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Not All Families are Welcome: Evidence from a National Survey Experiment

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Not All Families are Welcome: Evidence from a National Survey Experiment

1. Why this study?

Many experts in multicultural education believe that a curriculum that is inclusive of diverse groups—including diverse cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations— instills a belief in the intrinsic worth of all individuals and in the value of a diverse society. Teaching about different types of families allows all students to understand the diversity of family forms and exposes them to differences in their community. This type of inclusion also allows students to see themselves included in the curriculum, which can relate to better feelings about themselves and their family and generally more engaged in their education. If we take the example of LGBTQ students, when they are exposed to positive information about LGBTQ people, history, and events in the curriculum, they report greater school belonging, better grades, greater feelings of safety at school and LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, and peers who were more accepting of LGBTQ people. Yet LGBTQ inclusion in classroom topics is still uncommon in U.S. schools. In a 2021 survey of LGBTQ secondary school students, only 16% said that they had been taught positive information on LGBTQ topics,¹ and in a 2008 survey of LGBTQ families, only 30% of secondary school students with an LGBTQ parent said that the topic of LGBTQ families was ever mentioned in family-related curriculum.²

Unfortunately, diversity in the school curriculum has become a political battleground. In the past few years, we have seen a rise of opposition to inclusion in classroom teaching on racial inequality and structural racism and on LGBTQ issues. Five states currently have laws that require parental notification of LGBTQ curricular inclusion and ten states censor any LGBTQ inclusion in the curriculum. In 2022, the American Library Association reported the highest number of attempted book bans in libraries on record, and that the vast majority of these books were either written by or featured LGBTQ people and people of color. These movements against curricular inclusion would then likely inhibit children’s exposure to diversity and difference in their communities and, in turn, may inhibit the children from developing critical and independent thinking.

This research brief examines Americans' views of teaching about different types of families in primary and secondary schools. We use an experimental design in which we randomly assigned respondents to read about “families with gay and lesbian parents” or “single parent families”, and asked the respondents to share their views of teaching about these families.

¹ Kosciw, J. G., Clark, C. M., & Menard, L. (2022). *The 2021 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN.

² Kosciw, J. G. and Diaz, E. M. (2008). *Involved, Invisible, Ignored: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Parents and Their Children in Our Nation's K–12 Schools*. New York: GLSEN.

2. Most Americans support teaching about different types of families

Seven out of ten American adults (70%) say that it is important that elementary and secondary school students learn about the range of family structures -- 32% perceive it as “very important,” and 38% perceive it as “somewhat important.” The remaining 30% of respondents say that teaching about the range of family structures is “somewhat unimportant” or “not important at all” (17% and 13%, respectively).

3. However, support for teaching about single-parent families is higher than support for teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents

A large majority of American adults (79%) believe that it is important that elementary and secondary school students learn about single parent families (Figure 3.1; very important 38%, somewhat important 41%). However, when asked about the importance of elementary and secondary school students learning about families with gay and lesbian parents, fewer American adults (61%) say that it is important (very important 27%, somewhat important 34%). The number of Americans who hold negative sentiments towards teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents is almost two times that of Americans who hold similar sentiments towards teaching about single parent families (unimportant and not at all important 38% vs. 21%).

4. Varied levels of support for teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents across key demographics; the sharpest division is by political ideology

Public views on teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents map onto key sociodemographic cleavages (Figure 4.1).³ Views vary by:

- **Gender:** Two-thirds of women (67%) believe teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents is important. Among men, this figure drops to 56%.
- **Age:** Two-thirds of adults age 18-44 (68%) believe teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents is important. This percentage was significantly lower for adults age 45-64 (59%) and age 65 and above (49%).
- **Sexual orientation:** Eight out of ten lesbian-gay-bisexual (LGB) respondents (80%) believe teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents is important compared to 60% of non-LGBT respondents hold similar views.
- **Community:** Three-quarters of urban respondents (74%) believe teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents is important, compared to 58% of suburban and 45% of rural respondents.
- **Political ideology:** Liberals were much more likely to believe teaching about gay and lesbian parents is important (80%) compared to 60% of moderates and 37% of

³ While we found differences based on race/ethnicity, parental status, higher education, and income, these patterns are not statistically significant.

conservatives. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the majority of both liberals and moderates believe teaching this topic is important.

