Creating an LGBT-Inclusive School Climate

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The mission of Teaching Tolerance is to promote an appreciation for diversity in schools by reducing prejudice, improving intergroup relations and supporting equity for our nation’s children.
Objectives

- Identify best practices for creating LGBT-inclusive school climate.
- Identify ways to preventing and addressing problems.
- Review current building and/or district policy to ensure policies and procedures that are inclusive of all students.
Build an Inclusive School Climate

Six Practices to Build an Inclusive School Climate

• Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs (GSAs)
• Inclusive Leaders and Allies
• Clothing and Dress Codes
• Transgender and Intersex Students
• Proms and Other School Events
• Privacy
Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs

**Remember** that a GSA club is no different than any other student club and cannot be subjected to any extra regulations.

**GET STARTED**
Empower GSA members to educate their peers by providing venues for communication (e.g., airtime during daily announcements, a wall on which to hang posters or a school assembly).

[https://gsanetwork.org](https://gsanetwork.org)

Inclusive Leaders and Allies

**Publicly praise** staff members who actively promote an inclusive environment. This practice both affirms their positive action and creates a culture in which other staff members are unafraid to be allies to LGBT and gender-nonconforming students.

**GET STARTED**
At end-of-the-year award ceremonies, present special “Diversity Leader” certificates to educators who actively promoted an inclusive school environment throughout the year.
Clothing and Dress Codes

**Enforce** dress codes among all students equally. A school cannot Constitutionally forbid male students to wear dresses, for instance, if other students are allowed to wear dresses. **Empower** students to express themselves. Messages supporting LGBT rights are protected speech, whether they’re spoken, worn on a button or printed on a T-shirt.

**GET STARTED**

Check your dress code today. Are there rules that apply only to some students? If so, take immediate steps to remove them from your student handbook.

Clothing and Dress Codes

Dress code must be enforced equally among all students. Devyn should not be sent to the office. Instead, provide building-wide PD to help faculty respond inclusively to all students, including transgender students.
Transgender and Intersex Students

Gender (how a person feels) and biological sex (the physical makeup of a person's anatomy) are two different things, and they are not always aligned.

For example, a person may be raised as a girl but identify as a boy. Others may have been born with a condition that places their biological sex between male and female; they may still be deciding which gender they will ultimately adopt.

Help students whose gender is incorrectly listed on paperwork to correct the situation and ensure school staff and students address them using their preferred pronouns.

Designate a gender-neutral restroom. Binary (women/men or boy/girl) restrooms aren’t inclusive and can be unsafe spaces for transgender and intersex students. Allow each transgender or intersex student to use the restroom in which that student is most comfortable, whether it’s the gender-neutral restroom or the restroom that corresponds with the student’s self-identified gender.

Transgender and Intersex Students

GET STARTED

Evaluate your administrative forms and communications. Do they use gender-neutral language and provide an opportunity for students to communicate their gender identity? If not, make the needed updates.
Schools In Transition: A Guide for Supporting Transgender Students in K-12 Schools

http://www.hrc.org/resources/schools-in-transition-a-guide-for-supporting-transgender-students-in-k-12-s

Transgender and Intersex Students

- Ask students what pronoun they prefer.
- Avoid gendered language. Consider using friends or scholars instead of boys and girls when addressing students.
- Include examples of all gender identities in your curriculum materials.
- Challenge gender stereotypes.
Proms and Other School Events

Use *gender-inclusive* language on all event communications, including invitations.

**Educate** event organizers about students’ First Amendment right to attend events with a same-sex date and to wear clothing of their choice.

**GET STARTED**

Designate one member of your prom committee as the “Inclusivity Planner” to ensure that every student feels welcome.

Privacy

**Never reveal** a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity without the student’s permission—even to the student’s family.

**GET STARTED**

Include language in school privacy policies that explicitly states the confidentiality of information pertaining to students’ sexual orientations and gender identities.
What is happening on your campus?

Six Practices to Build an Inclusive School Climate

- Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs (GSAs)
- Inclusive Leaders and Allies
- Clothing and Dress Codes
- Transgender and Intersex Students
- Proms and Other School Events
- Privacy
Preventing and Addressing Problems

Five Actions to Prevent and Address Problems

• Anti-bullying Policy
• Bullying Hot Spots
• Training
• Religion
• Conversion Therapy
Anti-Bullying Policy

- Include language specifically prohibiting harassment based on nonconformity to gender norms, gender identity and gender expression.
- Give examples of harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of your school’s anti-bullying program annually.
- Designate an anti-bullying coordinator as well as an anti-bullying task force.
- Communicate effectively and often with students, families and the community about school climate issues such as bullying.
- Ensure that reactions to reports of harassment do not further stigmatize students who were targeted.

GET STARTED

Review your current anti-bullying policy. Don’t forget to get input from students, families, educators and the community.
Bullying Hot Spots

- Identify areas where bullying takes place.
- Make those spaces safe.
- Take immediate corrective actions to eliminate “hot spots” on campus (inside and outside).
- Train and assign students or staff to monitor these areas.

GET STARTED
Training

**Student** trainings that include:
- The importance of diversity in the student body
- Behaviors that constitute bullying.
- The negative impact of bullying.
- How students should respond to bullying.
- How teachers should respond to bullying.
- Disciplinary consequences for students who bully.
- The process for reporting bullying.

**Teacher** trainings that include:
- Root causes of bullying.
- Steps to foster an inclusive environment for all students, specifically students who don’t conform to gender norms or who might be perceived as LGBT.
- Review of the school’s bullying policy, emphasizing staff’s responsibility to respond to all bullying.
- Disciplinary consequences for school staff who engage in or ignore bullying.

GET STARTED

*Speak Up at School: How to Respond to Everyday Prejudice, Bias and Stereotypes*
Religion

Harassment based on religious beliefs is unacceptable and should be addressed according to your school’s anti-bullying policy.

Webinar series and resources on religious diversity in the classroom: http://www.tolerance.org/seminar/religious-diversity-classroom

Conversion Therapy

Educate school staff about myths perpetrated by those who conduct conversion therapy. It is impossible to “turn” an individual from gay to straight.

Prepare counselors and teachers to support students who are coping with the emotional side effects of conversion therapy. Students who have undergone this so-called therapy have reported increased anxiety, depression, and in some cases, increased thoughts about suicide.
Myths About Conversion Therapy
Providing Safe and Supportive Environments for LGBT Youth

“Ex-gay” or “reparative” therapy refers to counseling and psychotherapy that attempts to eliminate a person’s gay sexual orientation. The most important fact about these “therapies” is that they are based on a view of homosexuality that has been rejected by all the major health professional organizations. The nation’s leading professional medical, health, and mental health organizations do not support efforts to change young people’s sexual orientation through therapy and have raised serious concerns about the potential harm from such efforts.

Myths About Conversion Therapy
Providing Safe and Supportive Environments for LGBT Youth

Simply put, no. The American Psychological Association (APA) has determined: “There is simply no sufficiently scientifically sound evidence that sexual orientation can be changed.” The APA has also expressed concern that the aggressive promotion of efforts to change gay sexual orientation “create an environment in which prejudice and discrimination can flourish.” The nation’s leading professional medical, health, and mental health organizations do not support efforts to change young people’s sexual orientation through therapy and have raised serious concerns about the potential harm from such efforts.
Myths About Conversion Therapy
Providing Safe and Supportive Environments for LGBT Youth

Conversion Therapy Talking Points

“We have testimonials from “ex-gays” that conversion therapy works.” Anecdotes are not evidence. There are plenty of “ex-gays” who have denounced their conversions.

“You’re just biased against ex-gays.” It’s neither wise nor even possible to turn a gay person straight. Conversion therapy is not based on science, and there is no statistical track record that it works. Medical professionals have warned that it can cause depression.
Conversion Therapy Talking Points

“Science doesn’t know what causes sexuality.” This is true, but it has no bearing on whether it’s healthy to expose a teenager to conversion therapy. As the American Academy of Pediatrics states, “Therapy directed at specifically changing sexual orientation is contraindicated, since it can provoke guilt and anxiety while having little or no potential for achieving changes in orientation.”

Five Actions to Prevent and Address Problems

- Anti-bullying Policy
- Bullying Hot Spots
- Training
- Religion
- Conversion Therapy
What’s Next?

Do Tomorrows

• Identify 1-3 practices to revisit at your school.
• Identify which members of the school community need to be part of the conversation.
• Implement changes immediately.
Q & A

ASCA WEBINAR SERIES

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Best Practices

Creating an LGBT-inclusive School Climate

A Teaching Tolerance Guide for School Leaders
Best Practices  
*Creating an LGBT-inclusive School Climate*  
A Teaching Tolerance Guide for School Leaders

Introduction

Schools are places of learning and also miniature societies. The climate of a school has a direct impact on both how well students learn and how well they interact with their peers. Teachers and administrators work hard to make their classrooms welcoming places where each student feels included. But despite these efforts, students who are—or who are perceived to be—lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGBT) continue to face a harsh reality.

According to a recent Human Rights Campaign survey, LGBT students report being harassed at school—both verbally and physically—at twice the rate of non-LGBT youth. With heightened stressors like bullying, harassment and a lack of role models, LGBT students are also more likely to experience negative educational outcomes.

Needless to say, LGBT students need allies.

Studies have shown that creating a supportive environment for LGBT students improves educational outcomes for all students, not just those who may identify as LGBT. And remember, it's not about politics—it's about supporting students. Any educator, regardless of his personal beliefs, can be a resource for LGBT students.

It all starts with awareness. Often educators are unsure how to support their LGBT students in a meaningful way. These best practices were compiled to give school leaders the knowledge they need to create a climate in which their most vulnerable students feel safe and valued. Through inclusive policies and nurturing practices, administrators, counselors and teachers have the power to build an educational environment that is truly welcoming to all students.

Build an Inclusive School Climate

**GAY-Straight Alliance Clubs (GSAs)**

GSAs are a great way to educate students about diversity and support LGBT students. They can also be a valuable resource to administrators trying to gauge the temperature of their school climates.

Remember that a GSA club is no different than any other student club and cannot be subjected to any extra regulations.

流向: Get Started

Empower GSA members to educate their peers by providing venues for communication (e.g., airtime during the daily announcements, a wall on which to hang posters or a school assembly).

**Inclusive Leaders and Allies**

Leaders who promote a safe and inclusive environment are essential in creating a positive school climate, and they should be rewarded accordingly.

Publicly praise staff members who actively promote an inclusive environment. This practice both affirms their positive action and creates a culture in which other staff members are unafraid to be allies to LGBT and gender-nonconforming students.

流向: Get Started

At end-of-the-year award ceremonies, present special “Diversity Leader” certificates to educators who actively promoted an inclusive school environment throughout the year.
CLOTHING AND DRESS CODES
Clothing is a key way students express their various identities—and many fashion choices are protected by the First Amendment.

• Enforce dress codes among all students equally. A school cannot Constitutionally forbid male students to wear dresses, for instance, if other students are allowed to wear dresses.
• Empower students to express themselves. Messages supporting LGBT rights are protected speech, whether they’re spoken, worn on a button or printed on a T-shirt.

Get Started Check your dress code today. Are there rules that apply only to some students? If so, take immediate steps to remove them from your student handbook.

TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX STUDENTS
Gender (how a person feels) and biological sex (the physical makeup of a person’s anatomy) are two different things, and they are not always aligned. For example, a person may be raised as a girl but identify as a boy. Others may have been born with a condition that places their biological sex between male and female; they may still be deciding which gender they will ultimately adopt.

• Help students whose gender is incorrectly listed on paperwork to correct the situation and ensure school staff and students address them using their preferred pronouns.
• Designate a gender-neutral restroom. Binary (women/men or boy/girl) restrooms aren’t inclusive and can be unsafe spaces for transgender and intersex students. Allow each transgender or intersex student to use the restroom in which that student is most comfortable, whether it’s the gender-neutral restroom or the restroom that corresponds with the student’s self-identified gender.

Get Started Evaluate your administrative forms and communications. Do they use gender-neutral language or provide an opportunity for students to communicate their gender identity? If not, make the needed updates.

PROMS AND OTHER SCHOOL EVENTS
LGBT students and students who do not conform to gender norms can easily feel excluded from extracurricular events like proms if care is not taken to implement inclusive practices and language.

• Use gender-inclusive language on all event communications, including invitations.
• Educate event organizers about students’ First Amendment right to attend events with a same-sex date and to wear clothing of their choice.

Get Started Designate one member of your prom committee as the “Inclusivity Planner” to ensure that every student feels welcome.

PRIVACY
Four of ten LGBT youths say the community in which they live is not accepting of LGBT people, which makes it absolutely imperative that educators respect students’ right to privacy.

Never reveal a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity without the student’s permission—even to the student’s family.

Get Started Include language in school privacy policies that explicitly states the confidentiality of information pertaining to students’ sexual orientations and gender identities.

Preventing and Addressing Problems

ANTI-BULLYING POLICY
Before a school can be inclusive of all students, it must be safe for all students. Your school’s anti-bullying policy or code of conduct is the most public statement of its commitment to student safety. A strong policy protects all students, but many schools need explicit guidance on safeguarding LGBT students.

• Include language specifically prohibiting harassment based on nonconformity to gender norms, gender identity and gender expression.
• Give examples of harassment based on actual or
perceived sexual orientation.
• Evaluate the effectiveness of your school's anti-bullying program annually using student and staff surveys. (Find ours at tolerance.org/tdsi/schools-survey.)
• Designate an anti-bullying coordinator as well as an anti-bullying task force. Staff members specifically trained to prevent and respond to bullying incidents play a pivotal role in developing and maintaining your school's anti-bullying program and are essential if a bullying incident occurs.
• Communicate effectively and often with students, parents or guardians and the community about school climate issues such as bullying. Post the name and contact information for your schools’ anti-bullying coordinator in the office, on the school website and in the student handbook.
• Ensure that reactions to reports of harassment do not further stigmatize students who were targeted for their real or perceived LGBT identities.
• Educate teachers and administrators about common bullying myths, such as the idea that LGBT students are “asking for it” by expressing their sexual orientations or dressing in their preferred manners.

Get Started Review your current anti-bullying policy. Don’t forget to get input from students, parents, guardians, educators and the community.

BULLYING HOT SPOTS
Bullying often occurs when adults aren’t present. Identifying areas where bullying takes place and taking action to make those places safer is an important step in the school climate improvement process.

Identify “hot spots” where bullying often occurs (inside or outside) and take immediate corrective actions to eliminate them, such as training and assigning students or staff to monitor these locations and/or adding cameras.

Get Started Teaching Tolerance’s mapping exercise helps you begin identifying your school’s “hot spots.” Download it at tolerance.org/map-it-out.

TRAINING
From students to district administrators, everyone has a role to play in creating an inclusive school climate.

Proper training gives all school community members a thorough understanding of the part they play in making their school an environment that welcomes all students.

Conduct student training once a year, including age-appropriate discussion of the following:
• The importance of diversity (including nonconformity with gender norms) in the student body;
• Behaviors that constitute bullying;
• The negative impact of bullying;
• How students should respond to bullying;
• How teachers should respond to bullying;
• Disciplinary consequences for students who bully their peers; and
• The process for reporting bullying.

Conduct teacher and administrator training once a year, including the following topics in addition to those above:
• Root causes of bullying;
• Steps to foster an inclusive education environment for all students—specifically students who don’t conform to gender norms or who might be perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender;
• Review of the school’s bullying policy, emphasizing staff’s responsibility to respond to all bullying; and
• Disciplinary consequences for school staff who engage in or ignore bullying.

Get Started Teaching Tolerance’s guide, Speak Up at School, gives both educators and students practical strategies for speaking up against biased speech.

RELIGION
Religion can be a hot topic when discussing LGBT issues. All students are entitled to their religious viewpoints, but those viewpoints may not intrude on the rights of others.

Harassment based on religious beliefs is unacceptable and should be addressed according to your school’s anti-bullying policy.

Get Started Include faith groups in your school’s multi-cultural club as an opportunity for cross-cultural understanding.
CONVERSION THERAPY
Also known as reparative or sexual reorientation therapy, this pseudo-scientific “therapy” has been denounced by all major medical and psychological associations and may cause a student great psychological harm.

- Educate school staff about myths perpetrated by those who conduct conversion therapy. It is impossible to “turn” an individual from gay to straight.
- Prepare counselors and teachers to support students who are coping with the emotional side effects of conversion therapy. Students who have undergone this so-called therapy have reported increased anxiety, depression, and in some cases, increased thoughts about suicide.

🔗 Get Started Our article, “Therapy of Lies,” is a great resource for educating school staff about conversion therapy. Find it at tolerance.org/therapy-of-lies.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

- **Responding to Hate and Bias at School**
  A Teaching Tolerance guide that shows educators how to respond to a hate-related incident in their school or community and guides them through crisis management and post-crisis efforts at improvement. tolerance.org/hate-and-bias

- **Speak Up at School**
  A Teaching Tolerance guide that gives educators the tools to help students and themselves turn from bystanders to upstanders and explains how to respond to biased remarks from peers, parents or even administrators. tolerance.org/speak-up-at-school

- **Examining Your School's Climate**
  A questionnaire to begin the process of assessing your school climate. tolerance.org/activity/examining-your-schools-climate

- **Glossary of Terms**
  A quick-guide to improve your LGBT vocabulary. tolerance.org/LGBT-best-practices-terms

- **Ten Tips for Starting a GSA**
  These 10 simple steps can help make a GSA’s launch successful. tolerance.org/10-tips-GSA
For almost 100 years, the ACLU has worked to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of the United States. The ACLU LGBT & HIV Project helps protect young people's right to express themselves, start gay-straight alliance clubs, have their gender identity respected, and be taught in a safe environment.

