Second National Survey

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LGBTI STUDENTS

in Bulgarian High Schools

SINGLE
STEP

Attitudes Towards LGBTI Students in Bulgarian High-Schools Summary

Foreword

This report presents the experiences of LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex) students at Bulgarian schools. Results from our previous national survey for the 2017/2018 academic year showed high levels of offensive language and violence towards them. The Single Step Foundation is conducting the survey for a second time in 2024 to analyse the current experiences of LGBTI students and provide recommendations for improvement.

This is the second national quantitative study in the country, covering all 28 districts, that focuses on LGBTI student safety and attitudes of peers and school staff. The shared experiences regarding school safety and resources are key to understanding the experiences of different groups of students. The current results are also compared to the previous edition, allowing for tracking of trends in the learning environment of LGBTI students.

The survey was conducted between June and July 2024 and the data relates to the 2023/2024 academic year. Participants completed an online questionnaire about their experiences at school, including frequency of offensive comments, feelings of safety, instances of bullying and what support they received. Requirements for participation included a minimum age of 14 and identifying as LGBTI. Respondents were 1,109 students aged between 14 and 19 from all districts in Bulgaria.

This report is useful for teachers, school staff, psychologists, social workers, NGOs working with different target groups, institutions and parents.

Safety and belonging to the school

The survey results reveal a worrying reality in the school environment where LGBTI students do not feel safe. A hostile school environment can affect an LGBTI student's ability to fully participate in the school community and learning process, negatively impacting academic achievement and sense of belonging.

We adapted a scale used by PISA to compare our respondents with a sample of the general student population in Bulgaria. As shown in Figure 1.1., the LGBTI students in our study had a significantly lower sense of belonging on all six indicators compared to the general population. **Among LGBTI students, those who experienced more severe bullying based on sexual orientation or gender expression had lower levels of school belonging compared to students who experienced less severe bullying.**

Figure 1.1.
Sense of belonging at school: comparison between LGBTI students and students in the general population (proportion of students who agree or strongly agree with statements) (n = 226)

■ LGBTI students 15/16 years old
■ Results from PISA 2022

Sense of belonging at school: comparison between LGBTI students and students in the general population (n = 226)
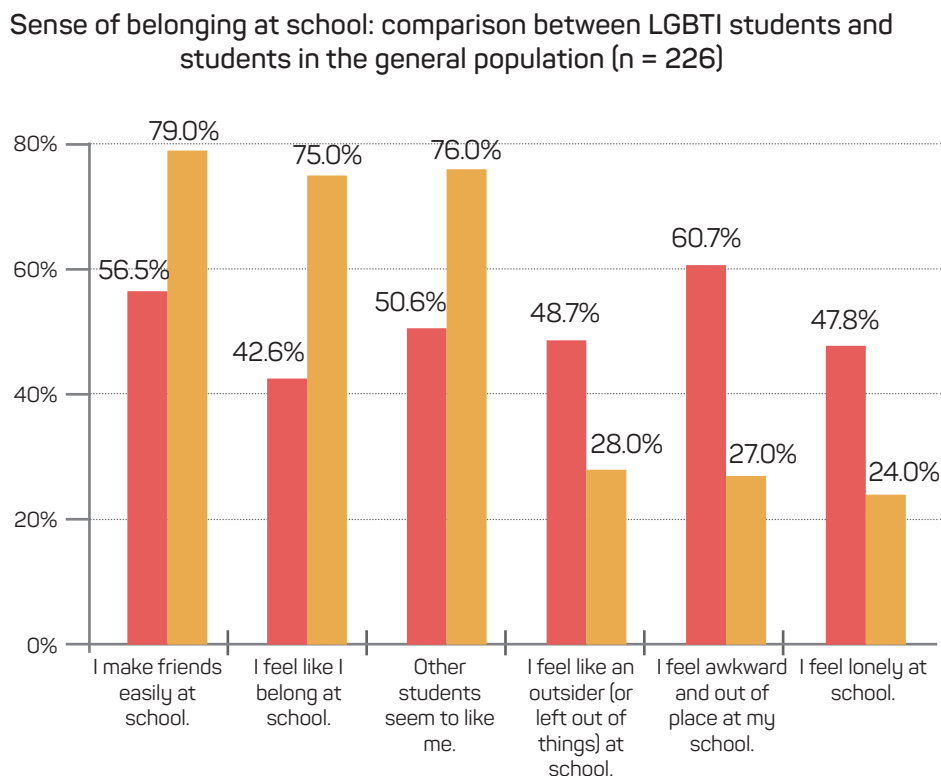
Respondents most commonly feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and gender expression (i.e., whether they are perceived as sufficiently "masculine" or "feminine" according to social expectations):

■ Two-thirds **(67.9%) reported feeling unsafe at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation;**

■ Almost half (48.1%) feel unsafe because of the way they express their gender;

■ Over half (54.4%) avoid at least one space at or around their school because they feel threatened or unsafe there.