We found this same pattern of differences by key sociodemographic characteristics with regard to teaching about single parent families. However, the differences between groups are much smaller (Figure 4.2). For example, when asked about teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents, the gap between liberals and conservatives is 48 percentage points; when asked about teaching about single-parent families, the gap between liberals and conservatives is 28 percentage points.

5. Americans who support teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents are more likely to oppose parents opting out their children from classes discussing these families

We asked a sub-sample of respondents whether parents with children in public schools should be allowed to opt their child out of classes about various types of families (Figure 5.1). Overall, 27% of respondents believe parents should be allowed to opt their child out of classes discussing single parent families, compared to 40% who say parents should be allowed to opt their child out of classes discussing families with gay and lesbian parents.

Among respondents who support teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents, approximately one-in-four respondents believe parents should be allowed to opt their children out of classes about this topic (Figure 5.2; 24% of respondents who rate the topic as very important and 22% of respondents who rate the topic as somewhat important). In contrast, among respondents who do not support teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents, the majority of respondents say that parents should be allowed to opt their children out of classes about this topic (62% of respondents who rate the topic as unimportant and 74% of respondents who rate the topic as not important at all).

6. Methodology – how we did this survey?

We surveyed 2,019 adults (18 year of age and older) from March 16, 2023 to March 31, 2023. The survey was conducted on Qualtrics Panel. Qualtrics, a marketing research firm, partners with a variety of online panel providers to supply a nationally representative sample. The sample is compiled using overall demographic quotas based on census percentages for representation (i.e., age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, and census region). To allow greater power for analysis, we over-sampled people who identify as Black, Asian and Pacific Islander, and/or Latinx. The sample is weighted to represent the U.S. adult population living in households or group quarters. The survey included several quality assurance measures, including attention checks and a speed check. Attention checks asked respondents to mark a specific answer. We removed respondents who failed one or more of these checks from the final sample.

Most of the survey items were developed by the research team and colleagues at Teachers College. Other survey items were adapted from the General Social Survey (GSS). The survey also

included a detailed battery of survey items on sociodemographic characteristics. In addition to close-ended items, the survey asked several open-ended questions, allowing respondents to contextualized and explain their responses in greater detail.

To test for potential bias in views towards teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents, we used an experimental design with two conditions. Respondents were randomly assigned to read about one type of family: “families with gay and lesbian parents” or “single parent families”. All questions pertaining to teaching about the range of families included the same condition or wording.

All surveys are subject to various forms of error. One form is sampling error: the variation in results that is attributable to chance in which members of a population are randomly selected to participate in the survey. For percentages based on the entire sample, the approximate margin of error is +/- 3.2%. For subgroups, the margin of error is larger. For example, the margin of error for Black respondents is approximately +/- 9.0%.

Questions used in this brief:

How important is it that elementary and secondary school students learn about the following topics?

	Not important at all	Somewhat unimportant	Somewhat important	Very important
Range of family structures, such as single parent families				
Range of family structures, such as families with gay and lesbian parents				

[Respondents were randomly assigned one of the survey questions]

If [Range of family structures, such as single parent families] is displayed:

Do you think parents with children in the public schools should be allowed to opt their child out of classes about a range of family structures, such as single parent families?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know

If Range of family structures, such families with gay and lesbian parents] is displayed:

Do you think parents with children in the public schools should be allowed to opt their child out of classes about a range of family structures, such as families with gay and lesbian parents?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know