Gender Spectrum provides education, training and support to help create a gender-sensitive and inclusive environment for all children and teens. We provide an array of services designed to help families, schools, professionals and organizations understand and address the concepts of gender identity and expression.

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation improves the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Through public education, research, and trainings and professional development, the HRC Foundation has an array of programs that encourage inclusive policies and practices, including Welcoming Schools, an evidence-based program that works to create inclusive elementary schools.

NCLR is a national legal organization committed to protecting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their families through litigation, legislation, policy and public education. NCLR litigates precedent-setting cases, advocates for equitable public policies, provides free legal assistance and public education to LGBT people and their advocates.

The National Education Association (NEA), the nation's largest professional employee organization, is committed to advancing the cause of public education. NEA believes every student in America, regardless of family income or place of residence, deserves a quality education. NEA focuses the energy and resources of its 3 million members on improving the quality of teaching, increasing student achievement and making schools safer, better places to learn.
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Foreword

A Letter from a Superintendent

One day about eight years ago, a mother came to me and asked what I could do to support her child who would be starting kindergarten in the fall. While I was accustomed to addressing the fears of worried parents, this family’s situation was one I had never encountered — Toni was assigned male at birth, but her parents were considering letting her start school as a girl, which is how she had been identifying for some time.

I told Toni’s mom that while I hadn’t dealt with a situation like this before, I believed every child had the right to feel safe, welcomed and valued, and I would work with the family to make sure we supported her child. Our journey began that day.

Toni eventually transitioned to living openly and authentically as a girl in second grade. Her family, school staff, counselor and I worked together to support her throughout the process. This was a new experience for all of us and we had few models to follow, so we all learned as we went and the process evolved over time. We had a plan in place for those things we could predict, but other things caught us off guard and we had to make it up as we went along.

By far the easiest part of the process was the acceptance by Toni’s classmates, who embraced her and affirmed her identity. As we worked to balance the need to educate and inform parents while protecting Toni’s right to privacy, I met with a small number of concerned parents individually and attended a parent night facilitated by Gender Spectrum. We provided education regarding transgender children to the school’s staff, our administrative team and the governing board. For the most part there was a compassionate response to do the right thing. There were people who struggled with changes we put in place, but we continually focused on supporting Toni and doing what was right.
I believed every child had the right to feel safe, welcomed and valued, and I would work with the family to make sure we supported her child.

Two years later another second grade student in our district transitioned — but this time we were prepared, and the process went more smoothly. Both of these students have since entered middle school. Both girls are courageous and wise beyond their years. They have taught me and others valuable lessons about what it means to truly support your students.

When I began this journey, I had little experience with working with transgender students, particularly those who were so young. I learned so much during this process from working with Gender Spectrum, but also from Toni’s parents and — most of all — Toni herself.

I encourage anyone looking to support a transgender student to always focus on the needs of the transitioning child and think about what they need to feel safe, included and supported. I never had a political agenda; my agenda was to support our students. I listened and tried to understand when I faced obstacles. I worked to be an advocate, not an activist.

If your experience is anything like my own, you will be in unfamiliar — perhaps even uncomfortable — territory. It is important, however, that your own personal uncertainties do not interfere with your ability to do the right thing to protect the safety and well-being of these vulnerable children. This guide to supporting transgender students builds on the experiences of educators like myself and the advocates who have supported us along the way. Moreover, it ensures that the knowledge we have gained as we worked to support these students can serve as a model for other educators, parents, counselors and students. In doing so, we hope to provide a foundation so that schools and classrooms become more accepting of gender diversity and where all students can feel supported and safe.

Janice Adams
Superintendent
Benicia Unified School District
Introduction
Supporting Transgender Students

Today's society is recognizing the experiences and needs of transgender people as never before. This trend is most evident in our nation's schools, where an increasing number of transgender and gender-expansive students live openly as their authentic selves. At the same time, parents, students, educators, administrators and other stakeholders are working together to determine the best ways to support these students.

Many are unfamiliar with the needs of transgender students, and attempts to meet those needs can be fraught with emotion for all involved. Educators may have concerns about their own capacity to support their transgender students, or hesitate to act because of personal feelings or fear of negative reactions from the larger community. Similarly, families and caregivers are sometimes uncertain about what support their child needs in school or question the school's commitment to the well-being of their child. This dynamic can create an adversarial relationship among the very individuals working to support the student. Finally, transgender students themselves may struggle with a variety of issues in seeking to be authentically seen, including the fear of social rejection and mistreatment or abuse from peers. As a result, many of these students hope to escape notice and to simply survive rather than flourish.

This guide highlights best practices while offering strategies for building upon and aligning them with each school’s culture.
What’s Inside

Rather than a static set of recommendations and formulas, this guide responds to the dynamics that affect a transgender student's experiences in school. The guide is geared toward the needs of all students, kindergarten through twelfth grade, and incorporates distinctions and recommendations based on the specific ages and stages of students’ development.

Statements, recommendations and resources are based on data, research and best practices that have been tested in the field, as well as narratives of real experiences from students, parents, caregivers and educators.

Chapter One provides information about basic concepts of gender. It is critical that those supporting a transgender or gender-expansive child understand the complexity of gender.

Chapter Two speaks to the importance of this issue and the harm society suffers when any students are marginalized at school.

Chapter Three sets out general guidelines for meeting the needs of transgender students, including intentionality and an awareness of the trade-offs inherent in any decisions about a student’s transition.

Chapter Four considers specific issues affecting transgender youth, including the use of chosen names and pronouns, student confidentiality and student records, restroom and locker room access, sports and other sex-separated activities and harassment or bullying.

Beyond these common concerns, there are some complex issues that may significantly affect the process of supporting a student’s transition. Chapter Five includes approaches for working with unsupportive parents or parents who disagree about the appropriate response to their child’s expressed gender identity. It also addresses how special education can be used to help transgender students.

Chapter Six provides an overview of the legal landscape that administrators, educators, parents and students should be aware of as they work together to create a safe and supportive school environment for all students.

The appendices to this guide include a wide array of practical resources and additional information related to topics introduced throughout this guide.
Guiding Principles

Even though the needs of transgender students vary tremendously based on a range of factors, a number of guiding principles informed this document. These principles include that:

- Every student has the right to learn in a safe and accepting school environment. Supporting transgender students gives them the equal opportunity that all students need.

- All adults must act as protective agents committed to the safety and well-being of the youth they serve, including those who are transgender or gender-expansive, and should recognize that working as a team is in the best interest of individual students seeking support.

- There are often gaps in trust — grounded in past or current experiences between students, families and educational institutions. This document will also incorporate language, resources and suggestions for navigating these trust gaps and supporting the student’s safety and well-being, including strategies for working in adversarial contexts.

- The expression of transgender identity, or any other form of gender-expansive behavior, is a healthy, appropriate and typical aspect of human development. A gender-expansive student should never be asked, encouraged or required to affirm a gender identity or to express their gender in a manner that is not consistent with their self-identification or expression. Any such attempts or requests are unethical and will likely cause significant emotional harm. It is irrelevant whether a person’s objection to a student’s identity or expression is based on sincerely held religious beliefs or the belief that the student lacks capacity or ability to assert their gender identity or expression (e.g., due to age, developmental disability or intellectual disability).

- Ongoing learning is a key element of this process. Educators and administrators need to engage in regular professional development and training to build a school climate that avoids gender stereotyping and affirms the gender of all children. Parents and caregivers must similarly continue to expand their understanding of the shifting concerns facing children as they get older. Professionals must also build their knowledge about the concerns facing educators and families alike.
For many educators and administrators, this work begins with a transgender or gender-expansive child enrolling at their school, or a current student starting to express their gender identity in a new way. While this guide is designed around the unique needs of transgender students, it is critical to recognize that transgender students are not the only youth affected by gender at school. Stereotypes about gender are reinforced in many ways in the school environment, which prevents all youth from reaching their full potential. For example, we may limit the toys or activities students can enjoy based on our preconceived notions of appropriate behavior and roles for girls and boys.

Creating a more welcoming environment for students’ gender diversity is a more effective and lasting strategy than trying to “solve” the concerns associated with an individual transgender student. Accordingly, many schools are working to develop more gender-inclusive environments for all students, knowing that they are also creating more affirming spaces for transgender students in the process. Such work represents a systematic approach to improving a school’s overall climate and will ultimately increase all students’ sense of safety, engagement and inclusion.

Endnotes

Chapter One
Some Gender Basics

Gender & Sex

One of the most prevalent misconceptions about gender is that it is based solely on a physical understanding of sex, and that everyone fits into one of two opposite categories, male or female. This misconception in turn, leads many to incorrectly assume that the body one is born with determines an individual’s gender. Though related to one another, both gender and sex are much more complex. Gender is comprised of a person’s physical and genetic traits, their own sense of gender identity and their gender expression. Given the numerous combinations that these factors can create, gender is better understood as a spectrum.

While many people fall into strongly masculine or feminine categories, others fall somewhere in the middle and are more androgynous. Ultimately, each person is in the best position to define their own place on the gender spectrum.

Gender Identity vs. Sexual Orientation

Despite the tendency to conflate sexual orientation and gender identity, the two are very different. Sexual orientation describes a person’s sexual or romantic attraction, while gender identity refers to someone’s own personal sense of being male, female, both or neither. Everyone has both a gender identity and a sexual orientation.

“Because I am transgender, every moment I’m not who I should be is like having 10 pounds added to my shoulders.”

— Participant
HRC Foundation 2012 Youth Survey
Gender:
Complex relationship between physical traits and one’s internal sense of self as male, female, both or neither (gender identity), as well as one’s outward presentation and behaviors (gender expression).

Sex:
In the United States, individuals are assigned “female” or “male” sex at birth, based on physical attributes and characteristics. This assumed physical dichotomy of sex is itself belied by a variety of naturally occurring conditions. Sex in some contexts, such as the law, is also used as an umbrella term that encompasses gender and gender identity. For the purposes of the discussion in this guide, however, “sex” is being used to convey those physical attributes and characteristics that are used to assign someone as “male” or “female” at birth.

Gender Binary:
A social system that constructs gender according to two discrete and opposite categories — male or female.

Cisgender:
A term for people whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender-expansive:
Refers to a wider, more flexible range of gender identities or expressions than those typically associated with the binary gender system.

Transgender:
Describes a person whose gender identity is different from what is generally considered typical for their sex assigned at birth.

Note: This term is an adjective. Using this term as a verb (i.e., transgendered) or noun (i.e., transgenders) is offensive and should be avoided.

Gender Nonconforming:
Describes a person whose behaviors or gender expression falls outside what is generally considered typical for their assigned sex at birth.

Gender Spectrum:
An understanding of gender as encompassing a wide range of identities and expressions.
Gender Expression:
How a person expresses their gender through outward presentation and behavior. This includes, for example, a person’s name, clothing, hair style, body language and mannerisms.

Gender Identity:
A personal, deeply-felt sense of being male, female, both or neither. Everyone has a gender identity.

Gender Dysphoria:
An intense and persistent discomfort with the primary and secondary sex characteristics of one’s assigned birth sex. Affirming and supporting a person’s gender identity can help to significantly decrease their dysphoria. Conversely, rejecting or requiring a person to conceal their gender identity will exacerbate their level of dysphoria.

Sexual Orientation:
Term that describes a person’s romantic or sexual attraction to people of a specific gender or genders. “Lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual” and “straight” are examples of sexual orientations. Our sexual orientation and our gender identity are separate, distinct parts of our overall identities.

Transition:
The process through which transgender people begin to live as the gender with which they identify, rather than the one typically associated with their sex assigned at birth. Social transition may include things such as changing names, pronouns, hairstyle and clothing. Medical transition may include medical components like hormone therapy and gender affirming surgeries. Not all transgender individuals seek medical care as part of their transition or have access to such care. The decision about which steps to take as part of one's transition is a deeply personal and private choice. You should never ask someone if they have had any medical procedures, and you should respect the privacy of a student’s transition process.

Transphobia:
Irrational fear or hatred of, or violence, harassment or discrimination perpetrated against transgender people.
How Gender Identity Develops

“How Gender Identity Develops

Children typically begin expressing their gender identity between the ages of two and four years old. Around this age, transgender children often express their cross-gender identification to their family members and caregivers through statements like “I have a girl brain and boy body,” or vice versa, and behavior like dressing in clothing and engaging in activities consistent with their gender identity. Even at that young age, transgender children are often insistent and persistent about their gender, differentiating their behavior from a “phase” or imaginative play.

With the love and support of families, caregivers and other adults, transgender children and youth can thrive. Supporting them means allowing them to live in a manner consistent with their gender identity, which helps them develop self-esteem and grow into happy, healthy members of society.

However, some transgender children receive the message from their families, caregivers and society that there is something wrong with who they are, and begin to repress their cross-gender identification out of fear and shame. Not having their gender identity respected and affirmed in their daily lives will likely cause them significant psychological distress. That distress is often exacerbated when a transgender student’s gender identity is not affirmed at school, which can be a very gendered space (e.g., girls’ and boys’ toys/games, girls’ and boys’ lines).

The consequences of not affirming a child’s gender identity can be severe, and it can interfere with their ability to develop and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. In the school context, that distress will also hinder a transgender student’s focus in class and ability to learn. The longer a transgender youth is not affirmed, the more significant and long-lasting the negative consequences can become, including loss of interest in school, heightened risk for alcohol and drug use, poor mental health and suicide.
With the goal of preventing or alleviating the distress that transgender youth often experience, typically referred to as Gender Dysphoria,\(^3\) healthcare providers recommend that the child “socially transition” and live consistently with their gender identity. That includes dressing, interacting with peers and using names and pronouns in a manner consistent with their identified gender. For most transgender youth, social transition provides tremendous and immediate relief, allowing them to flourish socially, emotionally and academically.


\(^3\) Gender Dysphoria is a serious medical condition codified in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Diseases. People diagnosed with Gender Dysphoria have an intense and persistent discomfort with the primary and secondary sex characteristics of their assigned birth sex. Gender Dysphoria is not a mental illness, but rather refers to the severe and unremitting emotional pain resulting from this incongruity. Gender Dysphoria was previously referred to as “Gender Identity Disorder.” The American Psychiatric Association changed the name and diagnostic criteria for this condition to reflect that Gender Dysphoria “is more descriptive than the previous DSM-IV term gender identity disorder and focuses on dysphoria as the clinical problem, not identity per se.” DSM-5, supra, p.451.
Chapter Two
Why This Matters

As visibility and awareness of transgender people increases more parents, counselors and healthcare providers are learning about the importance of supporting transgender youth. Educators and school administrators are also working to affirm these students, recognizing that every child deserves an opportunity to thrive in school. Gender-based harassment and violence can be widespread in schools and affect all students, not just those who are transgender or gender-expansive. All educators — whether or not they have a transgender student in their school — can benefit from instituting better interventions when bias and bullying arise, and fostering gender-inclusive learning environments to preclude the need for such interventions altogether.

Meeting Students’ Needs

Students have all kinds of needs — whether they are gifted and talented, speak a first language other than English or are transgender — and schools have a duty to provide for these needs. Dispelling harmful stereotypes and prejudices of all kinds creates spaces where every student has the opportunity to learn and thrive.

When students are harassed or bullied based on their gender, or others’ perceptions of it, their learning often takes a backseat to worrying about which restroom they can use safely or whether they will face a bully on their bus ride home. As a result, students who face harassment are less likely to succeed academically. Bias-based harassment also increases the risk for problems like school absences, substance use and emotional distress.
School is the place where our children should be exploring ideas and discovering new skills. No child should be prevented from pursuing their passions simply based on others’ perceptions of their gender.

The effects of a negative school environment are long-lasting and compounding. For example, a school climate survey recently released by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that students who experienced higher levels of victimization based on gender expression were twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue post-secondary education.\(^7\) Further, when targeted at school, gender-expansive youth perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning (LGBTQ) face long-term effects on their mental health and life satisfaction as young adults. In other words, mistreatment at school is not only difficult as it is occurring, but also has lasting negative effects.\(^8\)

While many transgender youth are transitioning at young ages, many others are not. They’re sitting quietly in classrooms feeling isolated and suffering harassment and bullying from peers for their gender expression. Creating an inclusive environment that is free of gender bias and welcoming of gender-expansive youth can make a positive difference in countless children’s lives.

Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment Benefits All Students

Gender-based bullying affects all children, not only those who identify themselves as LGBTQ or who have nonconforming gender identities or expressions. Creating school environments that respect and affirm gender diversity will empower all students rather than limit them. GLSEN’s study on the impact of Gay-Straight Alliances, for example, suggests that such organizations create school environments where all students are less likely to hear homophobic slurs.\(^9\) Gender-inclusive messages encourage greater acceptance of diversity and discourage children from expressing judgments about people based on factors like race, class, sexuality, gender, family structure, ethnicity and religion.

Beyond supporting these youth as individuals, we cannot afford to have any of our students cut off from interests, talents or intellectual pursuits that may ultimately contribute to our society. School is the place where our children should be exploring ideas and discovering new skills.
No child should be prevented from pursuing their passions simply based on others’ perceptions of their gender. By sending a message that certain pursuits are off-limits simply because of a person’s gender, we lose access to an incredible source of human potential.

