “Well again, back in grade school one through six, my school was not good at disciplining kids in general. A lot of the kids acted out and behaved irrationally. And rather than trying to find the root of the issue and make sure they were okay, their solution to every problem was just to send them to the office or give them a suspension”

Another student said, “I got into trouble with one of my classmates but due to being a member of the LGBTQ+ community, the punishment given to me was more severe to that of the other person. There was no justice, and nothing was done about it and felt I should let it slide because there was no support from anyone.” Finally, another student said, “I didn't get in any trouble that required this from school because I was almost invisible. I was kind of too self-conscious that I didn't want to get in trouble because I just always knew it would end badly.”

In response to the final question of what would a redesigned school that was supportive to students identifying as LGBTQ+ look like, Woman of Wonders started us off by saying, “Schools that listens to kids and takes their concern seriously no matter their identity”

Another student said, “Not only would our voices be heard but our educational experiences would be proportionally better. At school, I would want to see a community that I identify with. I would also make sure that my peers had a better understanding of the LGBTQ+ community. In short, I would like to go to bed at night knowing I won’t be rejected or segregated against because I have decided to identify as LGBTQ+. It is harder to unlearn discrimination the older you get.”

Super Beast said, “I would love to see a community I can identify with. I would want to know that my voice is being heard and my rights are being protected.” Green Super added, “I feel like more education about the LGBTQ+ community in schools would help. I believe a part of discrimination comes from lack of knowledge.”

Phantom Beast says, “I would want a school where LGBTQ+ community members are treated fairly, where LGBTQ+ subjects are being taught in a safe zone for myself without worrying about being rejected if I choose to identify with the LGBTQ+ community. There'd be an LGBTQ+ community club, and LGBTQ+ members are treated with respect, compassion, and sensitivity.”

Lastly, we asked the participants how we could improve the sessions. Super Beast said, “Alright, well, in the first place, the fact that we have people that don't really have a place to share what we feel besides in these sessions. These listening sessions, which are very great! But apart from these, I think one thing which you can do is develop an app for Android, iOS, iPhone, and other devices. If LGBTQ+ students are experiencing depression and trauma, they could just use the apps in real time for immediate feedback.”

Phantom Beast continued, “This kind of meeting is resolving issues right now. So, we should have them on a regular basis. They could be, maybe, 15 minutes or more. And I don't know if I'm making sense, but I think this space needs to happen more often.”

We ended the first session by asking all of the remaining participants to join with the community and parents in the third and final session to develop a plan for LGBTQ+ inclusion in school policy, curriculum, and community. One student responded to this that they could not because their parents are not supportive of their gender identification.

## Session 2 (LGBTQ+ Parents)

There were several overall goals for the second session:

- ★ First, we wanted to set the tone and create a safe online environment for parents who may or may not have LGBTQ+ children in the home or attending school in Sacramento. More importantly, we wanted parents to participate comfortably and securely.
- ★ Second, we wanted to understand the parent's experience in trying to navigate safe spaces for their children to grow and mature.
- ★ Third, we wanted to ascertain whether parents would be willing to come back together in a third listening session to formulate a plan to make improvements in school to make the experiences of LGBTQ+ students more pleasant and productive.
- ★ Finally, we also wanted to collect a set of recommendations that parents felt would improve conditions on school campuses for their children.

We discovered the attendance for this session was limited, so it was decided to abandon the questions for this session. We began the session by asking the parents to discuss their child's experiences in school, beginning with positives.

### Positives

1. The number of LGBTQ+ programs that exist on some of our campuses
2. Existence of several clubs at school sites that support the youth and the LGBTQ+ community
3. Yearly youth zoom meetings to discuss issues important to the LGBTQ+ community

### Negatives

1. Not all schools have these clubs, activities, and other programs
2. Teachers are not trained, so they do not know how to deal with students who identify as LGBTQ+
3. All gender restrooms are not always accessible

As we continued, another parent indicated that he wants to expand support services that are usually not available to elementary students. The parent said that most teachers do not act as advisors to LGBTQ+ students because they fear it will impact them negatively by being an advisor to clubs like GSA. The facilitator followed up on this question by asking whether there were support services for elementary students who identify as LGBTQ+.

Fortunately, we had a representative from Sacramento City Unified School District who said, "There are different levels of student support depending on the district. In Sacramento City, we have what is called the Connect Center. Within the Connect Center there are folks that oversee

LGBTQ+ Services. There is a referral process. Families, youth, or teachers can reach out and set up a mentor type system. They meet up with the families and come up with a plan for the youth to be successful in school. It starts in Transitional Kindergarten. Believe it or not, we have some students in TK who know they are Trans, so the district's Connect Center can set up a system of support."