Offensive comments at school

We asked students how often they heard homophobic slurs (such as 'faggot' or 'queer'). The vast majority (83.1%) of respondents reported hearing other students make these offensive comments often or very often at school (see Figure 1.2). In addition, more than two-thirds (68.0%) reported hearing homophobic comments from their teachers or other school staff (Figure 1.3).

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Figure 1.2.
Frequency of anti-LGBTI comments at school (n = 996)
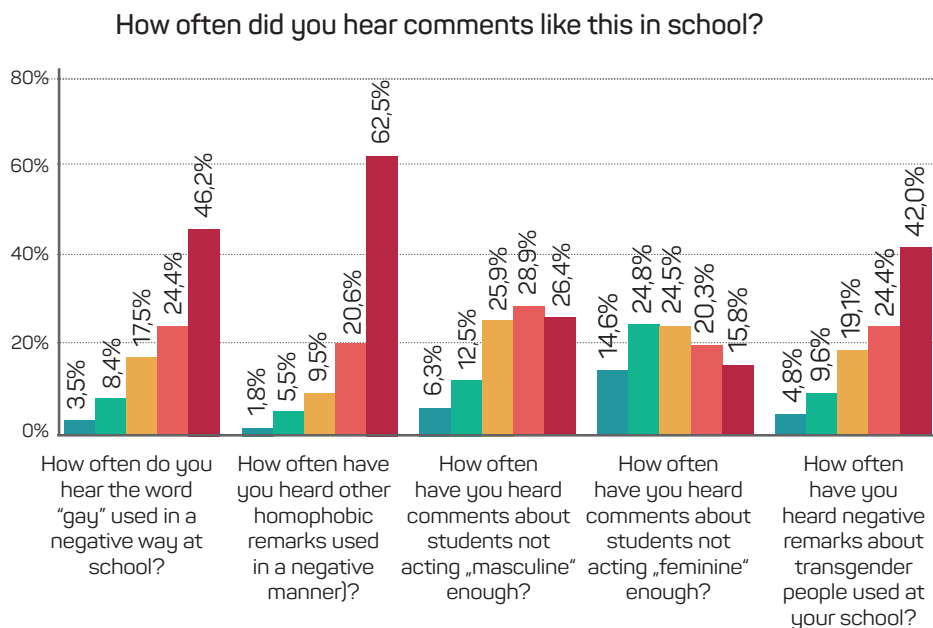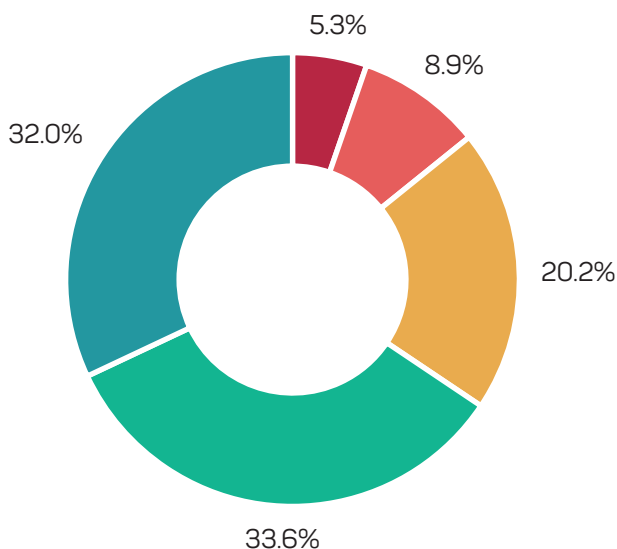
- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Frequently

How often did you hear comments like this in school?

Figure 1.3.
Frequency of hearing homophobic slurs by staff (n = 955)

- Frequently
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

How often did school staff make homophobic comments?