Endnotes


7 Kosciw, et al., supra, p. 47.

8 Toomey, et al., supra, p. 1585.

9 Kosciw, et al., supra, at p. 66.
Chapter Three

Key Considerations

Every student who transitions at school is entitled to a safe and supportive environment in which to follow their unique path to being their authentic selves.

“In preparing for battle, I have often found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.”

— Dwight D. Eisenhower

The Right Plan

Factors such as the student's age, personality and emotional state, the level of family support, the school's organizational design and even the time of year all can affect how the student's transition unfolds. It is important to avoid seeking some universally “correct way,” and instead to focus on identifying which steps will create the necessary conditions to make this particular student's experience as positive as possible. Creating a tailored Gender Transition Plan (see Appendix D) is the best way to ensure that the process is thoughtfully constructed and accounts for these various factors.
Urgency & Timing

A student's desire to undergo a gender transition at school is borne out of a deep need to be their authentic self. The urgency and timing of the gender transition must be carefully balanced. Ideally, the student is not currently experiencing an unmanageably high level of distress at school, which will allow the student, school and family (if appropriate) to work together as a team to establish the most positive scenario in which the transition can take place. This process could include training for staff, students and parents and a carefully laid out plan for the student’s authentic identity to be shared with the school community.

These steps need not take an inordinate amount of time. In fact, schools must be vigilant about not using this planning process to unnecessarily delay the student’s gender transition, which can compromise the student’s well-being. Simply setting a date for the transition is sometimes sufficient to reduce a student’s distress to a more manageable level. But when that is not enough, expediency should be a primary factor in the transition plan.

In instances where the process must go more quickly, school officials should prepare for staff members to be caught off guard and to field questions and concerns from other students and parents. This situation will entail, at least initially, that the school respond to any issues or concerns reactively. Schools that have proactively addressed gender diversity and inclusion as part of their overall school climate will be in a better position to respond to these more urgent situations.

In some cases a child’s gender-expansive behavior or desire to transition can initially surface at school. If school staff believe that a gender identity issue is presenting itself or creating difficulty for the child at school, sensitively approaching parents about the situation may be appropriate. By gently exploring the degree to which parents and caregivers have observed the student’s gender-expansive behavior at home, educators can become an important bridge to helping family members understand and support the child. If met with resistance, school staff should be ready with resources that may help family members better understand what the child is experiencing.

Any decision to raise the topic with parents must be made very carefully and in consultation with the student. In some instances, a school may choose not to bring the subject up if there is a concern that parents or caregivers may react negatively. For a further discussion on these issues, see Chapter Five.
Age & Grade Level

While it is important to include a student's age and grade level as factors to consider in the planning process, it should never be used to justify delaying or denying a student's gender transition. This factor becomes particularly relevant if the student's transition is taking place publicly. Should the student wish to discuss their transition with their peers or the school decides to incorporate lessons about gender into the curriculum, approaches for managing these actions should be developmentally appropriate.

Regardless of the age and grade level of the students, there are many activities and lessons that can effectively scaffold a student's gender transition. Educators, administrators, parents and the transgender student should work together to identify age-appropriate materials for those lessons. While some may assume that elementary students are too young to discuss these issues, experience from schools across the country say otherwise. In fact, in most cases younger students are much more flexible in their thinking and capacity for understanding a peer's assertion of their authentic gender.

The bottom line is this: using appropriate materials with students at any grade level will support a student's gender transition while at the same time creating greater awareness and space for every child's gender identity and expression.

Privacy & Disclosure

Far more than the age of the student, the degree to which others are aware of the student's gender transition will dictate what is necessary to make the transition go smoothly. If the student is transitioning in a school or community where they have been known as their assigned sex for a long time, options for privacy may be limited. In other situations, the student's move to a new school setting (i.e., starting middle school, transferring to a different school in the district) affords the opportunity to transition with more privacy. Regardless of the circumstances, the school should support the student's need for privacy to the best of its ability.

Schools are uniquely positioned to serve as a buffer to protect students and their families.
One of the most common questions that arises when students transition in schools is whether others in the school community have a right to know about the student’s gender transition. The simple answer is “no.” A student’s transgender status, legal name or sex assigned at birth is confidential medical information and protected personally identifiable information, and disclosure of that information may violate the school’s obligations under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) or constitutional privacy protections. Given the level of discrimination transgender people experience, sharing that information could also expose a student to harassment and abuse from peers, educators and school staff. Absent an explicit legal obligation or express permission from the student and family, such information should not be shared with anyone, including other parents and school personnel, and the school and district should implement safeguards to prevent such disclosures.

“I am not out to classmates, teachers, or at school because I have tried with a few, only to be ridiculed and pretty much marked as an outcast. Now that I’ve switched schools I have no intentions of having anyone know [that I am transgender].”

– Participant
HRC Foundation 2012 Youth Survey

Some students and families want to be more open with the school and community about the transition process, which could include, for example, sending a letter home to parents or setting aside time during a class period for the student to discuss their plan for a gender transition. Others may prefer to share this private information with a select group of people to ensure that the student has a support network at school. Regardless of how private a student or family ask the school to keep this information, that decision does not prevent the student from discussing their gender identity openly and deciding when, with whom, and how much to share.

Privacy and confidentiality are critically important for transgender students who do not have supportive families. In those situations, even inadvertent disclosures could put the student in a potentially dangerous situation at home, so it is important to have a plan in place to help avoid any mistakes or slip-ups. For a further discussion of supporting a transgender student with unsupportive parents, please refer to Chapter Five.

See Appendix D for forms that can provide a framework for the transition planning process in school.
Public Transitions

With a public transition, it is important to remember that the student is undergoing an incredibly personal experience; few youth want to be the center of attention, particularly for such a private matter. By working proactively, parents and caregivers, educators and school officials can help protect the student's right to feel safe from others' comments, questions or rumors and allow the student to preserve their dignity and privacy.

The school should be prepared for genuinely innocent confusion or uncertainty that may come up from members of the school community and set clear boundaries about what is appropriate to say to the student or their family. The school, student and family team must strike a delicate balance of providing education about gender diversity in general while still honoring the student's right to and need for privacy. Again, in schools that have proactively worked to be more gender inclusive, a student's transition will occur in a larger context of understanding and acceptance.

Schools must also be able to respond to negative reactions to a student's public gender transition. The larger community can subject these students and their families to ignorant intrusions and even outright hostility. But schools are uniquely positioned to serve as a buffer to protect students and their families.

Without speaking about the specific student, educators, administrators and other school staff can use these talking points to respond to questions or negative reactions from the school community:

- “I know this is new territory for many of us. Sometimes change is really challenging. Perhaps I can share some information with you about gender identity and transgender people?”

- “I can assure you that the safety, well-being and education of all students remain our highest priorities.”

- “Of course I can’t talk about any individual student, just as I would never talk about your child.”

- “Schools have always worked to support the needs of individual students in a variety of ways. Like we have always done, we are committed to supporting all of our students.”

- “Imagine if this was another type of student need that other people weren’t comfortable with, how would you respond?”
It is important to keep in mind that many negative reactions boil down to a lack of knowledge or familiarity with the idea of transgender people, particularly transgender youth. While a public transition might make others (including you) feel uncomfortable, that discomfort does not outweigh the student’s need to be safe and supported.

Some parents who oppose the school’s decision to support and affirm transgender students may involve local media to pressure the school and district to reverse course. The school or district can choose not to respond to media inquiries. If the school or district decides to respond, however, school officials can also use the talking points above or in Appendix C to respond to a media story.

Schools or districts should not discourage transgender students or their families from a public transition simply because it requires additional contingency planning. Public transition may be a better option in cases where the student has a strong support network of peers and teachers, a desire to be open about their transgender status or wants to participate in specific extracurricular activities. Regardless of whether a student’s transition is public or private, the school or district must be prepared for a variety of contingencies that could occur.

**Private Transitions**

When a student transitions privately, very few adults may be aware of the situation. While some school personnel may want (or believe they have a right) to know the student’s transgender status, the goal for many students and their families is to simply be another kid on campus and not “that transgender student.” In fact, the opportunity to have a school experience that is not dominated by this single aspect of the child’s life can be very affirming for a transgender student.

If an administrator or educator believes it is important for a particular person to know the student’s transgender status, they should raise that concern during the planning process.
Ultimately, it must be the student’s (and when possible, the family’s) decision about whether, when and to whom they will reveal this personal information.

Once that decision is made, administrators and educators should offer to assist the student or family in making any disclosures. For example, the family may want to make the disclosure themselves, but have the school administrator facilitate the meeting (i.e., invite the school staff person to the meeting or host the meeting in the administrator’s office).

Even in circumstances where a student’s transgender status appears to be completely private, with no conceivable way for others to find out, the school, family and student must anticipate that privacy may somehow be inadvertently compromised in a number of ways, including through social media or from a peer whom the transgender student knew prior to their transition. A transgender student might also choose to expand the circle of their friends who are aware of their transgender status, so it is important to plan as if every transition will have a public component. These realities underscore the importance of establishing a collaborative, intentional and ongoing process for supporting a transgender student throughout their transition.
Chapter Four
Key Elements & Practical Tips

Schools must continue to support students beyond their transition to ensure that the school environment remains a safe and supportive place to learn. Ultimately, the school environment must be set up so that transgender girls are treated like all other girls and transgender boys like all other boys. For many people, particularly adults, that notion challenges societal assumptions about the immutability of gender, so implementing these supports can seem daunting. But experience has shown that supporting these students is not only possible, but creates a safer and more inclusive environment for all students. This section will discuss the most common and foundational supports transgender students need in school and provide practical steps to implement them.

Student Records & Student Information Systems

The school’s student information system typically uses the student’s name and gender as reflected on their birth certificate. As a result, when a student transitions at school, there are a great many ways in which a student’s incorrect name or sex assigned at birth may inadvertently appear on documents generated by those systems.

Processes like enrollment, taking attendance, assigning grades and communicating with parents and caregivers can all easily compromise the student’s privacy and undermine an otherwise supportive school environment. For example, a substitute teacher simply calling out names from the attendance sheet, which typically lists each student’s legal name, can inadvertently disclose the student’s transgender identity to their peers. Other typical stumbling points include after-school programs, school photos, outside professionals providing a service on campus, yearbooks, ID cards, posted lists, library cards, lunch cards, distribution of texts or other school supplies and standardized tests. Even in the most supportive of school settings, simple bureaucratic oversights can cause real trauma for a transgender student.
Although a school’s recordkeeping and reporting requirements are often seen as a barrier to preventing those oversights, many school districts have found solutions that allow them to comply with those requirements while meeting their obligations to safeguard a transgender student’s privacy and right to learn in a safe and supportive school environment. The following are some examples of those solutions. This is by no means an exhaustive list and the viability of these solutions in any school depends on a variety of factors, including each state’s legal requirements for recordkeeping and student information systems. Examples of solutions include:

- Maintain a copy of the student’s birth certificate or other identity document that reflects the student’s name and sex as assigned at birth under lock and key in the principal’s office, while the student information system has the name and gender marker that correspond to the student’s gender identity.

- Allow the student to re-enroll in the school using a passport with the correct name and gender marker, or change the name and gender marker in the student information system to be consistent with the passport. If a student is a U.S. citizen and their family can afford the passport application fees, obtaining a passport that reflects the student’s gender identity is usually easier than changing that information on their birth certificate.

- Use the student’s chosen name and gender in the student information system, but switch it to the student’s legal name and gender just before uploading the information to the state department of education’s database. Schools that choose this approach pull that student’s testing booklet before it is distributed and correct the name and gender marker on the label to ensure that the student’s privacy and identity are respected.

- Create a uniform and public procedure at the district level that connects all electronic student databases and allows a student or their parent to fill out one form indicating the name and pronoun the student wishes to use. Some school districts have established such procedures to streamline the process and reduce the common bureaucratic barriers.

- Work with the student information system provider to develop a field or screen that would allow the district to maintain the student’s legal and chosen name, but that would use the chosen name to populate attendance sheets, report cards, and other school-related documents.
It is important to note that transgender youth can experience many obstacles to correcting their identity documents. From the high cost of obtaining a court-ordered name change to states requiring transition-related surgery before correcting the gender marker on a birth certificate, barriers prevent students — particularly those in earlier grades — from obtaining identity documents that reflect their true selves. Consequently, school and district personnel must develop policies and protocols for inputting the correct information into the student information system regardless of the student’s legal name or gender marker.

Names & Pronouns

“When someone with the authority of a teacher describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.”

— Adrienne Rich

A person’s name and pronouns are an important part of that individual’s identity. In many ways, they define how someone is perceived and affect how they interact with others. In our everyday lives, we consistently make an effort to use a person’s chosen name and pronoun without even asking whether that is the person’s legal name or gender, let alone requiring proof. It is important to extend those same social courtesies to a transgender student.

Consistently using a transgender student’s chosen name and pronouns signals that the speaker is respecting and affirming the transgender student’s gender identity. When the speaker is an educator or administrator, using the student’s chosen name and pronoun also models and sets expectations for the school community. Although seemingly minor, these simple actions can have a profound effect on the student’s experience. Conversely, intentionally using a transgender student’s prior name and associated pronouns will make that student feel unsafe and unwelcome, and will interfere with their ability to learn.

While this guide focuses primarily on transgender youth who are transitioning from male to female or female to male, it is important to note that a growing number of gender-expansive youth are identifying themselves outside the gender binary, and many use gender-neutral pronouns. While it may be more difficult to adapt to gender-neutral pronouns, it is still important to do so in support of the student.

See Appendix B for more information and examples of gender neutral pronouns.
Dress Codes

Transgender students have the right to dress in a manner consistent with their gender identity or gender expression as long as the student’s attire complies with the school- or district-wide dress code. If the school or district has a specific dress code for boys and girls, a transgender student must be allowed to wear the clothing that corresponds to their gender identity, regardless of their assigned sex at birth, the gender designated on their birth certificate or other legal documents.

Sex-Separated Facilities, Activities & Programs

“I’ve had people try to throw me out of bathrooms or locker rooms and even had school authorities try to write me up for using a female restroom.”

– Participant
HRC Foundation 2012 Youth Survey

Another crucial element in supporting a transitioning student is giving them access to sex-separated facilities, activities or programs based on the student’s gender identity. Restrooms, locker rooms, health and physical education classes, competitive athletics, overnight field trips, homecoming court and prom are just some of the explicitly gendered spaces that tend to be the most controversial because they require us to re-examine our beliefs about who belongs in those spaces. This can be challenging for everyone involved. The following discussion seeks to bring people beyond those initial visceral reactions, provide tools to help guide others through that same process and lead to the creation of a school culture that values gender diversity and respect for all students.
Restrooms & Locker Rooms

Every day, students in California, Colorado, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts and Washington — and at scores of individual schools across the nation — attend schools that respect and affirm transgender students by providing them access to the restrooms and locker rooms that match their gender identity. The experiences of these schools demonstrate that implementing such a policy is not only possible, but that it does not create the problems that some fear it will.

In early 2015, Media Matters for America contacted officials at the largest school districts in 12 states that have laws protecting transgender students, and not a single one reported “any incidences of harassment or inappropriate behavior” as a result of “allowing transgender students to access facilities they’re comfortable with.”\textsuperscript{10} This is not surprising given that schools have permitted all students to access restrooms and locker rooms based on gender identity for many years; it is, in fact, the norm throughout society to allow people to access those facilities without being asked to prove their gender. Enforcing any other type of policy would be unmanageable and invasive.

Providing transgender students with access to the restrooms and locker rooms that match their gender identity is yet another way that schools adjust to meet students’ individual needs. Typically the student, with or without their parents, will approach an administrator to request that the school give them access to the appropriate restroom and locker room. Generally, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of a student who asserts a transgender identity, and schools should accept the student’s identity without imposing additional requirements. Manipulative or insincere requests are likely to be easily discernible. If a school administrator has credible doubts about a student’s sincerity, however, they should document the concerns and request some documentation that the student has asserted a transgender identity in other settings. Again, this scenario is very unlikely to occur and school officials should avoid assuming the role of gatekeeper.
Although problems related to restroom and locker room use are unlikely to arise, parents, educators and school officials may raise concerns about some of the following “What ifs”:

**What if a student who identifies as male claims to be female just so he can enter the girl’s facilities?**

Restrooms and locker rooms can be a source of discomfort for everyone, not just transgender students, and it is incumbent on school officials to ensure that all students are safe in the school’s facilities. In schools that provide transgender students access to the facilities that accord with their gender identity, this has not been an issue. If male students do enter female facilities without permission (e.g., on a dare from a classmate), such behavioral issues are unrelated to and likely existed long before schools gave transgender students access to the facilities that matched their gender identity. More importantly, providing transgender students with access to restrooms and locker rooms based on gender identity does not hinder the school’s ability to address and prevent inappropriate student behavior.

**What if other students have privacy concerns about using a restroom with a transgender student?**

While this concern may seem understandable, it is often based on the false idea that a transgender boy is not a “real” boy, a transgender girl is not a “real” girl or that a transgender student wants access to those facilities for an improper purpose. Schools should attempt to address these and any other misconceptions that may be causing the student’s discomfort. In those conversations, it is important to remind students that behaving in a way that makes others uncomfortable is unacceptable and a violation of the school’s commitment to ensuring the safety of all students; but it must also be clear that a transgender student’s mere presence does not constitute inappropriate behavior. Any student who feels uncomfortable sharing facilities with a transgender student should be allowed to use another more private facility like the bathroom in the nurse’s office, but a transgender student should never be forced to use alternative facilities to make other students comfortable.
What if the restroom and locker room that correspond to the transgender student’s gender identity would not be safe for the transgender student?