Figure 3.1: Views toward teaching about different types of families

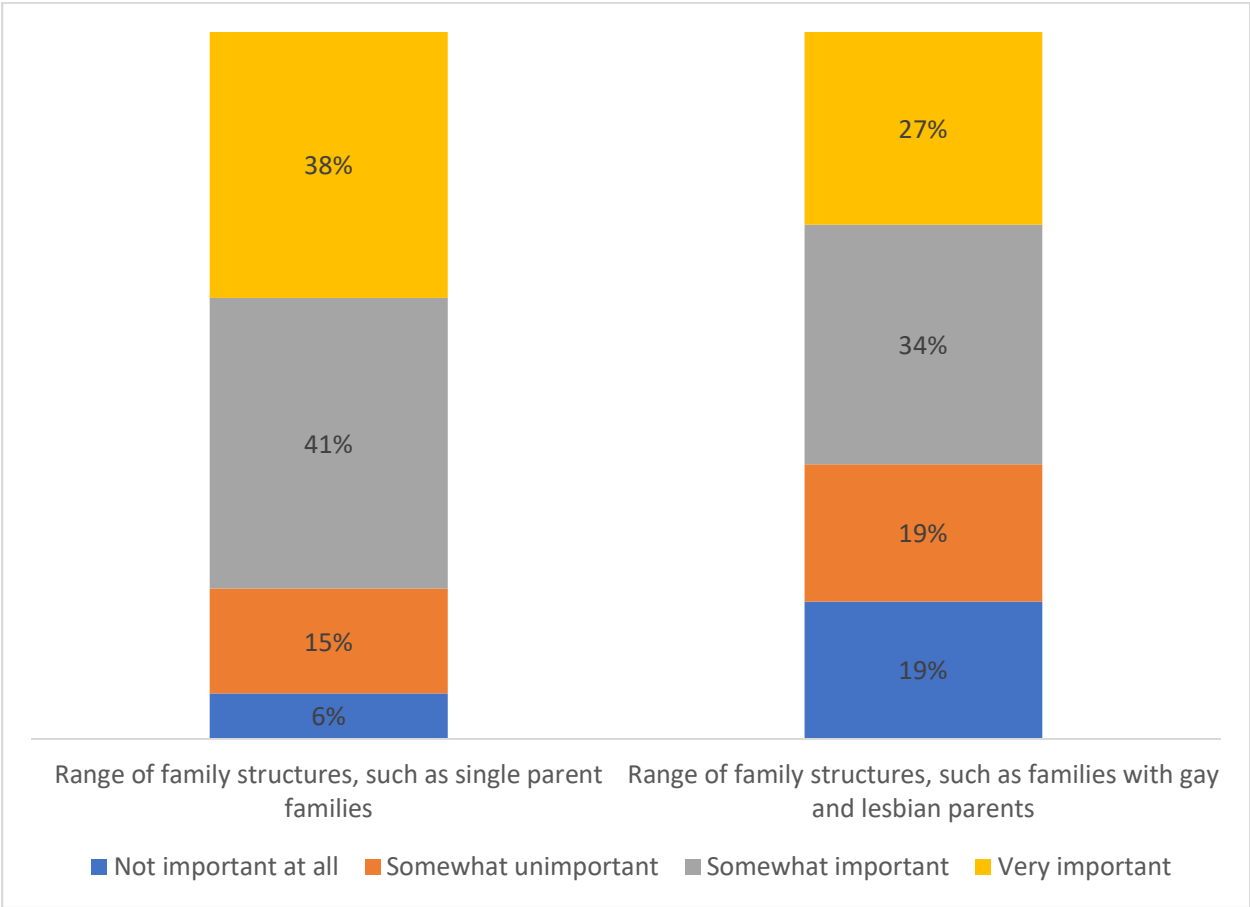


Figure 4.1: Views toward teaching about families with gay and lesbian parents, by key demographics (% say “very important” and “somewhat important”)