5.3%
8.9%
20.2%
32.0%
33.6%

Harassment in school

We also explored how often respondents were verbally harassed (e.g., insulted or threatened) at school because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Data shows that during the past school year:

- **Two out of three students (67.6%) were verbally harassed** in the past year because of at least one of these three characteristics.

- **Nearly one-quarter (23.8%) were physically bullied** (e.g., pushed or shoved).

- **12.2% of survey participants had been assaulted at school** (e.g., punched or kicked or attacked with a weapon).

We asked students who had been bullied or assaulted in the past school year how often they reported the incidents to school staff. **Almost half (48.2%) never reported incidents to staff** (Figure 1.4.). We also asked what the responses were from school staff when students last reported these incidents. The most common response was, "I was told to ignore it" (54.1%). A large proportion of students who were subjected to violence also **never shared these incidents with a family member (43.9%).**

Figure 1.4.

The Frequency of LGBTI students reporting incidents of bullying and assault (n = 790) *(percentages are for students who have been bullied in school)*

■ Always
■ Most of the time
■ Some of the time
■ Never

How often did you report when you were harrased?
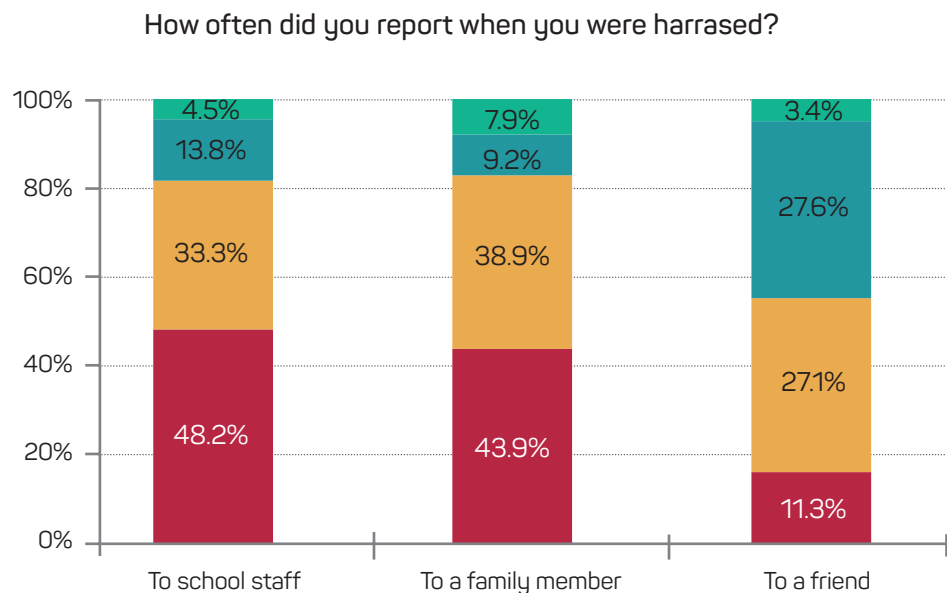
Three quarters of respondents (74.8%) said they hide their sexual orientation from all teachers, and almost as many (73.9%) are only out to a small group of classmates or no one. This indicates that a large number of LGBTI students feel pressured to hide their sexual orientation at school - possibly due to lack of safety and fear of bullying. However, levels of bullying remain high.

Family support

More than a third (37.0%) of students who came out to their parents said that they did not receive any support from their family, and a large proportion of respondents (58.7%) had been the target of homophobic or transphobic comments from at least one family member. Such comments can contribute to a perceived hostile atmosphere at home and negatively affect young people's sense of safety and mental wellbeing. We examined these relationships and found that students whose parents made anti-LGBTI comments towards them (consistently, frequently, occasionally, or rarely) were more likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation, have high levels of depression, lower self-esteem, and have had serious suicidal thoughts (Figure 1.5).

Figure 1.5.
Anti-LGBTI comments made by family and mental health of students (n = 661)

- Parents have not made anti LGBTI comments
- Parents have made anti LGBTI comments (sometimes, often, always)