If a student’s safety is a legitimate concern, administrators should not hesitate to discuss the topic, understanding that the objective is to respect the student’s gender identity and safety, not to convince the transgender student to rescind the request to use the facilities that match their gender identity. Potential solutions include permission to use the restroom during class time, increased teacher presence around restrooms between classes or a “buddy system.” For locker room access, options include placing the student’s locker near the coach’s office, setting up a privacy curtain or area in the locker room for any student to use or setting up a schedule so that the student can change before or after the other students. Again, a transgender student should never be forced or pressured into using alternate facilities just to make students or school personnel more comfortable. Such concerns are likely indicative of a broader issue with the school culture that may be making other students feel unsafe as well. Thus, in addition to addressing this concern with the transgender student, administrators should also identify ways to improve the school culture so that all students can feel safe in restrooms and locker rooms.

**Being uncomfortable is not the same as being unsafe and school officials have a responsibility to ensure the safety of all students.**

These key concepts — that respect for the transgender student should be the starting point, that being uncomfortable is not the same as being unsafe and that school officials have a responsibility to ensure the safety of all students — can be applied to any other “what ifs” that may arise when providing a transgender student access to the appropriate restroom and locker rooms.

Even with a strong and supportive school culture, some transgender students may still feel uncomfortable using restrooms or locker rooms and may seek an alternative that affirms their identity while also ensuring they are safe and comfortable. The best option would most likely be a single-stall facility, preferably one that is close to the student’s classes. It is important to discuss all possible options so that the student can make an informed choice. However, transgender students should never be forced to use a separate single-stall facility.

Students are constantly learning, growing, exploring boundaries and testing expectations. Inevitably, some students will make poor choices, and the school’s role is to ensure that they learn from these mistakes. It is also the school’s role to establish, articulate and enforce clear expectations about how students treat one another, including the boundaries of appropriate behavior in restrooms and locker rooms.
Overnight Field Trips

Overnight field trips are not only educational endeavors, but also important opportunities for social engagement. Making sure that a transgender student has access to both components of field trips requires some planning for issues like room assignments, chaperones and showers.

Once again, the concerns that typically arise in these instances are issues the school needs to consider for all of its students. Schools have an obligation to set clear expectations about respecting one another’s privacy and boundaries. Unlike the time they spend with one another in the hallways or classrooms, students share much closer quarters on field trips. Explicitly naming expectations about what it means to be in a communal environment is critically important and will improve all students’ experiences.

A transgender student’s comfort level with sleeping arrangements will largely dictate the manner in which related issues are addressed. If students are to be separated based on gender, then the transgender student should be allowed to room with peers that match their gender identity. As with any other students, the school should try to pair the transgender student with peers with whom the student feels comfortable. In some cases, a transgender student may want a room with fewer roommates or another alternative suggested by the student or their family. The school should honor these requests whenever possible and make adjustments to prevent the student from being marginalized because of those alternative arrangements. Regardless of whether those roommates know about the student’s gender identity, the school has an obligation to maintain the student’s privacy and cannot disclose or require disclosure of the student’s transgender status to the other students or their parents.

If showering facilities are communal, the school should find out whether the venue has any single stall or more private shower facilities that students can use. Recognizing that a number of students would likely prefer more privacy while showering, the school should consider creating a schedule to allow those students to use the shower facilities one at a time.

A large part of the learning experience on these field trips is social — late night conversations with roommates, long hours on the bus and being with one another for an extended period of time. There is also a possibility that during those unscheduled times students will make poor choices like playing practical jokes on other students or engaging in hazing behaviors; but these behaviors are not created by the presence of a transgender student and the school should be prepared to address such incidents in any event.
Competitive Sports Teams

Participating in sports teaches students many great skills and life lessons that will serve them well in the future. In order to ensure that transgender students are able to play sports, fifteen states — including California, Florida, Minnesota, South Dakota, and Washington — and the District of Columbia have adopted eligibility rules that explicitly permit transgender students to participate in school sports consistent with their gender identity. A growing number of other states athletic associations are considering similar policies.

**Focusing on the perceived differences between males and females too often obscures the fact that there is great variation even among cisgender males and among cisgender females.**

Even in states whose athletic associations do not have a written policy or rule on this topic, schools and districts should allow transgender students to compete on athletic teams based on gender identity. Unfortunately, schools often erroneously believe that a transgender student, particularly a transgender girl, will have a competitive advantage over the other players and therefore should not be allowed to compete on the team that matches their gender identity. Concerns regarding competitive advantage are unfounded and often grounded in sex stereotypes about the differences and abilities of males versus females.¹¹

Focusing on the perceived differences between males and females too often obscures the fact that there is great variation among cisgender males and among cisgender females. Moreover, the very small numbers of transgender student-athletes who have benefitted from transgender-inclusive eligibility rules have integrated well within the size and skill level of their teammates, such that there has not been any concern with competitive advantage. Thus, while a transgender girl may have been assigned male at birth, she still falls within the wide range of athletic abilities of her female peers.

Similarly, the participation of transgender student-athletes does not compromise their safety or that of other student-athletes. The safety rules of each sport are designed to protect players of all sizes and skill levels and adequately neutralize any concerns regarding the safety of transgender and cisgender student-athletes.

Some schools and athletic associations may require a transgender student to receive a particular type of medical treatment, sometimes including genital surgery, to participate on sports teams that align with their gender. Increasingly, transgender youth are transitioning before puberty and, as part of their transition, taking medication that prevents their body from going through the wrong puberty, which means that — with the exception of their reproductive organs — transgender students are just like their cisgender peers, including their hormone levels. Although delaying puberty is becoming more common, there are still many transgender youth who are unable to access any transition-related care due to cost, lack of insurance coverage and unavailability of competent providers, especially in rural areas.
Health & Physical Education Classes

For a variety of reasons, some schools maintain sex-separated health and physical education classes. Part of integrating a transgender student into the school environment is to place them in the classes that match their gender identity. Particularly in cases where a transgender student wants to transition privately, enrolling them in the wrong health or physical education classes would immediately disclose their transgender status to their peers, which could increase the likelihood that they will be harassed and bullied. Transgender students frequently cite the lack of locker room access as a key factor in their inability to fully participate in physical education courses, which can create a barrier to meeting graduation requirements.

“\textquotequote{I have been harassed and beaten at school. This whole high school thing would be much easier if I were cisgender and straight.}\textquotequote”

– Participant
HRC Foundation 2012 Youth Survey

Homecoming, Prom & Other School Traditions

School traditions are important to many students, and transgender students are no exception. Schools should allow transgender students to participate in all school traditions, including sex-separated traditions, in the gender category that matches their gender identity. For transgender students who want to be seen by peers as their authentic selves, participating in traditions like running for homecoming or prom king or queen can be very affirming. Educators need only look to the growing number of schools where students have elected their transgender classmates to fill those roles for proof of the positive impact on the whole school community. Allowing transgender students to participate in these traditions not only provides them validation from the school, but also from their peers.
Discrimination, Harassment & Bullying

It is the responsibility of each school and district to ensure that transgender and gender-expansive students have a safe school environment, which includes ensuring that any incident of discrimination, harassment or violence is thoroughly investigated, appropriate corrective action is taken and students and staff have access to appropriate resources. Complaints alleging discrimination or harassment based on a person’s actual or perceived transgender status or gender expression should be handled in the same manner as any other discrimination or harassment complaints.

While all school districts should have nondiscrimination and harassment policies that cover gender identity, policies alone are not enough. Districts must also address bullying and harassment with research-based interventions. Research has shown that punitive policies requiring actions that remove students from their educational environments — such as “zero tolerance” policies that rely on suspension and expulsion — are detrimental to overall school climate. Instead of changing behavior, suspension and expulsion reinforce negative behavior and often harm the students these policies are meant to protect, because they are used disproportionately against LGBTQ students, students of color and students with disabilities. What this means in practice is that the LGBTQ student who fights back against bullying is more likely to be punished than the student who is the aggressor. Restorative justice programs and positive behavior interventions and supports are two examples of alternative discipline approaches that improve school climate and address the root cause of bullying and harassment. The most effective way to reduce bullying is to create a school-wide culture of inclusion and respect for difference.

Endnotes


Chapter Five
Complex Issues

This section offers guidance on some of the more complex circumstances that may arise around students transitioning in schools.

Unsupportive Parents or Caregivers

Unfortunately, transgender youth experience high levels of family rejection. Lack of family support can have a detrimental effect on their short- and long-term mental health and well-being. Research on family rejection of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth has shown that “high levels of parental pressure to try to change an adolescent’s gender expression to enforce gender conformity is related to high levels of depression, a nearly four times greater likelihood of attempted suicide and illegal drug use, and being more than twice as likely to put oneself at high risk for HIV.” These findings are also applicable to transgender youth who also experience high rates of family rejection for the same reasons families often reject lesbian, gay and bisexual youth — namely their inability to conform to stereotypes associated with their sex assigned at birth.

“I am only out to people at school, because if I tell my family I won’t be accepted.”

– Participant
HRC Foundation 2012 Youth Survey

Schools can play a critical role in alleviating the psychological distress caused by family rejection. The school environment may be the only place a transgender student feels safe enough to be themselves. Having a safe place to learn is just as important, if not more so, for transgender students who do not have supportive parents as it is for those who do.
In these situations, the transgender student will often seek out an administrator or educator for support. Whenever a transgender student initiates this process, the educator or administrator should ask whether the student's family is accepting in order to avoid inadvertently putting the student at risk of greater harm by discussing with the student's family. Based on that information, the school and student should determine how to proceed through the collaborative process of figuring out how the school can support the student and balance the student’s need to be affirmed at school with the reality that the student does not have that support at home.

This process should address the following basic topics and situations:

- The modifications or accommodations the student is seeking (e.g., use of different name, pronouns and sex-separated facilities).
- How to refer to the student when communicating with the student’s parents or caregivers, both in writing and verbally.
- How to refer to the student when communicating with the student’s siblings.
- What information to share with the student’s teachers and other adults on campus.
- How to address questions from peers (if student's transgender status is not private).
- Services the school can provide to assist the student in coping with the lack of support at home.

Addressing the student’s needs at school provides a great short-term solution; but where possible, the goal should be to support the student’s family in accepting their child’s gender identity and seek opportunities to foster a better relationship between the student and their family. A parent’s initial negative reaction to indications that their child might be transgender is likely based on inaccurate or incomplete information about gender identity or out of fear for what this will mean for their child's future. Such reactions often come from a place of love and protection, and are not intended to harm their child — rejection can be a misguided attempt at protection. Learning that transgender youth experience these behaviors as rejection, and that these behaviors can have serious consequences for their children, often helps families change their behaviors.

Schools can assist the process of family acceptance in a myriad of ways, including arranging a safe space for the student to disclose their gender identity to their parents, providing counseling services for the whole family or connecting them to local resources or other parents of transgender or gender-expansive youth. As part of this effort, it is important to educate the student's family members about the serious consequences of refusing to affirm their child's gender identity. Sharing observations from school personnel that highlight the effects rejection has had on the student may also help encourage parents to begin moving toward acceptance.
Parents Who Disagree about Affirming Their Child’s Gender Identity

The psychological distress caused by family rejection is compounded when parents disagree about affirming their child’s gender identity, particularly if this conflict has come up in the context of a divorce or custody battle. As in cases with two unsupportive parents, this scenario does not mean that the school cannot make any efforts to help the student, but it does require balancing the student’s short- and long-term needs.

A parent seeking a change in custody must at least demonstrate that their request is in the best interests of the child. This standard is flexible and allows family court judges to craft custody arrangements that meet the needs of each child. Unfortunately, the dynamics sometimes created by custody disputes can obscure how to best achieve that goal. Moreover, the court’s unfamiliarity with the needs of transgender youth can make this process even more difficult. By educating courts about transgender youth and the current standards of care, parents have been increasingly able to demonstrate to judges that supporting and affirming a child’s gender identity is in the child’s best interest.

The emotional pain of the parents’ breakup and a lack of trust between them often leads the non-affirming parent to believe the affirming parent is either not telling the truth about their child’s needs, or using this issue to drive a wedge between them and their child. Even a parent who is not affirming of their child’s gender identity is likely acting out of love for their child and wants what is best for them. Thus, it is best to allow neutral professionals like educators to assess and identify the child’s needs and recommend a course of action to address them.

The first step in the process of defusing these situations is to meet with the parents, either individually or together, and explain the effect this conflict is having on their child based on the observations of school personnel. For the non-affirming parent, this conversation is also an opportunity for them to discuss the reasons why they do not accept their child’s gender identity. Any school personnel attending that meeting should listen to those reasons without judgment, calmly respond to the questions or concerns the parent may have and educate them on the harm caused by family rejection.
If the school has observed a significant change in the student’s performance, attitude or behavior based on having transitioned — or having been prevented from doing so — this is important information that the school can provide to the parents. Lastly, school personnel should provide clear, preferably written, recommendations to the parents outlining how the school would like to meet their child’s needs and help them succeed. This process will help foster a collaborative working relationship between the school and the non-affirming parent, and building that parent’s trust may also make up for the lack of trust between the parents.

Educators and school administrators can also provide the family with referrals to local resources like knowledgeable mental health or medical providers, support groups and local nonprofits. Ideally, those local resources will complement any services or supports being provided directly by the school.

School officials interact with the student on a daily basis and focus on supporting the student’s growth and development, which gives school personnel unique insight into the student’s needs.

Learning about and understanding the needs of transgender youth takes time, so this process may require several meetings. The school should follow up with the student regularly to check in, offer further assistance and support, and if appropriate, inform them about the status of discussions with their parents. By finding solutions that facilitate a family reaching consensus, the school is helping to create a safe and supportive environment where transgender students can flourish academically and socially.

If the parents are unable to resolve the dispute amicably, it is possible that an educator or school administrator may be called to testify in court.

School officials interact with the student on a daily basis and focus on supporting the student’s growth and development, which gives school personnel unique insight into the student’s needs without the biases parents can or are perceived to have. Sharing the school’s experiences with the student before and after the student began identifying as transgender can help highlight to the judge the importance of affirming the student’s gender identity. Describing the academic, social or emotional changes that school personnel observed will strengthen the testimony and give the judge a fuller understanding of the child’s needs and what would be in that child’s best interests.

A parent’s negative reaction to a child’s gender often comes from a place of love and protection, and is not intended to harm the child — rejection can be a misguided attempt at protection.
Developing an IEP or 504 Plan for a Transgender Student

Special education laws create a mechanism for accommodating the needs of students who are experiencing difficulty in school. That difficulty does not have to be solely academic; it can include social and emotional well-being and development. Given the psychological distress that some transgender youth experience, these laws provide a potential tool for families and schools to address a transgender student’s unique needs and create an environment where the student can succeed. It is important to note that while transgender students may be eligible for special education because of their gender dysphoria, many transgender students will qualify because of the anxiety, depression and other forms of psychological distress caused by not having their gender identities affirmed in all aspects of their lives.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) are the two main special education laws. IDEA governs the creation and implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and Section 504 establishes the rules for Section 504 Plans. Although these laws serve similar purposes, the level of supports, services and accommodations a school must provide to meet its legal obligations under IDEA tend to be higher, which translates into more legal protections for students than under Section 504. A student also must be experiencing more significant difficulties in school to qualify for an IEP.

Parents and schools often shy away from invoking special education laws because of misconceptions like the belief that a student with an IEP must be placed in separate, specialized classes. In fact, special education laws require that a student be placed in general education classes unless there is a compelling reason to place that student in a different educational setting. These laws are designed to counteract the effects of social, emotional and academic difficulties that are hindering a student’s progress. By providing supports, services and accommodations, special education laws expand transgender students’ future opportunities and help them get back on the path to success.
Through a special education plan, schools can provide basic accommodations like use of the student’s chosen name and access to the appropriate restrooms. The IEP or Section 504 Plan can also account for other needs like stress breaks throughout the school day to help reduce anxiety. Even when the school is fully supportive of a transgender student, having an IEP or Section 504 Plan in place will help ensure that the student receives a consistent level of support throughout any changes in school or district administration, even if the student moves to another school or district.

One potential drawback to creating an IEP or Section 504 Plan is that it creates another school record that could inadvertently disclose a student’s transgender status, so as with any other educational records, parents and school officials must make sure it remains private. Another issue to consider is that some students feel stigmatized by the association with special education and by having a legally defined disability. Again, it is important to reiterate that although transgender students may be eligible under special education laws because of their gender dysphoria, they may also be eligible because of the anxiety, depression and other issues that may be caused by not having their gender identity affirmed. Whether the potential feeling of stigma outweighs the benefits of having the IEP or Section 504 Plan is a decision that the student, educators, parents and caregivers should consider as a team, with the parents and student making the final decision.

See Appendix E for more information on the special education assessment and eligibility process.

Endnotes


15 Depending on the circumstances and the particular state’s laws, the parent seeking to change the arrangement may have a higher burden such as demonstrating that refusing to change the current custody arrangement will result in detriment to the child.

16 Nevertheless, it is always important to consult with an attorney experienced in these types of cases. Parents in this situation are encouraged to reach out to the National Center for Lesbian Rights, American Civil Liberties Union, or other LGBT legal advocacy group, in addition to a local family law attorney.