The facilitator then followed up by asking whether African American children are represented in asking for services. The district representative went on to say that she could not speak for every school but as an GSA Advisor at Rosa Parks, most of her students were African American and they fully participated.

Another participant asked, "Are there events in the district that celebrate and acknowledge representatives from the LGBTQ+ Community? Further, does the district do anything to acknowledge LGBTQ+ students to celebrate them? Finally, are students acknowledged or marginalized, especially those from the African American Community?"

Her answer was, "Yeah, marginalized and made invisible. Again, it all comes to a site-by-site recognition. There is nothing district wide because there is one person in charge of support services in the entire district; they primarily work with mental health to make sure that our young people feel safe and supported."

"In terms of celebration, that is tough. I have done some things personally in the past. We do march in pride every year as a district. But we also had a task force a couple years ago, so we should be starting up again. In terms of celebration, it is difficult unless someone 'outs' themselves first."

A parent responded to another series of questions beginning with, "Can you elaborate on how they are invisible? Are they in a club and not participating? What does that mean in terms of invisibility?"

The District Representative answered, "Invisibility in terms of color for African Americans is simple- you just look at their color. If you are LGBTQ+, sometimes there are assumptions made, by the way a person presents, or how they speak, or what they wear, but, unless they specifically say, Hey I'm trans! or I am gay! we don't know. So, it is not something we can necessarily approach kids with saying, Hey I know you're gay, here's this club for you. So, it's a little bit tricky. I didn't have an issue at Rosa Parks Middle, but I have heard at other sites where some students are hesitant to be a part of the club because they are still questioning themselves and they do not necessarily want to be labeled. But our youth today are much more accepting and aware of themselves and a part of exploring their identity." She continued, "It's much easier to make those connections online and find their foundation. So, in terms of the district spaces, there are not a lot of celebrations."

Continuing, "There is a law called the Fair Education Act where different groups of people need to be represented within the history, social science standards and LGBTQ+ people are one of the groups, including kids with disabilities, African Americans, Asian American, etc. But our

textbooks are not recent enough to include these groups of people. So, unless teachers have insight to bring in people who aren't white into their classroom spaces, we don't necessarily have that built into our adopted materials. I do not want to take up everyone's time and space."

Reacting to the last comment by the district representative, another parent said, "I know that we talk about Black History Month frequently, but most of us now realize those discussions should be daily. I was thinking how easy it would be for the district to have a celebration wall- just slowly put it out there. There should be something teachers are told to do on an annual basis to support our children. There is no excuse to not do anything. I understand young people. My daughter, for example, is trying to find herself; it took my daughter a while to figure herself out and even come out to us. I just think the district should be able to do that without it being a big issue. I mean it might be that way in the beginning, but if the teacher does it every year, I think it'll get easier to do. I just feel like our group, and other groups should push for inclusivity for our children. If the district was supportive and open, it would make it easier for our kids." Another parent adds that she wants the district to have a type of pride month along with LGBTQ+ studies embedded in the curriculum.

The final question asked our participants was to make recommendations to improve services to students who identify as LGBTQ+. The responses included:

1. Having opportunities for LGBTQ people to talk and interact with guest speakers
2. Normalizing the idea that it is okay to be gay
3. Hire more sensitive employees
4. Open bathrooms and have school sites make decisions on how to improve services for students who identify as LGBTQ+
5. Celebrate pride month
6. Have gender neutral bathrooms on all school campuses
7. Offer a session at Be Brave Be You LGBTQ+ Youth Leadership Conference
8. Use Mr. Cooney as a resource to build a program
9. Ensure that all campuses have a GSA program
10. Continue the existing Be Brave Be You Conferences
11. We need to offer safe zone training (through the connect center: <https://thesafezoneproject.com/> ) sitewide that talks about the difference between gender and sexuality, pronouns, and other pertinent questions, and we need to bring the training up during staff meetings where all staff can hear about it
12. Be more precise and open about LGBTQ+ rather than just keeping the topic in the dark; we could use community members to come into schools as guest speakers; we should normalize being gay as you are still a functional member of society.
13. Family and community members can go to the school board and advocate for the rights of LGBTQ+
14. Have the school sites make a decision on the all-gender bathrooms as to keep them open *at all times* or just get rid of them altogether rather than locking them up

15. Celebrate Pride month, recognize Black LGBTQ+ activists and leaders on our Facebook page, and push the district to recognize Pride month and youth
16. Expand more on Black LGBTQ+, create some sort of advocacy in the community, and possibly provide training for youth
17. Someone from the BPSB organization to offer a session at “Be Brave Be You” LGBTQ+ Youth Leadership Conference

### **Session 3 (LGBTQ+ Students and Parents)**

There were several overall goals for the third session.