How often have members of your family made homophobic or transphobic comments to you?
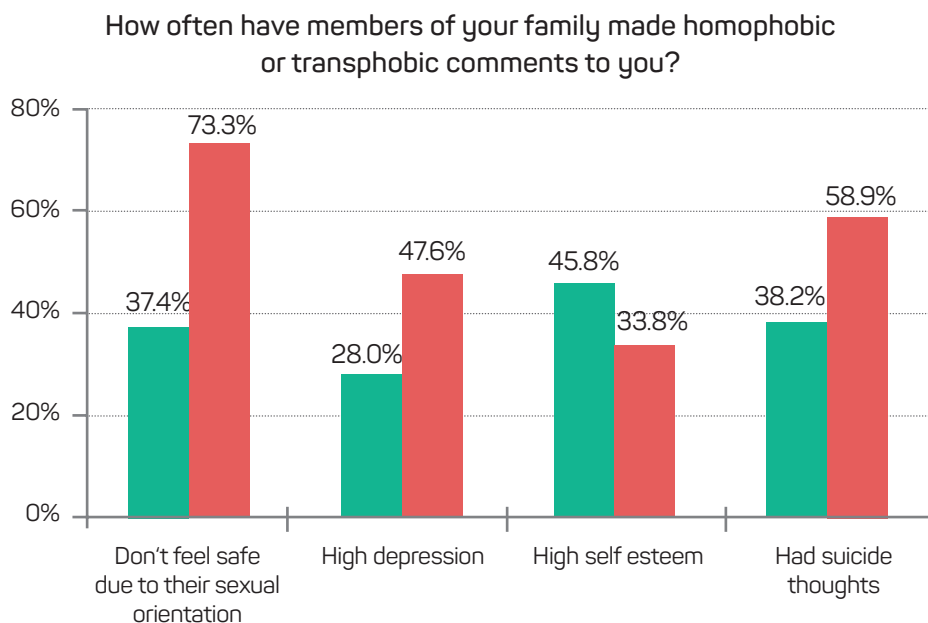
School climate and student well-being

In 2024, even more students reported hearing homophobic comments very frequently at school, with the proportion increasing from 54.5% in 2018 to 62.5% in 2024. A similar trend was seen for comments made by school staff, with 68.0% of pupils in 2024 hearing such comments from their teachers, up from 57.4% in 2018. At the same time, teachers are less likely to react to homophobic comments - 53.5% of them take no action compared to 46.6% six years ago. This is concerning because when LGBTI students report that their teachers and other school staff members respond by supporting them in these situations, their sense of belonging to the school community is higher and they present with better psychological wellbeing (see Figure 1.5). Students experience verbal bullying less often when interventions by teachers are perceived as effective.

Figure 1.6.
School staff involvement regarding homophobic comments and student well-being (n = 496)

- school staff never intervenes
- school staff intervenes (sometimes, often, always)

School staff involvement regarding homophobic comments and student well-being
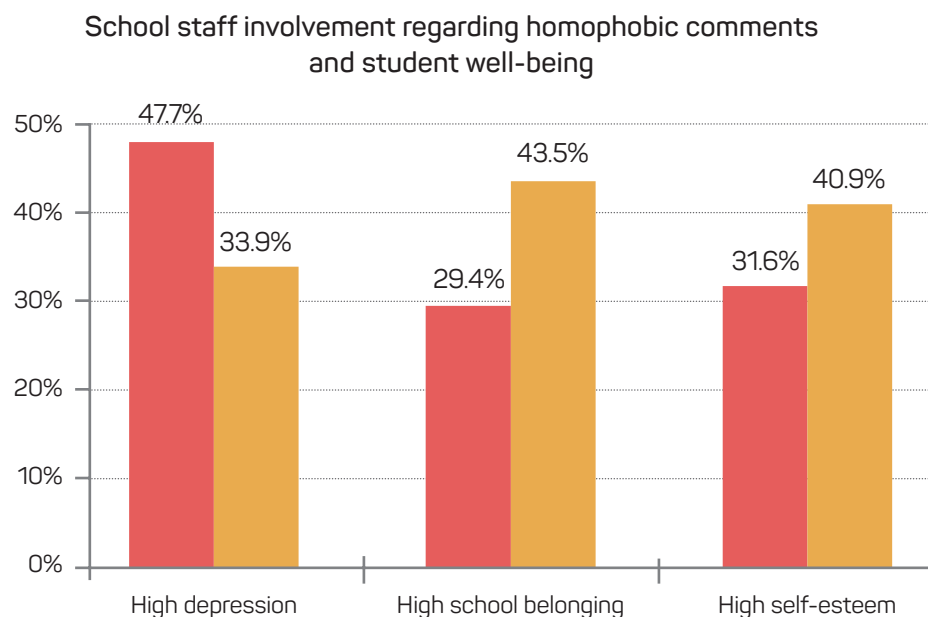
A noticeable trend is that young people report poorer mental health (49.6% have seriously considered suicide in the last year compared to 41.2% in 2018) and high levels of feeling unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation (67.9% compared to 48.4% in 2018).