17 Any parents in this situation are strongly advised to reach out to the National Center for Lesbian Rights, American Civil Liberties Union, or other LGBT legal advocacy group for information and assistance in navigating these difficult legal issues.
Chapter Six

The Legal Landscape

As noted throughout this publication, there are many reasons for all of a school’s stakeholders to collaborate and create a more gender-inclusive school environment. However, this publication would be incomplete without a discussion of the various federal and state laws that protect students in schools, including transgender students. Each of the different laws mentioned in this subsection provide transgender students with a layer of protection. Because of variations in state laws, students from some states may have more layers of protection than others. But, regardless of which protections exist in a given school district, all students need to be able to attend school in a learning environment that is safe, supportive and free from discrimination.

Schools will find it increasingly difficult to defend discrimination against transgender students

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX) is a federal law that prohibits discrimination based on sex in any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. Courts have recognized that Title IX’s prohibition on sex discrimination encompasses protections against discrimination and harassment on the basis of failure to conform to sex stereotypes and gender identity. Consistent with that interpretation, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) filed a Statement of Interest in G.G. v. Gloucester County School Board, a lawsuit filed on behalf of a transgender student seeking to enforce his right to use the boys’ facilities at school.
In the filing, the Department of Justice concluded that, “prohibiting a student from accessing the restrooms that match his gender identity is prohibited sex discrimination under Title IX.” The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has also enforced Title IX to require school districts to treat transgender students in accordance with their gender identity, even in the context of sex-separated spaces such as restrooms, locker rooms and overnight field trips.

Most recently, in July 2015, DOJ and OCR approved an equity and nondiscrimination policy for transgender students developed by the Arcadia Unified School District, which was created in response to a complaint filed by a transgender student in the district. That policy affirms that transgender students must be treated in accordance with their gender identity, even with regards to sex-separated facilities and activities. It also includes privacy protections and clear guidance that “[t]he responsibility for determining an individual’s gender identity rests with the individual,” among other important protections. In a nutshell, Title IX requires all federally funded schools and programs to respect and affirm a transgender student’s gender identity in every aspect of the school.

**Family Educational Rights & Privacy Act**

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is another federal law that provides protections to transgender students. FERPA prohibits schools from releasing “personally identifiable information,” such as the student’s name, without the permission of the parent or student, if the student is over 18 years old. The definition of “personally identifiable information” also applies to any information that would allow a person in the school community to identify the student. Although FERPA does give school personnel discretion to discuss student information among themselves where there is a “legitimate educational purpose,” sharing a student’s transgender identity will rarely meet that requirement.

**State Anti-Discrimination Laws**

Transgender students are also protected from discrimination in school by state anti-discrimination laws. Fourteen states and the District of Columbia explicitly prohibit discrimination based on gender identity in schools. However, even states that do not have explicit protection against gender identity discrimination may prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, which — like Title IX — could also cover transgender students.
Transgender students have also been able to obtain protection through state anti-discrimination laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability. Courts have interpreted state anti-discrimination laws to require schools to respect and affirm students’ gender identity in all aspects of the educational experience. The cases involved access to appropriate facilities as well as other issues that affect transgender students, including harassment and dress code enforcement.

**Federal & State Constitutional Protections**

The final layers of protection are rooted in the United States Constitution’s rights to free speech, privacy and equal protection, which are particularly important for transgender students. For example, a school cannot restrict a transgender student’s appearance beyond the dress code unless the student’s appearance causes a “substantial disruption” at school, which is a very high burden to meet. Similarly, schools must evenhandedly apply school rules to transgender and cisgender students and cannot use sex stereotypes to justify treating transgender and cisgender students differently. Thus, schools cannot legally require a transgender girl to comply with the boys’ dress code, nor can a school ignore complaints of harassment reported by transgender students while investigating the complaints of other students or discipline a transgender student more harshly than a cisgender student for breaking the same school rule.

Notably, many state constitutions have articles or sections that mirror federal constitutional protections. In certain cases, the courts in those states have interpreted those provisions to offer more protection than granted under the United States Constitution.

Regardless of how many legal protections a particular student may have, courts look at best practices and the reasonableness of the school’s conduct to determine whether a student’s rights have been violated. As evidenced by the best practices outlined in this publication and data detailing the harm caused by refusing to affirm and respect a transgender student’s gender identity, schools will find it increasingly difficult to defend discrimination against transgender students. Instead, schools should collaborate with students, parents and other stakeholders to create a safe and supportive school environment for all students. That approach is not only likely to be cost-efficient, but more importantly, is consistent with the mission of schools to foster social, emotional and academic growth and well-being.
Endnotes


22 Id. at 3.


26 34 C.F.R. § 99.3.

27 34 C.F.R. § 99.31(a).

28 California, CAL. EDUC. CODE § 220; Colorado, COLO. REV. STAT. ANN. § 24-34-601; Connecticut, CONN. GEN. STAT. ANN. § 10-15c; Delaware, DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 6, § 4503; Illinois, 775 ILL. COMP. STAT. ANN. § 5/5-102; Iowa, IOWA CODE § 216.9; Maine, ME. REV. STAT. ANN. tit. 5, § 4592; Massachusetts, MASS. GEN. LAWS c.76, § 5; Minnesota, MINN. STAT. ANN. § 363A.13; Nevada, Nev. REV. STAT. § 651.070; New Jersey, N.J. STAT. ANN. 10:5-4; Oregon, ORE. REV. STAT. ANN. § 659.850; Vermont, VT. STAT. ANN. tit. 9, § 4502; Washington, WASH. REV. CODE ANN. § 28A.642.010; and the District of Columbia, D.C. CODE ANN. § 2-1402.41. See also Doe v. Reg’T Sch. Unit 26, 86 A.3d 600 (Me. 2014) (holding that Maine’s anti-discrimination law prohibits schools from requiring a transgender student from using a single-sex restroom as opposed to the restroom consistent with the student’s gender identity).

30 Tinker v. Des Moines Indep. Cnty. Sch. Dist., 393 U.S. 509 (1969) (finding students protesting the Vietnam War by wearing black armbands did not meet that standard); Boyd Cnty. Gay Straight Alliance v. Bd. of Educ. of Boyd Cnty., 258 F. Supp. 2d 667 (E.D. Ky. 2003) (holding a student boycott protesting the formation of a GSA was not a substantial disruption and could not justify restricting First Amendment rights of students wanting to participate in the GSA); Chambers v. Babbitt, 145 F. Supp. 2d 1068 (D. Minn. 2001) (ruling an increase in physical fights caused by heightened tensions in the school were not a substantial disruption because the fights were unrelated to the student's speech).

31 Doe v. Yunits, 15 Mass. L. Rptr. 278, at *4-6.

32 Flores v. Morgan Hill Unified Sch. Dist., 324 F.3d 1130 (9th Cir. 2003) (finding school district violated gay students' rights by treating discrimination against them differently from discrimination against straight students); Nabozny v. Podlesny, 92 F.3d 446, 453-58 (7th Cir. 1996) (finding school district violated a gay student's rights by failing to investigate his complaints of sexual harassment despite otherwise conducting investigations into complaints of sexual harassment by straight, cisgender students).

33 See, e.g., State v. Veale, 972 A.2d 1009, 1014 (N.H. 2009); N.M. Right to Choose/NARAL v. Johnson, 975 P.2d 841, 851 (N.M. 1998); People v. Ellis, 57 Ill.2d 127, 132-33 (Ill. 1974). This is particularly true in the context of the right to privacy. See, e.g., State v. Ellis, 351 Mont. 95, 101 (Montana 2009); State v. J.P., 907 So.2d 1101, 1112 (Fla. 2004); Anchorage Police Dep't Employees Ass'n v. Municipality of Anchorage, 24 P.3d 547, 550 (Alaska 2001).
Conclusion
Creating an Affirming School for All

Just as a transgender youth’s transition is a journey, so too is the process of supporting that transition and creating an affirming school environment for them.

The amount of information in this guide may seem daunting, but looking at the process of supporting transgender students wholistically, everything boils down to the basic principle that students can and should be supported and able to attend schools where their authentic gender is recognized and honored.

This publication is the result of hard work by educators, parents and advocates who have worked through processes like this before with little or no guidance. The approaches we have suggested have repeatedly proven effective. Planning is essential, but that doesn’t mean the process of supporting a transgender student will be without its challenges, anticipated or otherwise. While educators are on the front lines of this effort, the ultimate success of the student’s experience rests on the ability of all the stakeholders to work together. Just as a transgender youth’s transition is a journey, so too is the process of supporting that transition and creating an affirming school environment for them. And the process is ongoing, as new situations can present themselves even years after a student has socially transitioned.

Whether you’re a teacher, counselor, administrator, parent or anyone else wanting to learn how to support transgender students more effectively, keep in mind that this process is doable. Working as a team, you can overcome any obstacle that arises, and in the end, you will have made a meaningful difference in not only the student’s life, but in the lives of their family, other students, educators and those in your community.
APPENDICES
Appendix A
Puberty & Medical Transition

At the onset of puberty, gender dysphoria can become incapacitating for transgender youth as their body begins to develop secondary sex characteristics that are inconsistent with their gender identity. These inconsistencies are also visible to peers. Transgender youth often take special precautions to hide their developing bodies with the hope of presenting to the outside world a body that is consistent with their gender identity. For example, a youth who identifies as male may use clothing and materials to flatten the contours of his chest. Those materials can be tight, constricting and uncomfortable; however, the dysphoria caused by not taking those additional precautions far outweighs the drawbacks.

It is around this time that transgender youth may begin to explore the possibility of a medical transition with their families and healthcare providers. Depending on the youth’s particular circumstances, they may begin taking medications that delay the physical changes associated with puberty. Those medications act as a pause button and give the youth an opportunity to explore their gender identity without the distress of developing the permanent, unwanted physical characteristics of their assigned sex at birth. During this time, the youth will work with their family and healthcare providers to develop a treatment plan, which may eventually include taking cross-sex hormones to induce a puberty that is consistent with their gender identity.

Many barriers exist to accessing these types of medical care and aspects of social transition (i.e., legal name change); in certain instances, transgender youth may choose not to take particular steps as part of their medical transition. Thus, it is critical to affirm the student’s expressed gender identity, regardless of what the student may or may not have done as part of their transition.
Many transgender students will adopt the gender pronouns associated with their gender identity, but a growing number are using gender-neutral pronouns. Below is a chart with a few examples of commonly used pronouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>She, her, hers</td>
<td>This is my friend Sam. <strong>She</strong> came to my house today. I borrowed a book from <strong>her</strong>. This book is <strong>hers</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>He, him, his</td>
<td>This is my friend Sam. <strong>He</strong> came to my house today. I borrowed a book from <strong>him</strong>. This book is <strong>his</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Neutral</td>
<td>They, them, their</td>
<td>This is my friend Sam. <strong>They</strong> came to my house today. I borrowed a book from <strong>them</strong>. This book is <strong>theirs</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Neutral</td>
<td>Ze, hir, hirs</td>
<td>(pronounced zee, hear, hears) This is my friend Sam. <strong>Ze</strong> came to my house today. I borrowed a book from <strong>hir</strong>. This book is <strong>hirs</strong>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Talking Points

The following talking points were developed by Gender Spectrum to aid educators in addressing the common questions and concerns that arise as schools work to develop more gender-inclusive environments for all students.
Responding to Concerns: Supporting Transgender Students

Why is the school making such a big deal about this? How many of these kids are there anyway?

- Of course I can’t talk about any individual students, just as I would never talk about your child. Personal information about our students, including their gender identity is private. But is there something we can do to help you or your child better understand gender-related issues?
- Many people don’t realize that gender-based discrimination is illegal under Title IX, and that gender is a protected class in many states and cities (just like race, religion or disability). Unfortunately, these protections are necessary because transgender and other gender-expansive students frequently face a great deal of discrimination from other students, staff and community members.
- Organizations such as the PTA, the NEA, the California School Board Association and many other associations for administrators, counselors, and other educational professionals have written clear guidelines about the need to make sure that transgender and other gender-expansive students are safe at school.
- I know this is new territory for many of us. Sometimes change is really challenging. Perhaps I can share some information with you about this issue?

Who is protecting my child?

- What are the specific behaviors of another person that are making your child feel unsafe?
- I can assure you that the safety of all of the students at this school remains my highest priority. If your child is feeling unsafe, we need to know about it. Can you tell me about specific situations or occurrences that have taken place in which your child’s safety was at risk?
- Our expectation for all of our students is that they respect the privacy and physical boundaries of other students. If the behaviors of one student are making another student feel unsafe, that is an issue we take very seriously. Is something or someone behaving in a way that makes your child feel unsafe?
- How can we help your child to feel more comfortable? If for any reason your student needs additional support, such as a private space to change or use the restroom, we will work with you and your child to provide these.

So who decides if a student is transgender? What is to prevent a boy from coming to school one day and simply declaring that he is a girl and changing in the girl’s locker room?

- Schools have always worked to support the needs of individual students in a variety of ways. For any student who requires support related to gender, the school works very deliberately to provide the necessary services. This does not take place without a great deal of care and planning.
- Schools all over the country are supporting transgender students in these ways and this issue simply does not come up.
- A transgender student is very different from a young person who is claiming to be a different gender for some improper purpose. Transgender students are not trying to get away with something or make this up; why would they? Conversely, any student pretending to be transgender would be easily identified in the planning processes we have established.
- Our policy of treating transgender students consistent with their gender identity does not permit a student of the opposite sex to enter into the wrong facilities.

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Responding to Concerns: Teaching about Gender

Why should my child learn about gender at school?

- School is a place where children are taught to respect one another and to learn to work together regardless of their differences. Learning about gender diversity is part of that work. Creating a more tolerant, inclusive, and accepting school environment teaches all children to recognize and resist stereotypes. We teach children to stand up for others, to resist bullying, and to work together.
- We also know that many children whose gender is seen as different than what is expected of them can face very difficult circumstances. Too often teasing, bullying, and violence are common experiences for a gender-expansive child. A growing number of school districts and states (14 as of 2014) specifically prohibit bullying and harassment of students based on gender expression or identity. Furthermore, various federal, state and municipal laws protect students from discrimination because of their gender. Proactive education and training to help students understand gender diversity more fully helps school districts meet those legal obligations while working to create a safer, more supportive learning environment for all students.

Isn’t my child too young to be learning about gender?

- Children are already learning about it. Messages about gender are everywhere, and children receive very clear messages about the “rules” for boys and girls, as well as the consequences for violating them. By learning about the diversity of gender, children have an opportunity to explore a greater range of interests, ideas, and activities. For all children, the pressure of “doing gender correctly,” is greatly reduced, creating more space for them to discover new talents and interests.
- Whether in or out of school, children will encounter other children exhibiting wide ranges of gender expression. This is normal and, with a little reflection, we can all recognize it as something we encountered during our own childhoods. Tomboys or shy, sensitive boys are commonly recognized examples of children who buck societal expectations of gender expression. These children, and all children, deserve a safe, supportive learning environment in which they can thrive and empower themselves.

If you are talking about gender, aren’t you discussing reproduction and sexuality?

- The simple answer is “no.” When we discuss gender, we talk about what people like to wear, the activities they engage in, and how they feel about themselves. This is not sexuality. Sexuality involves physical intimacy and attraction. Gender is about self-identity. Gender identity is a person’s internal sense of where they fit on the gender spectrum. This includes all kids, “typically” gendered or not.
- If responding to questions that arise about physical sex, the discussion uses phrases such as “private parts,” and even if anatomical terms come up, nothing specific to human reproduction or sexuality is taught. For the most part, children are simply not raising these questions. While as adults, we struggle to separate the ideas of gender and sexuality (primarily because many were taught that they are one and the same), children have an ability to grasp the complexity of gender diversity because sexuality does not factor in to complicate their understanding.
Ideas about gender diversity go against the values we are instilling in my child at home. Are you trying to teach my child to reject these values?

- Absolutely not. Our children encounter people with different beliefs when they join any community. While one aim for learning about diversity is to become more accepting of those around us, not everyone is going to be best friends. That does not mean that they can’t get along and learn together. The purpose of learning about gender diversity is to demonstrate that children are unique and that there is no single way to be a boy or a girl. If a child does not agree with or understand another student’s gender identity or expression, they do not have to change how they feel inside about it. However, they also do not get to make fun of, harass, or harm other students whose gender identity they don’t understand or support. Gender diversity education is about teaching students to live and work with others. It comes down to the simple agreement that all children must be treated with kindness and respect.

Won’t my child get confused if we speak about more than two gender options?

- Experience show that, with enough information, children of any age are able to understand that there are more than the two gender categories currently recognized by our society. When it is explained to them in a simple, age appropriate manner, gender diversity is an easy concept for children to grasp.
- When you discuss gender with your child, you may hear them exploring where they fit on the gender spectrum and why. This shows that they understand that everyone may have some variation of gender expression that fits outside of stereotypical norms. Their use of language or their personal placements along this spectrum may surprise you. We encourage all parents to approach these discussions with an air of openness and inquiry.

Don’t gender-expansive kids have lots of problems? Is gender nonconformity a product of abuse, emotional problems, neglect, divorce, or detached, or over-involved parents?

- No. While it is true that some transgender and gender-expansive people do experience a tremendous amount of societal abuse and parental rejection, this is not the cause of their gender identity or expression. As a result, when not supported, children whose gender expression or identity is considered atypical often suffer from loneliness, lower self-esteem, and other negative feelings. Statistics reveal the devastating impact these youth face when placed into a non-supportive or hostile setting.
- A gender-expansive child’s emotional distress is a response to the mistreatment they have likely faced from those around them. It is not at all uncommon to see a gender-expansive or transgender child’s distress greatly reduce or disappear when they’re provided with a more positive environment.

Won’t allowing children to express non-traditional genders cause them to be teased or harassed?