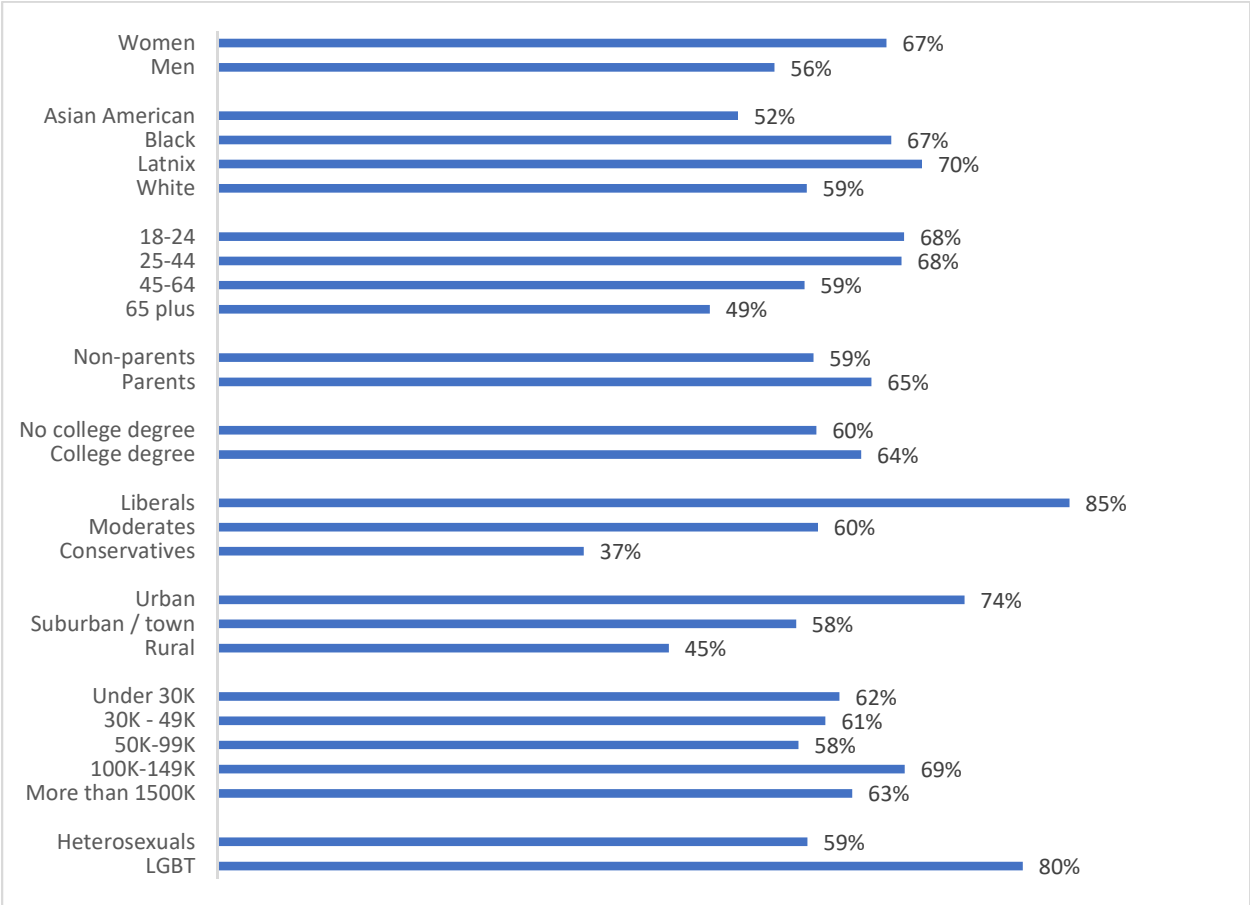


Figure 4.2: Views toward teaching about single parent families, by key demographics (% say “very important” and “somewhat important”)