As most respondents reported negative experiences related to the school climate, we asked whether they planned to leave Bulgaria for education or work. **Three in five (60.1%) reported that they plan to leave the country**, in addition to over a quarter (28.5%) who were unsure. **Of those who indicated that they planned to leave or were unsure, three-quarters (72.4%) reported that their intention to leave was related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.**

Conclusion

The lack of attention to offensive language and bullying contributes to a hostile environment not only for LGBTI students, but for any student who is a target of hate speech. Those who are perceived as 'different' or a minority endure verbal and physical harassment and even violence, leading to a diminished sense of belonging at school, a deteriorated mental state and a desire to leave.

Participants in the study most often told friends when they had been bullied and most often disclosed to only a small group of classmates. They try to support each other within small groups where only their friends know about their identity, and try to cope with difficult experiences at school without adult support. Despite some positive trends, such as a decrease in physical and sexual aggression, which may be due to the many students hiding that they are LGBTI, the overall hostile environment continues to negatively affect students' mental health. Nearly half (49.6%) of them seriously considered suicide, highlighting the urgent need for adequate support strategies.

Systemic changes and actively challenging discrimination are essential to ensure safety and support for all students in Bulgaria.

Recommendations

In this section, we focus our recommendations on strategies that can be implemented at a school level, but we also included broader strategies that are key to improving the lives of LGBTI students on a national level. These guidelines are based on the results of the survey, as well as our experience supporting LGBTI students who have come to us over the last 8 years.

Changes at national level

■ **Improve legislation**

This survey was conducted prior to the adoption of the amendments to the Preschool and School Education Act (PSEA) of 16.08.2024, which prohibits "carrying out propaganda, promotion or incitement in any way,

directly or indirectly, of ideas and views related to non-traditional sexual orientation and/or determination of gender identity other than biological." The results of the survey show that even prior to the introduction of the amendment to the PSEA, very few students received positive information about the topic of LGBTI people at school.

This newly passed law amendment presents the topic of LGBTI people as something dangerous that students need to be protected from, while the real danger is the misunderstanding and demonisation of the topic that leads to LGBTI students getting bullied. The legislative change could make it even harder for school support staff to do their jobs conscientiously and could increase the use of abusive language even further. Teachers of subjects such as Civic Education, Philosophy, Ethics, Psychology, Biology and Foreign Languages will find teaching the curriculum particularly difficult. We therefore **strongly recommend that the changes to the PSEA be repealed.**

■ **Restrict hate speech in media and social networks**

In order to reduce offensive language in schools, this must first happen in public spaces. Sexual orientation is a characteristic protected by the Law on protection against discrimination. Thus, homophobic or transphobic speech must be restricted and sanctioned, both in the media and on social networks.

■ **Improve understanding and support for trans people**

Increasing understanding and support for trans people is essential to creating a safe and inclusive environment. Many of the fears and prejudices associated with trans people stem from misunderstanding and misinformation. Instilling fear in parents and teachers only hinders dialogue between these important adults and young people who are going through the difficult time of strengthening their identities. We recommend that the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court of Cassation reconsider their decisions, which have left trans people in Bulgaria without the right to legally change their gender and made them subject to even greater discrimination than before.

Changes at school level

■ Anti-bullying policy

School administrators have the power to create and communicate policies to address bullying in their own schools. Currently, even if schools have formal policies, they are not well publicized to students, who are often unfamiliar with them. Since a comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-violence mechanism has already been adopted, we urge the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) to strengthen the existing framework and actively assist school administrators to implement it effectively.

■ Targeted efforts by the administration

In terms of addressing reports of bullying by students, the study shows positive trends that should be encouraged and multiplied. MES should

focus its efforts on good examples and facilitate the sharing of good practices between schools. It is a matter of willingness on the part of the administrations to take note of similar practices in other schools and look for ways to implement them on their own.

■ Training of school staff

Teachers and other educational professionals should be trained to recognise and counter bullying, have strategies to deal with discrimination in the classroom and to support LGBTI students. In the 'Practical guidance for teachers' section below we provide ideas that are easily applicable in the classroom. Such guidelines are most effective when teachers have a good understanding of the specific needs and difficulties of minority groups in school.