- While there is a great deal of data suggesting that gender-expansive youth do face teasing, there is a growing body of knowledge that points to the impact gender-expansive education can have on reducing that treatment. If children are being treated badly because of who they are, the answer is not to try and prevent them from being themselves. Rather, we should instead ask what needs to be done to address the teasing. Providing educational programming and training that expands students’ understanding about stereotypes and limitations of self-expression can go a long way to preventing teasing.
Won’t discussing gender encourage my child to be transgender?
- Being transgender is not something that a person chooses. Studies show that although parents cannot make their child gay or transgender, they can deeply influence how their children feel about themselves. Parental pressure to enforce gender conformity can damage a child’s self-esteem and is a high predictor of negative health outcomes and risk-taking behaviors for youth. Transgender youth currently have an extremely high attempted suicide rate: some estimate it being as high as 50 percent. Discussing gender will have the effect of removing much of the pressure students face to fit into narrowly defined expectations that few if any can actually meet.

If transgender people are so “normal”, why are some families so private about it?
- A family with a transgender child will decide together how much they wish to share with others. Many transgender children prefer to live their lives as the gender that reflects their internal gender identity without using the word “transgender.” For example, the child would identify themselves as a girl or boy as opposed to a transgender girl or boy.
- Some children and families are open and share this with everyone in their lives. Others choose to maintain a sense of complete privacy, while still others find a blend of these two approaches. In most families, this decision will be determined jointly by the child and guardian(s), often in collaboration with a medical, mental health, or other professionals experienced in this area.
- If a family honors their child’s wish for privacy, this can have the appearance of secrecy. In reality, it may be an effort to avoid potential stigmatization or to simply keep a very personal topic private.

How can I correct or modify the impression I have already given my child about gender?
- It is powerful to let children know when we don’t know the answer to something, and to let them know that adults as well as children are always learning. Having conversations with your children that reflect your growing understanding is wonderful. It does not undermine your parenting. If you were to discover that you had unknowingly taught your child another form of misinformation about other people, you would correct the impression you had mistakenly given them. With gender it is no different. Gender diversity is something that both society and science are constantly exploring and understanding more deeply.

I don’t really feel like I know how to answer my child’s questions.
- Once again, explain that you are learning about this too. It is important, however, to monitor and understand your own feelings before you initiate this kind of conversation. Children can pick up on your feelings towards a subject. So, if you are still feeling uncomfortable about the concept of gender diversity, then consider taking additional time to increase your understanding. Read, talk to others, and further educate yourself. When you have a greater understanding and increased awareness, then you will likely feel more confident to talk with your children.
- Answer children’s questions simply, and let them take the lead in how deep the conversation goes. Most children are satisfied with this approach. They will guide the conversation from there and rarely ask the complex questions that occur to adults. You may be surprised at how simply children navigate this terrain. Some parents have found responses such as, “Hmmm, I am just learning about that myself. Let me tell you what I know, and then if you would like to learn more, maybe we could do that together,” to be helpful in opening up pathways for further discussion.
Appendix D
Gender Support Plan & Gender Transition Plan

On the following pages you will find printable forms you can use to plan the process of supporting transgender students. The Student Gender Support Plan is a broad tool that can be used to systematically address various aspects of a transgender or gender-expansive student’s experiences at school. It is designed to ensure that the school, student and parents (when appropriate) are all on the same page and have shared expectations about how the specific, gender-based needs of the student will be met. The Student Gender Transition Plan focuses specifically on the process a student will use to undergo a gender transition at school. It seeks to identify the various steps that will be taken as the student explicitly declares a shift in the manner in which they wish others to understand and recognize their gender.
– Confidential –
Gender Support Plan

The purpose of this document is to create shared understandings about the ways in which the student’s authentic gender will be accounted for and supported at school. School staff, caregivers and the student should work together to complete this document. Ideally, each will spend time completing the various sections to the best of their ability and then come together to review sections and confirm shared agreements about using the plan. Please note that there is a separate document to plan for a student’s formal gender transition at school.

### PARENT/GUARDIAN INVOLVEMENT

Are guardian(s) of this student aware and supportive of their child’s gender transition?  
- [ ] Yes  
- [ ] No

If not, what considerations must be accounted for in implementing this plan?

### CONFIDENTIALITY, PRIVACY AND DISCLOSURE

How public or private will information about this student’s gender be (check all that apply)?

- [ ] District staff will be aware (Superintendent, Student Support Services, District Psychologist, etc.)
  Specify the adult staff members:
- [ ] Site level leadership/administration will know (Principal, head of school, counselor, etc.)
  Specify the adult staff members:
- [ ] Teachers and/or other school staff will know
  Specify the adult staff members:
- [ ] Student will not be openly “out,” but some students are aware of the student’s gender
  Specify the students:
- [ ] Student is open with others (adults and peers) about gender
- [ ] Other – describe:

If the student has asserted a degree of privacy, what are expectations of the institution if that privacy is compromised? How will a teacher/staff member respond to questions about the student’s gender from:

- [ ] Other students?  

---

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Staff members?

Parents/community?

---

**STUDENT SAFETY**

Who will be the student’s “go to adult” on campus?

If this person is not available, what should student do?

What, if any, will be the process for periodically checking in with the student and/or family?

What are expectations in the event the student is feeling unsafe and how will student signal need for help:

- During class
- On the yard
- In the halls
- Other

Other Safety concerns/Questions:

---

**NAMES, PRONOUNS AND STUDENT RECORDS**

Name/gender marker entered into the Student Information System

Name to be used when referring to the student Pronouns

Can the student’s preferred name and gender marker be reflected in the SIS? If so, how?

If not, what adjustments can be made to protect this student’s privacy?

Who will be the point person for ensuring these adjustments are made and communicated as needed?

How will instances be handled in which the incorrect name or pronoun are used?

How will the student’s privacy be accounted for and maintained in the following situations or contexts:

- During registration
- Completing enrollment
- With substitute teachers
- Standardized tests
- School photos
- IEPs/Other Services
- Student cumulative file
- After-school programs
- Lunch lines
Taking attendance
Teacher grade book(s)
Official school-home communication
Unofficial school-home communication (PTA/other)
Outside district personnel or providers
Summons to office
Yearbook
Student ID/library cards
Posted lists
Distribution of texts or other school supplies
Assignment of IT accounts
PA announcements

If the student’s guardians are not aware and supportive of the child’s gender status, how will school-home communications be handled?

What are some other ways the school needs to anticipate information about this student’s preferred name and gender marker potentially being compromised? How will these be handled?

---

**USE OF FACILITIES**

Student will use the following restroom(s) on campus
Student will change clothes in the following place(s)
If student has questions/concerns about facilities, who will be the contact person?
What are the expectations regarding the use of facilities for any class trips?
What are the expectations regarding rooming for any overnight trips?
Are there any questions or concerns about the student’s access to facilities?

---

**EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

Does the student participate in an after-school program?
What steps will be necessary for supporting the student there?
In what extra-curricular programs or activities will the student be participating (sports, theater, clubs, etc)?
What steps will be necessary for supporting the student there?
Questions/Notes:
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Are there any specific social dynamics with other students, families or staff members that need to be discussed or accounted for?


Does the student have any sibling(s) at school? _______ Factors to be considered regarding sibling’s needs?


Does the school have a dress code? _______ How will this be handled?


Are there lessons, units, content or other activities coming up this year to consider (growth and development, social justice units, name projects, dance instruction, Pride events, school dances etc.)?


What training(s) will the school engage in to build capacity for working with gender-expansive students?


Are there any other questions, concerns or issues to discuss?


SUPPORT PLAN REVIEW AND REVISION

How will this plan be monitored over time?


What will be the process should the student, family, or school wish to revisit any aspects of the plan (or seek additions to the plan)?


What are specific follow-ups or action items emerging from this meeting and who is responsible for them?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Item</th>
<th>Who?</th>
<th>When?</th>
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Date/Time of next meeting or check-in____________________ Location _________________________
Gender Transition Plan

This document supports the necessary planning for a student’s formal transition of gender from its commonly assumed status to something else. Its purpose is to create the most favorable conditions for a successful experience, and to identify the specific actions that will be taken by the student, school, family, or other support providers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School/District</th>
<th>Today’s Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student’s Preferred Name</td>
<td>Legal Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student’s Gender</td>
<td>Assigned Sex at Birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Birth</td>
<td>Sibling(s)/Grade(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent(s)/Guardian(s)/Caregiver(s)</td>
<td>/ relation to student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is the nature of the student’s transition (male-to-female, female-to-male, a shift in gender expression, etc.)?

How urgent is the student’s need to transition? Is the child currently experiencing distress regarding their gender?

**PARENT/GUARDIAN INVOLVEMENT**

Are guardian(s) of this student aware and supportive of their child’s gender transition?  
___Yes  ___No

If not, what considerations must be accounted for in implementing this plan?

**INITIAL PLANNING MEETING**

When will the initial planning meeting take place?  Where will it occur?

Who will be the members of the team supporting the student’s transition?

- [ ] Student
- [ ] Parent(s)
- [ ] School Staff
- [ ] Other

**STUDENT TRANSITION DETAILS**

What is the specific information that will be conveyed to other students (be specific)?

What requests will be made?

---

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With whom and when will this information be shared?

- With peers in the transitioning student’s class only  
  Date: ________________
- With peers in the student’s grade level  
  Date: ________________
- With some/all students at school (specify)  
  Date: ________________
- Other (specify)  
  Date: ________________

Who will lead the lessons/activities framing the student’s announcement?

What will the lesson/activities be?

Will the student be present for the lesson/sharing of info about the transition? ________________
If yes, what if any role does the student want to play in the process? ________________

Once the information is shared, what parameters/expectations will be set regarding approaching the student?

Other notes, considerations or questions ________________

---

**KEY DECISIONS PRIOR TO STUDENT’S TRANSITION**

**Communications with Other Families**

Will any sort of information be shared with other families about the student’s transition? ________________

With whom:  
- _____ Families in child’s grade  
- _____ Whole School  
- _____ Other (specify)  

Who will be responsible for creating this? ________________  
When will it be sent? ________________

How will it be distributed? ________________  
Where will it be sent? ________________

What specific information will be shared*? ________________

Questions/Notes: ________________

* see sample letters

**Training for School Staff**

Will there be specific training about this student’s transition with school staff? ________________  
When? ________________

Who will be conducting the training? ________________  
What will be the content of the training? ________________

Questions/Notes: ________________
**Parent Information Night About Gender Diversity**

Will there be specific training for school community members? __________ When? ______________________

Who’ll conduct it? ______________________ Will it reference the student’s transition? ______________________

What will be the content of the training? ______________________

____________________

Questions/Notes: ______________________

____________________

**Class Meeting with Parents**

Will there be any meeting with the families of the transitioning student’s peers? ______ When? __________

Who will lead the meeting? __________ Who will be attending the meeting? __________

What will be the purpose for this meeting? ______________________

____________________

**Identifying and Enlisting Parent Allies**

Are there any parents/adults in the community you would like to enlist in support of the child’s transition? ______

If so, who? ______________________

When will you speak with them? __________ What will be your request? ______________________

____________________

Questions/Notes: ______________________

____________________

**Identifying and Enlisting Peer Allies**

Are there other students you would like to enlist in support of the child’s transition? ______________________

If so, who? ______________________

When will they be spoken with? __________ What requests will be made? ______________________

____________________

Questions/Notes: ______________________

____________________

**Siblings**

Does the student have any siblings at the school? _____ What needs to be considered for them?

Training in their classroom(s)? ______________________ Emotional Support? ______________________

____________________

Questions/Notes: ______________________

____________________
# TIMELINE

Which of the following will take place in relation to this student’s gender transition, and when will it occur and who will be responsible for making it happen?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lead</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Planning Meeting</td>
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<td>Lessons/Activities with Other Students</td>
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<td>Communications with Other Families</td>
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<td>Training for School Staff</td>
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<td>Parent Information Night About Gender Diversity</td>
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<td>Class Meeting with Parents</td>
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<td>Identifying and Enlisting Parent Allies</td>
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<td>Identifying and Enlisting Peer Allies</td>
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What are the specific follow-ups or action items emerging from this meeting and who is responsible for them?

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Appendix E
Assessing Transgender Students for Special Education

Determining whether a student qualifies for an IEP or Section 504 Plan typically involves an assessment. To ensure the assessment provides accurate results, the assessment must be conducted in a manner that affirms the student’s gender identity. Beyond referring to the student by their chosen name and pronouns, the assessor should become familiar with the literature on transgender youth. Having experience working with transgender youth can also help lead to a more accurate assessment of a transgender student’s needs. Lastly, the assessor must not recommend any supports, services or accommodations that are intended to change a student’s gender identity or otherwise shame them for who they are.34

In some instances, the student may be able to provide sufficient documentation of their unique needs in school to establish eligibility for special education, in which case the parents can forego the assessment process and start the process of creating the IEP or Section 504 Plan. Those documents can include letters from the student’s treating healthcare providers or records from education-related services the student is already receiving. This approach can be particularly beneficial if the student is experiencing significant levels of distress and the need is urgent.

After the assessments are complete, the school will gather a team that includes the student’s parents and educators to determine whether the student is eligible, and if so, what supports, services and accommodations the student needs. Eligibility under IDEA is guided by specific categories, each of which is defined in the law. The eligibility criteria for a Section 504 Plan are less stringent than IDEA and cannot consider the positive effects of “mitigating measures,” which include reasonable accommodations. Thus, a transgender student whose school has implemented all the accommodations and modifications that the student needs to ensure that their gender identity is affirmed and respected may still be eligible for a Section 504 Plan because without those changes the student would experience debilitating psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, school phobia) that would impair the student’s ability to learn.
The IEP or Section 504 Plan created by the team must be tailored to the transgender student’s unique needs, which may include any of the modifications and accommodations mentioned in this publication, as well as others. Incorporating those modifications and accommodations into the IEP or Section 504 Plan also ensures that the transgender student is in the “least restrictive environment,” a legal obligation that requires schools to educate students in general education to the greatest extent possible. Without the psychological distress associated with not having their gender identity affirmed, transgender students are just as capable as their peers to participate in and benefit from general education.

These same principles apply to transgender students who already have an IEP or Section 504 Plan. Regardless of the student’s other educational needs, respecting and affirming a transgender student’s gender identity is critical to their ability to learn and develop in school. Not including the modifications and accommodations needed to respect and affirm the student’s gender identity guarantees that the educational program created by the IEP or Section 504 team will fail to meet the school’s legal obligations to that student.

Endnotes

34 Programs or treatments intended to change someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity, commonly referred to as “conversion therapy” or “reparative therapy,” have been universally discredited by leading medical and psychological associations. See, e.g., American School Counselor Association, The Professional School Counselor and LGBTQ Youth (2014) (“Professional school counselors do not support efforts by licensed mental health professionals to change a student’s sexual orientation or gender as these practices have been proven ineffective and harmful.”); American Psychoanalytic Association, Position Statement on Attempts to Change Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, or Gender Expression (2012) (“Psychoanalytic technique does not encompass purposeful attempts to “convert,” “repair,” change or shift an individual’s sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Such directed efforts are against fundamental principles of psychoanalytic treatment and often result in substantial psychological pain by reinforcing damaging internalized attitudes.”); Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health Disparities: Executive Summary of a Policy Position Paper from the American College of Physicians (2015) (“The College opposes the use of ‘conversion,’ ‘reorientation,’ or ‘reparative’ therapy for the treatment of LGBT persons… Available research does not support the use of reparative therapy as an effective method in the treatment of LGBT persons. Evidence shows that the practice may actually cause emotional or physical harm to LGBT individuals, particularly adolescents or young persons.”). As a result, a growing number of states have banned the practice of conversion therapy on minors. See CAL. BUS. & PROF. CODE § 865 (2013); N.J. STAT. ANN. §§ 45:1-54 & 45:1-55 (2013); D.C. CODE §§ 7-123.01 & 7-123.14a (2015).
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(212) 549-2627
www.aclu.org/safeschools

Gender Spectrum
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San Leandro, CA 94577
(510) 788-4412
www.genderspectrum.org

Human Rights Campaign Foundation
1640 Rhode Island Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 347-5323
www.hrc.org

National Center for Lesbian Rights
870 Market St., Suite 370
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 392-6257
www.nclrights.org

National Education Association
1201 16th St., NW
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 833-4000
www.nea.org
“It’s important that we make room for this—for learning how to get along with one another—in our core curriculum ... ‘People skills’—being conscious of our cultural differences—is what makes businesses succeed and economies run. If we don’t do this, it’s a disservice to our students, to our country and to our world.”

—Amber Makaiau, ethnic studies teacher
Oahu, Hawaii
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Dear Educator,

Many of the questions we receive for our magazine column “Ask Teaching Tolerance” are from educators seeking advice about how to respond when someone—a student, a colleague, even a parent—uses biased language or stereotypes in school.

This booklet is our response. It’s for educators who want to develop the skills to speak up themselves and who want to help their students find the courage to speak up too.

What exactly is biased language, you might ask? Slurs, put-downs and other negative labels, of course. We know these can start as early as kindergarten when, for instance, a boy is teased about being “girly” because he likes dolls. And we’re all too familiar with the queasy feeling that comes when a colleague makes a joke that relies on stereotypes for its humor.

No single word covers all this ground. In this guide, we refer to it as biased language, and to the larger problem as bias. We know that many, if not most, of these remarks are said in ignorance, but that some reflect real hostility.