- ★ First, we wanted to set the tone and create a safe online environment for parents and students who participated in session one or two.
- ★ Second, we wanted to join parents with students to expand the conversation to develop solutions to many of the concerns and issues addressed in the first two listening sessions and understand the parent's experience in trying to navigate safe spaces for their children to grow and mature.
- ★ Third, we wanted to develop a connection between students and parents that would lead to a synergistic development of a school improvement plan for LGBTQ+ students.
- ★ Finally, we wanted to develop a list of actions that participants felt would improve conditions for LGBTQ+ youth.

We had large numbers of participants who registered for this session. Unfortunately, when we opened the Webinar, the numbers did not eventuate. We again changed our format from direct questioning to shaping questions to fit the needs of those in attendance.

The facilitator asked the participants what they wanted to accomplish for this third and final meeting and the following are some of the answers:

1. Learn from both students and parents
2. I want to hear new perspectives about LGBTQ+ students and their hardships and what we can do to fix these things.
3. Learn more about pronouns

#### **Session Three Recommendations to Improve Outcomes for LGBTQ+ Students**

1. Navigating ways to get complaints and information to school districts to facilitate faster change
2. Require all school districts to have non-gender restrooms
3. Teach the youth how to get their voice heard and use their voice to activate change
4. Bring LGBTQ+ issues to the youth advisory board at SCUSD. Plus, I think it would be worth talking to the principal or someone in the district and if that does not work, then talk to a few trustees on the SCUSD board to see if they will take this up. Again, I am glad to help with advocacy- I think this is tangible. I agree adults can help here if the students prefer that help
5. Host Zoom meeting centers where parents and children can communicate in an ongoing manner

6. More communication from schools to parents to assist the community in identifying resources that include understanding gender pronouns
7. More online resources for LGBTQ+ youth to search out answers to issues that concern them

# Summary

In partnership with Stonewall Foundation of Greater Sacramento, the Black Parallel School Board scheduled, planned, and facilitated a series of Zoom Meetings designed to serve as listening sessions to expand the conversation of school related issues that serve as barriers to LGBTQ+ youth in gaining a well-rounded academic, personal, and academic foundation necessary for high school graduation.

The sessions totaled three. The first was a listening session for LGBTQ+ students attending schools in Sacramento. The second was a listening session for parents who may or may not have children identifying as LGBTQ+. The third and final listening session was designed to include parents, students and interested community members working together to identify strategies to assist and support LGBTQ+ students on our school campuses.

Fortunately, we were able to overcome a mistake in the first listening session by deciding to initiate group conversations to increase engagement. This mistake led to the loss of 20% of our audience. The remaining participants stayed engaged and were thoughtful and forthcoming.

A lesson learned moving forward is that we will always ask about grouping strategies before initiating activities with students to make sure they remain invisible.

Most of the participants believed that attending school in Sacramento was an experience full of mixed feelings. For the most part, they felt it was annoying, repetitive, and predictable. Typically, they felt the experience felt like a routine that others made uncomfortable at times. One participant summed up responses to the first question and said, “There are days when it's not bad and there are days when I'm just kind of indifferent about it.”

Another participant said, “It's normal to go to school, but reporting with teachers and classmates most times creates uncomfortable atmospheres.” They believed that other students (peers) would not only discriminate against them but would isolate and reduce them in stature causing undue mental stress. Many students just worry that if they come out or get revealed they will be ostracized by their peers and treated unfairly by the authorities. Several students admitted to being disciplined differently and unfairly as compared to their straight peers. And rather than trying to find the root of the issue and make sure they were okay, their solution to every problem was just to send them to the office or give them suspension.

Students openly admitted that some of their teachers seemed to be disgusted with them, and they truly felt rejected. According to some students, their rejection and humiliation led to severe consequences that have gotten better over time. One student openly admitted that they thought they were going crazy and fell into a severe depression.

Some students reported that when they connected with an on-campus student or adult who understood what they were going through it made it easier to withstand the taunts, stares,

aggressive language, and bullying. Others reported that having a GSA organization on campus that provides support was helpful in withstanding all of the pressures of being LGBTQ+.

Finally, one student declares, “We have a GSA meeting every week and although the numbers of participants have been going down, it's really good to have a space where we can vent about stuff going on in our lives.”

Most students believed that their peers were not knowledgeable of LGBTQ+ issues and teachers are really bad at educating students but were encouraged to learn about a proposal for LGBTQ+ included studies in the curriculum.