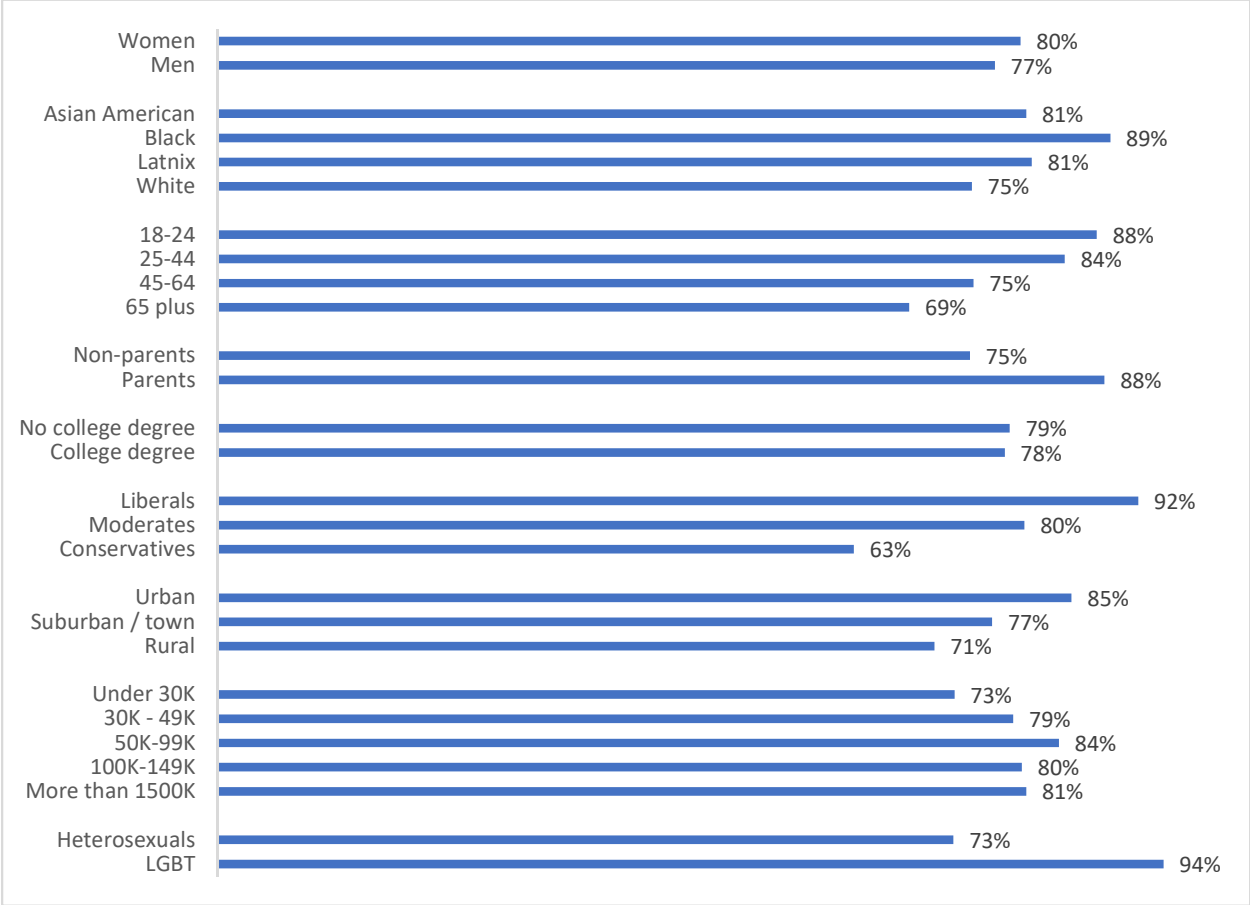


Figure 5.1: Do you think parents with children in the public schools should be allowed to opt their child out of classes about ____?