This guide is for the adults in the school. It offers advice about how to respond to remarks made by students and by other adults and gives guidance for helping students learn to speak up as well. We believe that modeling the kind of behavior we want from students is one of the most effective ways of teaching it.

We also know that schools are hierarchies, for the adults and for the students. So we’ve addressed the ways responding to bias might be affected by the power relationship involved. It’s relatively easy for a teacher to correct a student who’s used an ethnic slur, but quite uncomfortable—even fearful—to do so when the slur comes from a colleague, administrator or parent.

Finally, you’ll notice that we talk a lot about “moments” in this guide. We’re talking about the very short time that passes when somebody says something and you struggle with how, or even whether, you’ll respond. These moments are opportunities that must be acted on swiftly. We hope this guide provides you with practical ideas about how to respond to biased language in the moment, from any source, in any situation.

Maureen Costello
Teaching Tolerance Director
You’re tongue-tied.

Someone has said something biased that makes you uncomfortable, or even angry. You want to say something, but you’re not sure what to say.

It happens “almost daily,” one teacher relates. Maybe it’s one of your students. Or it’s a colleague. Or an administrator. And maybe you laugh along—a forced or awkward laugh—because you don’t want to be rude. You see students grappling with the same issues.

This guidebook offers tools and strategies to prepare you to speak up against prejudice, bias and stereotypes at school.

Because whoever it is, and wherever you are, there are ways to be ready for such moments, ways to make sure that you aren’t caught tongue-tied, ways to make sure that you don’t let hate have the last word.

NOTE
This is not an anti-bullying guidebook, though the strategies can be used to address some forms of bullying behavior. If you are implementing a specific anti-bullying curriculum in your school or district, this guidebook can be used in concert with that effort.

If, for example, you are using the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, you can work with the “Circle of Bullying” chart and use strategies in this guidebook to move “Possible Defenders” and even “Disengaged Onlookers” to genuine “Defenders.”
You’re an educator. You want to make the world a better place. You want to create a school environment that is safe and welcoming for all students—and you don’t want to let moments of bias pass silently. But what to say?

The best way to avoid being stymied when the moment occurs is to prepare. Simply telling yourself that you are someone who will speak up goes a long way toward shifting from inaction to action. So say to yourself:

• I am a person who will speak up against bigotry.
• I will not let hate have the last word.

A next step is to develop ready responses that will work in a variety of moments.

• That offends me.
• I don’t find that funny.
• I’m surprised to hear you say that.

These phrases allow you to speak up against bias in a simple, straightforward manner. Sometimes they may open a dialogue. Other times, they simply allow you to challenge bias and take a vocal stand against it.

Simple questions also are a good way to interrupt everyday bigotry.

• What do you mean by that?
• Why would you say something like that?
• What point are you trying to make by saying that?

Questions place a burden on the person who made the remark. When faced with having to explain a “joke” or support a stereotype, people sometimes find themselves at a loss. Follow up with a simple “Tell me more” to help the person move toward a deeper understanding of why the remark is offensive. If the speaker falls back on something such as, “C’m on, I was just being funny,” then you can use one of your ready responses, such as, “I don’t find that funny.”

Practice the phrases aloud. Memorize them. Have them ready for the next moment.

“The most important thing is to say something,” says Deb Nielsen, a middle school teacher in Durango, Colo. “Don’t let these kinds of put-downs pass. Put yourself out there, and you will make a difference.”

Nielsen offers her own set of standard responses:

• Did you mean to say something hurtful when you said that?
• Using that word as a put-down offends me.
• Using that word doesn’t help others feel safe or accepted here.

Keep these in mind as well:

How do you say it? You know you’ll speak up. But what about tone and temperament? Veteran educators say it’s best if you remain calm and thoughtful. Don’t react with shock. Mostly, just
be yourself. Be firm. Be confident. Know that you are doing the right thing. There is no need to shame or humiliate the other person; that tack too often works against you, galvanizing the behavior instead of changing it. Humor is risky. Sometimes it can defuse a tense situation. Other times, though, it can send a mixed message. Was something about the bigoted comment funny? Are you laughing at (and potentially shaming) the speaker, and will that backfire?

Assess the risk of speaking up. You may be branded too sensitive, too “politically correct,” too something. You may feel the sting of rejection. You may fear retaliation by hostile students or colleagues. This is especially true when challenging someone in authority. So consider your safety in any moment when you may choose to speak up. Is now the best time? Could I handle this in a different way, later, that would be safer? Is there someone I trust—a colleague, a peer, a mentor—to whom I can speak about this, to help me prepare for the next time it happens? Try not to let unwarranted fear silence you, but do consider the consequences of speaking up—and weigh them against the consequences of not speaking up.

Understand the dynamics of change. It happens slowly, and sometimes not at all. People can hold on to prejudice with tenacity. But know this: Speaking up offers a powerful force for good, and it is felt by all within earshot. If you speak up, others may follow—and others after them. You may inspire people to find the courage to speak up themselves, in a later moment. Don’t gauge success solely by whether the person you are addressing changes; change is happening all around you, and the ability to marginalize bias is a sign of success.

Don’t undermine your efforts. If changed behavior is what you are after, keep that goal in mind—and let it shape your response.

“BE FIRM. BE CONFIDENT. KNOW THAT YOU ARE DOING THE RIGHT THING.”

Calling someone a “racist” may feel satisfying, but it also may reinforce that person’s bigotry, and be counterproductive. You may never change this person’s behavior—a tough realization in anti-bias work—but that doesn’t mean you should strengthen their cause by behaving badly yourself. “I’m not going to call another teacher racist,” says Tracy Oliver-Gary, an AP history teacher from Burtonsville, Md. “That just throws up a brick wall, and anything else I say will be lost.” As the old saying goes, be the change you want to see—and impart this idea to your students as often as possible. Keep in mind, too, that your students struggle with the same issues you do, and more.
This guide aims to help people in school settings handle moments of everyday bias—when and how to speak up. But if all we do is speak up after the fact, we will forever be responding to the problem. So, at the outset, we want to put in a plug for prevention.

This work starts in preschool and kindergarten and carries right on through to high school graduation. It also begins on or before day one of any school year, when you consider how to build community within your classroom and how to develop ground rules or guidelines for communication.

Ask yourself, “What climate do I want in my classroom and my school?” Then ask yourself, “What can I do to promote that kind of atmosphere?”

Consider these ideas:

**LANGUAGE AND CONTEXT**

Students at all grade levels need language and context to help them become people who speak up against bias.

Share with them the ready responses from the previous chapter. Or, better yet, brainstorm to come up with a list of their own, then keep that list posted in the classroom. It’s something you can refer to during the year.

In age-appropriate ways, discuss why some words hurt. Building context (historical, psychological, literary and so on) around such words helps students better understand their power to hurt.

Teachers who provide such language and context tell us that it often spreads outward from the classroom, into the halls and cafeteria, where they overhear students using language developed in the classroom to speak up against intolerant remarks.

**CLASSROOM COMMUNITY**

Seasoned teachers tell us that classroom community is at the heart of anti-bias work. Help students build meaningful relationships within the classroom, and they will be ready and able to speak up against intolerance for themselves.

Develop ground rules for communication, with student input, at the outset of the school year. Post the rules prominently, and use them as a touchstone when an issue arises. By creating language together (“We want everyone to feel safe in our classroom.”) when a put-down is heard, you have that language ready: “I’m betting not everyone feels safe in this classroom when you say something like that, Marcus.”

Teachers who do this work at the beginning of the school year say that it pays off all year long in improved classroom behavior. It pays off in other ways, too. Researchers have found the single best way to eliminate bias is by having students of different races, ethnicities, abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds work together on successful projects. So by creating classrooms in which that happens, you are doing the upstream work of preventing future incidents.
MODELING BEHAVIOR FOR YOUR STUDENTS

Dan Rubin, a high school language arts teacher in Las Cruces, N.M., encourages teachers to respond quickly and unequivocally when a student seeks help with a moment of bias—especially one in which the student felt powerless to respond.

Rubin shares an example from a time when he served as advisor to the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at his high school.

At the beginning of the year, he asked GSA members whether they had any issues or concerns to share. One student described a moment that had occurred near the end of the previous school year. He told Rubin that one of his teachers had pulled him aside as the class was leaving, when the room was nearly empty. The teacher had told him, “I know a church that can help you with your ‘situation.’”

The student told Rubin that he felt stymied, uncertain how to respond, so he had said nothing.

Rubin immediately informed the principal via email. The next morning, the principal sent out an all-staff email reminding teachers that it was against district policy to discriminate against any student based on his or her sexual orientation. The text of the specific policy was included in the email.

The email concluded: “Let me give you fair warning—whatever your views may be, telling a student this is absolutely STRICTLY prohibited in our educational setting.”

Visit tolerance.org for a wide variety of exercises and lessons to promote classroom community at all grade levels.

GETTING STUDENTS IN THE FRAME OF MIND

Students who want to speak up face the same issues that you confronted as you prepared. When you encourage them to speak up, remember to

- tell them they can do it.
- discuss the importance of tone and temperament.
- consider their safety.
- be patient and believe they can make a difference.
- keep their eyes on the behavior.
- avoid labeling people.
IN THE MOMENT
INTERRUPT

Educators from all grade levels and all parts of the country emphasize this point: You must speak up against every biased remark, every time it happens. Letting one go, then speaking up against the next one, sends an inconsistent message: that sometimes bias is OK; other times it isn’t. Letting the first instance go without comment also sends the message to anyone within earshot that it’s OK to say bigoted things.

So interrupt it. Every time. In the moment. Without exception.

“Stop what you’re doing—whatever you’re doing—and address it,” says Soñia Galaviz, a fifth-grade teacher in Nampa, Idaho.

So if Galaviz is teaching a math lesson and she hears a student make a biased remark, what does she do? “I say to myself, ‘Hold on, let’s stop.’ The parallelogram lesson can wait. And I go back to all the work we did the first two months of school, discussing classroom culture and sharing our own cultural stories. I address it in the moment. I never let it pass. Anytime you let it pass, it’s an opportunity missed.”

Usually, such moments have stopped happening by mid-year or earlier, based on that early work, Galaviz says. But once, many years ago, well into the second half of the school year, a student casually used the n-word in class. “I went ‘Errrrrrr. Hold on a second.’ I tempered my own response, so I wasn’t angry or out of control. And I asked why in the world he would say such a thing.”

In the end, Galaviz worked lunch hours and after school with the student, having him write what turned out to be a 15-page paper on the origin and history of the n-word. It was a lesson the student didn’t forget. When he was in high school, he came back and thanked Galaviz for teaching him the negative power and ugly history of that word.

These moments are rare, Galaviz says. But early, firm intervention sends the message that bias will not be tolerated.

Nancy Brakke, a music educator in Tacoma, Wash., admires and encourages these “instant” responses. “No anger, no recriminations, no lecture—just a calm, straightforward ‘stop,’” she says.

Connecticut teacher Christine Sipes describes just such a moment: “I was a new teacher on lunch duty, and a veteran teacher came up to me and said, ‘Have you heard the one about the Italian and the …?’ I immediately said, ‘I don’t like ethnic jokes.’”

This may not stop every so-called joke; the person still may tell such “jokes” to others. But it begins to marginalize the behavior. The more often it is interrupted, the more likely it will be curtailed.

QUESTION

As mentioned in the opening chapter, asking simple, exploratory questions in response to bigoted remarks can be a powerful tool: “Why do you say that?” “What do you mean?” “Tell me more.”

Galaviz, the fifth-grade teacher, also serves as an adjunct faculty member at Boise State University. One of her students, preparing to begin student teaching, said to Galaviz, “You can tell kids whose families don’t have an education.”
As it turns out, Galaviz, who has multiple degrees and solid educational credentials, grew up in a lower-middle class family, the daughter of parents who had to drop out of school to begin working. She didn’t immediately challenge her student’s comment. Instead, she said, “Tell me more. Tell me what you mean by that.”

She says that approach accomplished two things. One, it led the speaker to encounter his own blind spots or bits of ignorance, as she teased out the reasons behind his thinking. Two, it helped her better understand his thinking and gave her more time to frame and tailor her response.

Galaviz says that this doesn’t work if you pepper the speaker with aggressive questions. “What exactly do you mean by that?” Aggressive questioning can be counterproductive, closing off communication rather than opening it. The gentle-but-clear “tell me more” approach extends the conversation rather than shutting it down.

Tone matters in these moments. Your goal is to understand the roots of the speaker’s prejudices, then help add context and information to dispel them.

Don’t think for a moment that we all don’t have some sort of prejudices. “I call them the ‘uglies,’ and we have to acknowledge the uglies within ourselves if we’re ever going to make lasting change,” Galaviz says.

Amber Makaiau is an ethnic studies teacher at Kailua High School in Oahu, Hawaii. She recalls a moment when she faced the “uglies” in front of her students.

Makaiau periodically checks in with students about classroom culture—what’s working, what’s not working, any issues to discuss. During one of these check-ins, a student asked Makaiau why she pushed the Filipino students to talk more during classroom discussions but did not similarly push the white students.

“I said, ‘Hmrmr,’ and it surprised me. They had a good point,” Makaiau says. “They got to see me work through this surprising realization right in front of them, and I was able to change my behavior accordingly. Teachers need to be open to that. We are there to learn as much as the students are.”

EducatE

Hate isn’t behind all hateful speech. Sometimes ignorance is at work, or lack of exposure to diverse populations. Other times, people simply don’t know the negative power behind certain words or phrases. So a good first step in a moment of bias—particularly if it’s the first time you’ve encountered it with someone—is to explain why the term or phrase is offensive.

So if someone says, “That’s so lame” or calls someone a “bitch,” not knowing the discriminatory or sexist power behind these words, you can offer background and context to encourage the person to choose a different expression.

Barbara Hemann, an Iowa teacher who has multiple sclerosis, shares this example:

*My most obvious symptom is my foot dragging as I walk, creating a limp. A student once said to me, ‘What’s with the gimp?’*

*I don’t think the student meant to be disparaging in any way, so I sat down and told him that although I was not hurt by his*
In the Moment

comment, that many people who have a disability would be, and that he should always be respectful and use respectful language if he was going to ask someone about a disability. I told him that I welcomed questions, and I would always take time to answer those questions.

I think the student left with a lifetime skill.

So unless you are dealing with a longstanding pattern of behavior, give the speaker the benefit of the doubt, and allow that person to make a change. “Be kind,” Hemann says. “Nearly everyone is fighting a great battle.”

It is not your “job” to educate everyone else about bias. People do need to take responsibility for their own ignorance. Self-education—the realization that one lacks knowledge on a subject and will seek it out on one’s own—is vital.

That said, you are in a school, and education happens in schools. So it’s a natural fit to wrap education around moments of bias or stereotyping.

Consider this moment, shared by Vanessa D’Egidio, a second-grade teacher in New York City: A group of second-grade girls was overheard on the playground, laughing and making negative comments about classmates’ clothing. They found fault with clothing that wasn’t name brand and laughed at others whose clothes were faded and frayed.

“Another teacher pulled the group aside to discuss what she overheard, explaining to the students that what they were doing was teasing, bullying and very hurtful toward their peers, regardless of whether it was to their faces or behind their backs,” D’Egidio says.

Afterward, the second-grade teaching team collectively decided to follow up with a community meeting of all second-graders.

“During the meeting, we did not single out the students who had done the teasing, but we brought up the issue of teasing someone about their clothing or something else about them through gossiping,” D’Egidio says.

Teachers role-played different scenarios, showing how gossip can be hurtful. Then they asked students for examples of more considerate behavior.

“The teachers reminded students that words can hurt, whether they are used in private, overheard or said directly to someone,” D’Egidio says. “We also highlighted the importance of being an ally, the importance of speaking up against teasing, and the importance of everyone working together in a community to create a safe, caring space for all.”

ECHO

It’s powerful to be the first voice that interrupts bias. It’s also powerful on another level to be the second, third or fourth voice to join in the interruption. In group settings, if someone has said something biased, and not one but four people speak up, the echoing power of those voices can have a multiplying effect.

As the echoing voice, you can reiterate the anti-bias message or you can thank the first person for speaking up—or both!

Consider this, from a high school teacher working with ninth-graders:

I overheard a side conversation where a student said, ‘That’s so gay.’ I was shocked. I thought that phrase was rarely used. (Maybe I just wasn’t aware.) Immediately, another girl in the group said that was a wrong thing to say. The first girl giggled and said she was just being funny. The second girl said it’s not funny because it hurts people. I was impressed, so I jumped into the conversation. I told her, ‘Thank you. I have a lot of respect for you speaking up like that, and I totally agree with you.’
SPEAKING FROM AUTHORITY

When you communicate from a position of authority, your words often carry more weight—and sometimes you cannot gauge whether the listener genuinely understands or simply is unwilling to talk back. If the response is silence, don’t assume that your message has sunk in. Watch closely to see if behaviors change, and be ready to speak up again—and again—if needed.

From a position of authority, your words also affect people within earshot. If a principal hears a student in the hallway using a casual sexist slur and she stops to tell the student that biased language is not tolerated at the school, others will hear an anti-bias message from the top. This can have a ripple effect—both to curb slurs and to empower others to speak out against them. Imagine that same principal delivering a message against slurs at a schoolwide assembly. That’s another case in which speaking from authority can have a huge impact.

Perhaps more important, if someone in authority does not speak up, it empowers a different sort of behavior. That lack of action tells everyone within earshot that slurs are allowed in hallways, classrooms or the office.

