



Conversion Therapy for LGBTQ+ Youth: Why It Matters for Schools



On its surface, the *Chiles v. Salazar* decision handed down last month would appear to be unrelated to education. In it, eight of nine U.S. Supreme Court justices sided with a Colorado therapist who claimed her right to free speech was violated by a state law that prevented her from providing minors with so-called “conversion therapy” that aims to change sexual or gender identities.

But in a [recent piece](#) in *Education Week*, NEPC researcher [Jonathon E. Sawyer](#) argues that the reasoning and impact of the decision will be felt in public schools. And all of us, he warns, should “be concerned about LGBTQ+ students who are subjected to these practices.”

“It is well documented that LGBTQ+ youth experience significant harm through conversion practices, while evidence suggests that therapies of affirmation support the emotional well-being of LGBTQ+ youth,” he writes.

Sawyer, who just completed his PhD studies at CU Boulder, notes the

push to [allow chaplains](#) to provide counseling in public schools. “Are chaplains who affirm conversion practices now allowed to work with their public-school students to erase their LGBTQ+ identities?” he asks.

The [harm of conversion therapy](#) occurs on top of the challenges LGBTQ+ youth already experience at many public schools. A 2023 NEPC [report](#) notes that schools are often unwelcoming environments in which LGBTQ+ youth face elevated risks of verbal and physical harassment.

Political rhetoric around anti-LGBTQ+ legal decisions like this one, plus state-level laws (e.g., “don’t say gay” bills that prevent K-12 teachers from introducing content about sexual orientation) elevate the level of “minority stress” young people experience at school and at home—increasing the risk of depression and suicide, as NEPC Fellow and CU Boulder Professor [Elizabeth Meyer](#) writes in a 2023 piece in *Psychology Today*. None of this is conducive to the development of academic or socioemotional skills.

In his *Education Week* piece, Sawyer questions the Supreme Court’s emphasis in *Chiles v. Salazar* on the plaintiff’s contention that she simply tries to honor the wishes of the young people who seek her out. He asks,

If a student is being abused by an influential adult in their life, would it be ethical for a school counselor to help that student pursue their stated goal of learning to better please that adult? Or for an embedded therapist to help a student who is struggling with anorexia pursue their goal of losing more weight? Of course not.

Sawyer’s article also notes his own period of “emotional turmoil” and “trauma” as a result of conversion practices he experienced during his own high school and college years.

“Inevitably, many more LGBTQ+ youth will continue to be subjected to practices that (at least for a time) they may view as a form of ‘healing’ and ‘freedom’ from what they believe to be deeply flawed parts of themselves,” he writes. “The decision by the Supreme Court in *Chiles v. Salazar* smooths the path for such forms of harm to be wrought on future generations.”

NEPC Resources on LGBTQ Issues

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