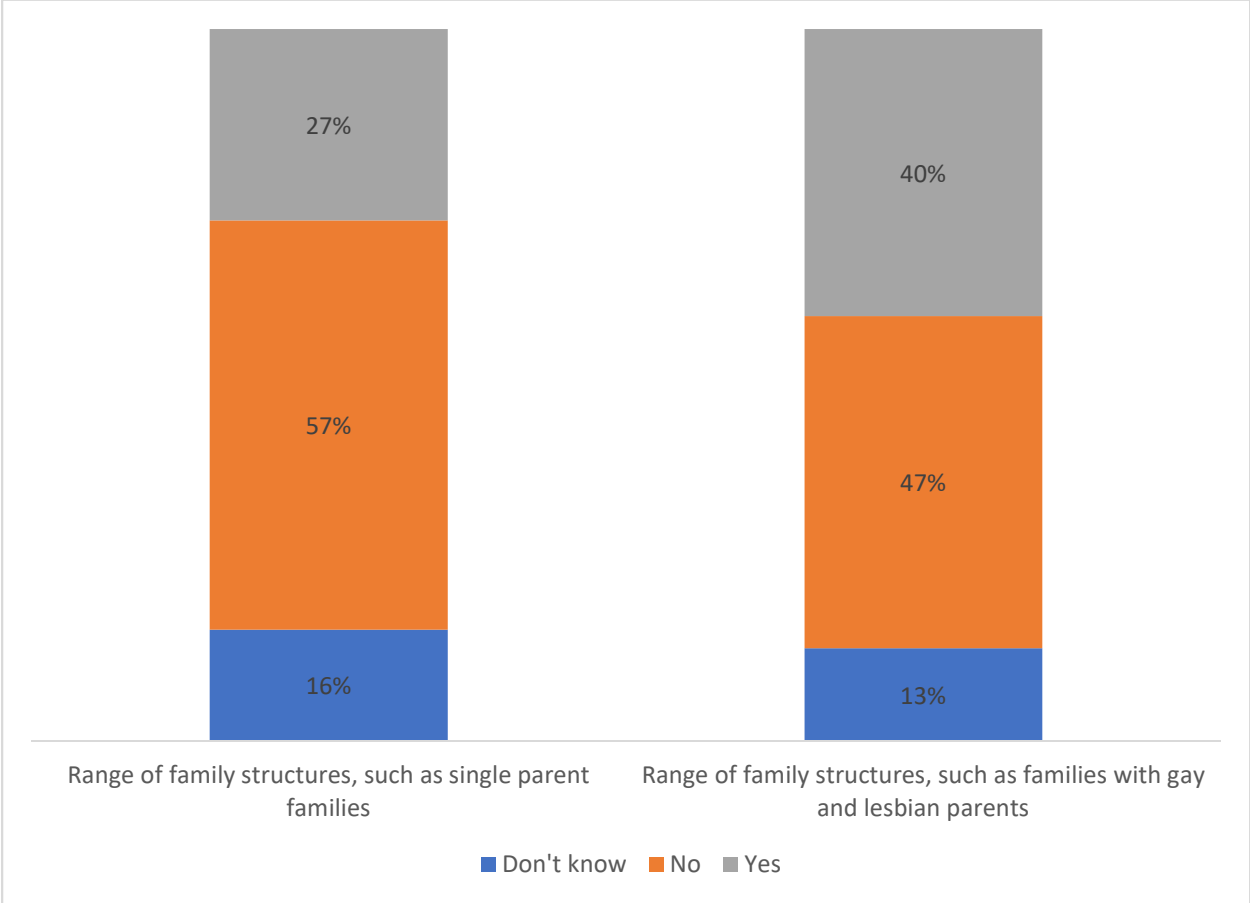


Figure 5.2: Do you think parents with children in the public schools should be allowed to opt their child out of classes about families with gay and lesbian parents, by views toward teaching about these families