■ Cooperation between school staff and parents

All of the following recommendations would be much more effective with the active and informed participation of parents. School administrators should ensure that their strategies and efforts to address bullying are visible to both students and parents. As the survey results show, family support is a key factor in the wellbeing of LGBTI students, and we strongly encourage working with families in bullying or violence situations, and this should occur with full respect for students' confidentiality.

■ Comprehensive social-emotional learning programmes

The introduction of a social-emotional learning (SEL) programme is a key step in reducing bullying and abusive language in schools as it gives students the tools they need to develop emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. Through SEL, students learn to recognise and manage their own emotions and also to put themselves in the shoes of others, which promotes empathy and mutual respect. Such programs offer conflict resolution strategies and better communication, which helps students respond constructively to stressful situations instead of resorting to violent or abusive language, thus being effective violence prevention.

Changes at classroom level

In the current social climate in Bulgaria - and especially after the changes in the education law that effectively banned the discussion of LGBTI issues in school — we understand that it can be difficult, and sometimes even risky, for a teacher to declare open support for LGBTI students. Such a stance is likely to lead not only to criticism from management and some parents, but possibly to prosecution. However, the results of the survey show that having supportive teachers is associated with higher academic performance, fewer missed school days, and a greater sense of belonging to the school for LGBTI students. The key is for each teacher to strive to create as supportive and accepting classroom atmosphere as possible, taking into account the context in which they are working.

This section offers practical tips and ideas that can be implemented immediately. These approaches will be useful not only for supporting LGBTI students, but also for creating a positive and supportive environment for everyone in the class.

■ Personal example of respect for differences and discussions about diversity

Teachers' personal example of accepting and respecting differences is important in creating an inclusive and tolerant school environment. Positive attitudes towards diversity are not only manifested during lessons but also in all aspects of school life - for example, reactions to different opinions in the classroom, the way different holidays are celebrated and strategies for managing conflict situations.

■ Intervention in case of discriminatory comments

The results in this study clearly show that teachers' response to homophobic or other discriminatory comments is key to creating a safe and supportive school environment. When such incidents occur, it is important to take action immediately - either by reminding students of the school's rules that prohibit offensive language and bullying or by emphasizing the school's values that promote respectful and constructive conflict resolution.

■ Anonymous student surveys

Anonymous surveys allow educators to learn more about students' experiences at school, which young people may want to share but are concerned about negative consequences such as disclosure of their sexual orientation or unwanted interference from a teacher. We recommend using an online platform for such surveys so that students do not worry that their handwriting will be recognised or that a classmate will read what they write.

■ Accessible opportunities for contact and support

Sometimes students do not share incidents of bullying or the difficulties they face because they do not want other students to witness them talking to teachers or because they find it difficult to share their experiences face-to-face. There are various options to overcome these barriers, for example, putting a box where students can drop off anonymous notes and letters (securely locked and with a narrow opening, of course), having a drop-in before or after school, an online form for messaging the teacher, or an email contact.

■ After-school clubs

Teachers can encourage the creation of after-school clubs that provide safe spaces where students can connect with peers in a positive and supportive atmosphere. Even when clubs are not specifically targeted at LGBTI students, they can contribute to their sense of comfort and support within the school environment, as well as support the personal development of all participants.

■ **Online self-learning platform CommonPoint**

Awareness of LGBTI issues can be very helpful in providing a safe and supportive environment. The CommonPoint platform is a specially developed free online resource in five languages for professionals working with LGBTI youth. The modules contain information on concepts and terminology, the specific psychological challenges faced by LGBTI people, and information on how to support them in the coming out process.

■ **Response to discriminatory statements made by teachers or school staff**

Some of the discriminatory statements at school are made by teachers, sometimes in front of students, sometimes only in the presence of other colleagues. At such times, another teacher may look for ways to calmly and professionally remind that offensive comments are dangerous and can negatively affect the school atmosphere. Such conversations can raise colleagues' awareness of this topic and, over time, lead to a better working atmosphere and cooperation.

■ **Support for teachers**

If a teacher feels pressured or threatened as a result of working through these issues, they should not hesitate to seek allies. Colleagues from other schools or outside organisations can offer moral support and guidance on how to continue their work in a safe and sustainable manner. In order to create a supportive, accepting and encouraging environment, everyone involved in this process needs suitable conditions.

This is a summary of the recommendations. The full report contains our full recommendations, including those that will only be applicable after the repeal of the amendments to the PSEA that came into force on 16 August 2024.