The following is a list of ideas for a re-imagined school:

1. Valued schools would be those that take their concern seriously no matter their identity.
2. Schools that promote a better understanding of the LGBTQ+ community so those students will not be rejected or segregated.
3. Schools that have safe zones for students who identify with the LGBTQ+ community and where LGBTQ+ members are treated with compassion, respect, and sensitivity.
4. Schools that continue these listening sessions throughout the year.
5. Schools that develop a phone app that students can use for immediate feedback when they are experiencing depression or trauma.

Parents believed that the number of LGBTQ+ programs on campuses should increase and that several clubs, GSA for example, have proven successful when implemented. But to their dismay, they understood that not enough schools had these programs and teachers were not trained, so teachers did not know how to handle issues that sometimes arose around students who were part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Parents also agreed that annual listening sessions would be valuable to them and their children and that it would be helpful to their children if there were “all gender” restrooms accessible. Parents also agreed that services to LGBTQ+ students should extend all the way down to the elementary school. Many parents believed that the school district had the responsibility to provide training to teachers so that they could be much more understanding and sensitive.

District solutions they thought were important were the following:

1. Having opportunities for LGBTQ+ people to talk and interact with guest speakers
2. Normalizing ideas that it is okay to be gay
3. Someone from the BPSB organization to offer a session at “Be Brave, Be You” Conference
4. Support the “Be Brave Be You” LGBTQ+ Youth Leadership Conference annually
5. Ensure that all campuses have a GSA program

6. Celebrate Pride month at all schools and the district offices
7. Expand more on Black LGBTQ+ and create some sort of advocacy in the community and possibly provide training for youth

We had large numbers of participants who registered for session three (3). Unfortunately, when we opened the session, the numbers did not happen. We again changed our format from direct questioning to shaping questions to fit the needs of those in attendance.

The facilitator began the session by asked the participants what they wanted to accomplish as solutions for what schools could do to make the experience as a LGBTQ+ for this third and final meeting and the following are some of the answers:

1. Learning has to continue in the community and the school sites offering new perspectives from both students and parents about the LGBTQ+ experience
2. Educational institutions must bridge the gap between the rapid change in the LGBTQ+ community and what the schools and its staffs understand
3. Districts must navigate new ways to get student complaints and information to schools to facilitate faster change
4. Require all school districts to have non-gender restrooms
5. Teach LGBTQ+ youth how to get their voice heard and use their voice to activate change
6. The BPSB should host Zoom meeting centers where Parents and Children can communicate in an ongoing manner
7. More communication from schools to parents to assist the community in identifying resources that include understanding gender pronouns
8. Provide more online resources for LGBTQ+ youth to search out answers to issues that concern them

## **Prompts for Session Discussions**

### **Prompting Questions for Students (Session 1)**

1. Do you like school? Why or why not?
2. Tell us a story about a positive experience in school?
3. Tell us a story about a negative experience in school? Do you think it was about hate or misunderstanding?
4. Were you ever in a school related incident that required discipline? If so, do you think it was handled appropriately or inappropriately? Be specific. Were you ever suspended or expelled or asked to transfer to another school?
5. What would a reimagine school look like? One that does not have any of the negative experiences that you have already addressed.

### **Prompting Questions for Parents (Session 2)**

1. Please tell us about your child's experience in school- begin with the positive experiences and then talk about any that were negative?
2. Did your child experience any bullying by other students because of their perceptions of whether your child identified as LGBT or Q?
3. If they experienced any bullying, do you think it was about hate toward your child or a misunderstanding of who they perceived your child to be?
4. Was your child suspended from schools because of issues connected to how other students perceived them?

5. Because of any discipline given out, did the school practice restorative justice/practices with your child?
6. Thinking about the future, what would you recommend to your child's school as a solution to support your child's educational growth academically, personally, and socially regardless of how other students or adults perceive them?
7. Are there any programs or activities that the Black Parallel School Board could be doing to support your child moving forward?

### **Prompting Questions for both Students and Parents (Session 3)**

1. If you participated in the student or parent listening session, what did you learn that resonated with you?
2. What is it that you want to accomplish with this meeting tonight? How can we best meet your needs now and into the future? 5 min
3. If you are a student, what topic or question would you want parent participants to discuss or answer?
4. If you are a parent, what topics or questions would you want students to discuss or answer?
5. What can we all do to ensure that all children are appreciated and heard on our school campuses? What would you recommend?
6. What can our district and schools do better than they have in the past?
7. What recommendations do you have for the Black Parallel School Board?
8. Are there any programs or activities that the Black Parallel School Board could be doing to support your child moving forward?