A teacher from upstate New York describes the rural, largely white community in which she lives, where casual and not-so-casual bias sometimes is allowed to thrive. But it does not thrive in her classroom, where she has the authority to set the tone and speak out. She states it flatly, and takes responsibility for the work: “I am the only person who can stop the bigotry in my classroom.”

A teacher from another part of the country learned her lesson on this issue from moments when she did not speak up.

I often just did not pay attention to hurtful comments or bigoted behaviors. [Then] I began to make a personal connection to my own life and how bullying had impacted me as a youth. Bullying and bigoted behaviors have so many layers and are presented in so many ways. This is when I realized that I was contributing to the problem by not speaking up and speaking out.
Every week, she found herself in situations where she needed to speak up against comments that were intolerant. The result?

I discovered that the more I speak up, the more I hear [my students] speaking up, too. This is one of the ways we create that safe space around us, where our young people know that they are accepted, appreciated and heard.

An elementary school principal in the Pacifi c Northwest says that he routinely interrupts when he hears biased words being used—either with teachers or with students.

I step in. I say, ‘Whoa, whoa, whoa.’ The vast majority, with students, is kids using words they don’t really understand. They just know the word is negative, a put-down. So I make it public, but I don’t make it punitive. It’s a teachable moment, and I want everyone within earshot to know it’s not okay to speak that way here.

02 SPEAKING TO A PEER

There is power in a peer relationship. When a friend or trusted colleague tells you something, you often hear it more clearly than if it comes from some other source. Peer relationships also are problematic. Explaining to another teacher why offensive language should be avoided might result in a reply along the lines of “You’re not my boss.”

So there are considerations to be made:

- How close are you to this peer? (Strong friendship, mild but positive acquaintance, nothing more than “hello” in the hallway?)
- What is the nature of past interactions? (Happy but shallow, feelings of real affinity, some tension over other issues?)
- How does this person best receive communication? (Written, verbal, with humor, in group settings, as a quiet aside?)

Weigh your response based on relevant factors. Some examples:

TEACHER-TO-TEACHER

An early-childhood educator from Wisconsin had someone she considers a good friend speak excitedly about some bargains he had found at a neighborhood yard sale. She continues:

He said quite conversationally that he had ‘Jewed down’ the owner. I asked what he meant and watched as his face went from puzzlement (at my ‘ignorance’) to embarrassment (he knows quite well that I’m Jewish). I let him flounder for a bit and then tossed him a lifeline—his promise not to use that phrase again, regardless of who is in the room.

STUDENT-TO-STUDENT

A Georgia high school student describes himself as the only African American in his circle of friends.

They do not necessarily say mean-spirited things or bully me directly, but they always make a point to mention that I am the ‘token black.’ I usually laugh it off or ignore it, but recently it became too much. I was having a bad day, and I could not hold back my annoyed feelings any longer. I began to yell at them explaining how racist it was that they called me that … and how mean they were being. When I finally finished, they stared at me until one of the boys started laughing. They all laughed and made fun of me, and I realized that all I did was fuel their fire.
Looking back, the student says he would have changed his approach.

I would have confronted it much earlier, when I first realized that I had a problem with the way I was being treated. I should have pulled my friends aside or talked to them individually, explaining my issues with the situation—not with anger or revenge, but with calmness.

“I SHOULD HAVE EXPLAINED MY ISSUES WITH THE SITUATION.”

03 SPEAKING TO AUTHORITY

Speaking up to an authority figure is tricky. It carries risk. Are you questioning your principal’s leadership skills? Or are you challenging a senior teacher in a way that might backfire? Will you face punitive reactions? Is the power relationship so imbalanced that you won’t be heard at all—or worse, will be mocked for being overly sensitive or “whiny”?

Ask yourself some questions:

• Should I write down my issue, present it in the form of a letter or memo? Would that avoid an initial face-to-face confrontation that could get ugly, allowing the person in authority to absorb the message before we speak about it?
• Should I seek an ally or allies?
• Am I jumping over a level of authority (going to the superintendent before speaking with the principal, for example), and will that lead to problems later?

In 2004, when Emma Fialka-Feldman was in high school, she wrote a letter to teachers and administrators at the beginning of the school year, reminding them the power they have to teach their students not only about academics but also social values, such as respectful language. ... I was nervous. I wondered that their response would be.

A few days after the letter arrived in all teachers’ mailboxes, Emma’s biology teacher stopped her in the hallway.

He said, ‘I know there have been times I haven’t said anything. I am sorry, and I plan on calling out more students now.’ I was speechless. My teacher was coming up to me to apologize; I thought students always did the apologies. ... I am honored to have gone to a school district that could learn from its students.

Emma’s letter has been republished widely and included in at least one anthology. Here is a brief excerpt:

Changing the culture of any high school to promote values of respect and responsibility does not happen overnight. ... It happens little by little. I can’t and will not tell every single person I hear use the r-word to stop saying it. I need your help. In the classroom, when a student uses the r-word, tell them to stop. By saying it in front of the classroom, the entire class knows that they can no longer use the word because you don’t tolerate it.

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When they eat in the cafeteria or walk down the hallways they will also learn that they can no longer say it on school property because every time they do, a teacher will tell them to stop ... and they will bring what the teachers, staff and administrators taught them into the larger world.

STUDENT-TO-TEACHER
A teacher in the Northeast related this story:

Two teenage girls, both pregnant, are walking down the hallway of their high school. A teacher passes, clicks his tongue and says, “I bet neither of you even knows who the baby daddy is,” and keeps walking by. The students say nothing.

What might they have said?

“It’s tough,” the teacher says. “Teachers have power, and students know that. They certainly could have said, ‘You can’t talk to us that way,’ but even that might be risky.”

The teacher relating the story suggested that the girls together might approach an administrator and describe what happened and ask what can be done. Or they could tell their parents, and the parents could contact an administrator. This work isn’t easy, and the power involved in some relationships makes it tough to find an effective avenue for change.
SPEAKING TO A PARENT OR VISITOR

When the person making a biased remark is a parent or a visitor to your school, ask yourself some questions. Do you have an ongoing relationship or is this person a one-time visitor? What kind of relationship does this person have with the school? (Someone with a history of antagonistic interactions with the school may require a different response than someone with positive or neutral relations, for example.)

The basic advice for speaking up to visitors is to be quick, calm, firm and straightforward. Whenever possible, tie the moment to classroom rules, school policy or some other principle.

If a father visiting on parents’ night casually makes a biased remark, a possible reply would be, “Oh, we don’t use that word in our classroom. Our classroom rules prohibit the use of hurtful words.” Don’t engage in a debate over whatever term was used, just refer again to the rules, if needed, and move on.

If you have a relationship, draw on that. (“Oh, Maria, I know you didn’t mean to be hurtful using that word, but we don’t say hurtful things in our classroom.”)

If it is someone with a history of offensive behavior or antagonistic relations, stay firm and straightforward, and move on to the content at hand. (“We don’t use that word in this classroom. Thank you. Now, we were discussing the art project planned for the spring …”)

An ELL/Spanish teacher in Illinois held a parents’ night. The father of one of her Spanish class students told her he insisted that his son take Spanish so he could “show those Spanish-speaking factory workers who’s boss.”

I have to say I was taken aback by the tone of the comment. (But) I am grateful this parent shared his opinion. I added additional parents’ nights to discuss the presence of immigrants in the United States and the challenges they face. As evidenced by the surveys, the meetings ended on a positive note. All participants indicated they had a better understanding of immigrants.

“CHANGING VALUES TO PROMOTE RESPECT AND RESPONSIBILITY DOES NOT HAPPEN OVERNIGHT.”
In your classroom you have the advantage of time and authority. You—working with students—can set ground rules and limits about slurs and hurtful comments. You can interrupt a moment, suspend the planned lesson and devote the time needed to discuss and explore the impact of what was said.

(We know that you are inundated with mandatory curricula, testing and other things that fill classroom time, and we also know that the issue of creating a safe and welcoming environment for all students is something you believe in—and something worth the classroom time.)

“We talk about intellectual safety in our class, that we’re a community where inquiry and reflection can happen—and a community where everyone can feel safe,” says Amber Makaiau, the ethnic studies teacher in Oahu, Hawaii.

This gives students the language to speak up throughout the year, Makaiau says, both in and beyond the classroom. In the classroom, they can use their shared language (“I don’t feel safe when you use that term”). Outside the classroom, they are empowered to speak up against biased remarks because of the understanding they have reached inside the classroom.

Makaiau describes the classroom as a place where teachers and students can “unpack” language. “So if someone says, ‘We have to respect each other in our classroom,’ we don’t stop there. We take it further, to explore how different people from different cultures define respect, and how we balance its many meanings within the classroom.”

The need for a prompt and strong response to biased remarks in the classroom has been explored earlier in this guidebook.

Some teachers, though, move beyond spoken responses and require follow-up action from their students.

“If someone says something inappropriate or offensive in my class, I stop what I’m doing and have them write a letter of apology,” says Tracy Oliver-Gary, the AP history teacher from Burtonsville, Md. “It might be something sexually offensive, or something involving bias—anything that may offend another student in class and make them feel targeted. It happens, and I say, ‘Start writing the letter.’”

The teachers’ lounge is a place where uncomfortable peer-to-peer situations may arise. Conversation might be more casual there. Insensitive comments and biased assumptions may be voiced more frequently.

For example:

*A fellow teacher made a joke to other staff about the band students, referring to them as ‘band fags.’ Needless to say, I told him it wasn’t funny and certainly not appropriate.*
A colleague I barely knew expressed sadness that his Jewish and Hindu students were all going to hell [based on his Christian beliefs]. I was left breathless. It took me a few seconds to recover enough to tell him—firmly but gently—that I did not share that belief, for a lot of reasons.

The level of the peer relationship must be considered. How close are you to this person? There also must be some sensitivity about who else is present, who else might hear any interaction and how they might react.

All those factors are at play, but the basic strategies still apply. Do speak up. Don’t antagonize. Do keep your eye on the goal: to keep communication channels open and help someone realize the effect of biased comments.

Consider this incident:
Two educators were talking in a teachers’ lounge at a school in the Pacific Northwest. Each had a sibling from the same family as a student. The teacher of the younger sibling said, “Those parents don’t care a thing about their child’s education. They don’t even come to parent-teacher conferences.”

Hearing that, the second teacher—the one who relates this story—took a breath and considered how to respond. She had visited the family’s home and knew some of the pressures and realities the parents faced: living in poverty, working multiple jobs, having unreliable transportation. Getting to a parent-teacher conference was not a case of not caring; it was a simple impossibility, given their situation.

“That’s a bold statement, to say a parent doesn’t care about a child’s education,” the teacher says, recalling the moment. “What was going on was that this teacher had not worked to engage herself with the student’s family, to understand what was going on in that home. She hadn’t done her job.”

Can one teacher tell another teacher, “You’re not doing your job”? Not without some sparks.
So this teacher took a different tack. She told the teacher, “You know, I’ve had a completely different experience with the older sibling.”

She then described the family circumstances that were working against the parents’ school involvement.

“I put a face on it. I made it real for her. And she got it. I saw the light bulb go off, and she realized she’d made some assumptions based on her own thinking about ‘those’ kinds of families.”

**IN HALLWAYS AND COMMON AREAS**

Hallways—like buses or playgrounds—are places where student-to-student bias can thrive if no one speaks up against it.

A middle school student related this story:

*A boy in the hall—a popular kid with lots of friends—routinely cackled at a girl with hearing aids when he passed her in the hall. As she got near, he’d shout the line from a cell phone commercial: ‘Can you hear me now?’*

His friends and classmates (including those worried about fitting in or losing his friendship) laughed at his “joke.” Other students—and adults—within earshot didn’t join in the laughter but said nothing in response. They allowed cruelty to have the last word. The student with the hearing aids spoke with the principal about it, and the principal objected, saying, “We don’t have that kind of bullying here.”

You have mere seconds in the hallway to speak up. The bustle of students moving quickly between classes creates its own kind of chaos. So any intervention needs to be quick, clear and pointed.

A teacher overhearing the boy’s remark might say, “Jacob, that’s not funny. If you say that again, I’ll be forced to call your parents in for a conference.” That might encourage one of the bystander students to say, “That’s a stupid thing to say. Stop it.” If more students joined in, the pressure might be enough.

The hallway is where you need to have your comments ready. They must be brief, no more than a sentence or two, and they must be easily delivered above the din.

Advance strategy also can come into play. Three teachers can promise each other they’ll all speak up, together, the next time it happens—because it will keep happening if no one speaks out against it.

Other speaking up also can occur, including saying comforting words to the target of the abuse and asking how she would like to be supported. (She may be suffering so greatly that she wants no added attention, for example.)
Had the principal responded in a more supportive fashion, he could roam the hall, waiting to encounter a similar incident himself, then simply take the bully to his office and address the situation seriously, outlining consequences if the behavior continued.

IN THE CAFETERIA

Cliqués, racial and ethnic lines, socioeconomic class—so many factors are at work in the cafeteria. National surveys of students continue to indicate that the cafeteria is the place on campus where dividing lines are most clearly drawn.

Because of that, a group at one table can easily fall into biased remarks about some other group across the room. These remarks are overheard by passersby—other students, teachers, administrators, cafeteria workers.

It’s a ripe landscape for speaking up.

Advice from teachers who have spoken up in cafeteria settings indicates that sitting down is a key strategy.

As with so many things, it’s about relationships. If you sit down on a regular basis—not just to scold but to get to know students better—you become more relevant and can have more impact with these groups. A teacher who just walks by and says, “Don’t say that” is more likely to get eye-rolling and whispered sneers than improved behaviors.

If you sit down and use some of the strategies in this guidebook (“Why do you say that?” “Tell me more.”), you have a better chance of building a relationship, deepening your own understanding of the prejudices at work, and tailoring your comments accordingly. If any of the students are in your classes, you can continue the guidance there as well.

If you have existing relationships with any students at a table where slurs are being casually tossed around, speaking individually to that student also can be a tactic. “Why do you listen to that? You know it’s wrong to say those kinds of things.” Planting the seed that encourages the student to someday speak up is a good strategy to employ. Again, these are lessons you can offer in your classroom, with an eye toward improving behaviors in the cafeteria.
Community-building work at the beginning of the school year, including setting ground rules, can help educators deal with students who use hurtful language. Below are examples of age-appropriate things for teachers to say.

**GRADES PRE K-2**
Tina, you know there are words that hurt, right? Words like stupid or ugly. Well, there are other words that are used to hurt people, too, and that’s one of them. That’s why we don’t use that word as a put-down or to hurt someone else. So promise me you’ll stop using it, okay?

**GRADES 3-5**
Tina, that word carries more weight than you might know, and it can really hurt people. There’s a lot of emotion around that word. It’s been used to attack people, and I know you’re not meaning to attack anyone, but if someone hears it, they might feel attacked. And we don’t want that here. We want everyone to feel safe here. So let’s not use that word anymore, okay?

Depending on the setting and/or the maturity of the student(s), you may want to explore the basic historical context around the term being used. It may tie in with a social studies lesson or some other instructional materials. “Class, remember when we talked about words that hurt, well that relates to this lesson …”

**MIDDLE GRADES**
Tina, I know that you know that word is hurtful, and I’m surprised, and more than a little disappointed, to hear you use it. It has no place in this classroom, or this school. You know we have an agreement here to not use hurtful language, and I’ll need you to honor that agreement and stop using that word.

**UPPER GRADES**
Tina, that doesn’t fly here and you know it. I need you to stop it, or there will be more serious consequences.

In middle and upper grades, if you have classroom ground rules and they have been broken, follow through with agreed-upon consequences. If the student repeats the behavior, deepen the conversation and escalate the consequences—including meeting with an administrator or contacting the student’s parents. Tie such slurs or pejorative remarks to classroom lessons whenever possible, making historical context relevant and meaningful.
It’s clear that one voice in one moment does not stop bias. Bias is insidious, arriving in many forms and many voices. Insults and put-downs, like the rest of the English language, are ever-evolving. As people use language to create new ways to ostracize and hurt others, we hope the strategies in this guidebook can be adapted and adjusted to keep pace.

Every moment that bias goes unanswered is a moment that allows its roots to grow deeper and stronger. Bias left unanswered is bias tacitly approved. If you don’t speak up, you are saying, in your silence, that you condone it.

In moving forward, consider the basics:

**BE PREPARED**
Prepare yourself, and help prepare your students. Have handy phrases you are comfortable saying. Promise yourself that you’ll speak up in these moments, then follow through.

**BE POSITIVE**
Don’t just be reactive. Take proactive steps to help create the school climate you seek.

**BE CONFIDENT**
There is no need to apologize for speaking up. Don’t let naysayers silence you. You recognize bias, and you seek to eradicate it. This is important work, and you must dedicate yourself to it.

**BE ENCOURAGING**
Help others prepare to speak up. Encourage the good behavior you see, especially changed behavior. If someone else has spoken up before you, be the next voice, echoing that anti-bias message—thanking the person who has spoken up and encouraging others to join in.

**WORK TOGETHER**
This guidebook is designed for individuals, but know that you are not alone. Even in the most oppressive school environments, allies are waiting for you somewhere in the building. Maybe they are students, other teachers or counselors. Maybe they tried to speak up once, weeks or months or years ago, but felt too alone to bring change. Seek them out. Band together. Create a campaign focused on the most prominent problem at your school, and put it into place, using resources included in the appendices of this guidebook. There is power in numbers.

The campaign against bigotry involves all of us. Each of our voices matters, and each is vital to creating inclusive schools—schools that embrace the great diversity of our nation.

So speak up. Don’t let hate have the last word.
APPENDICES
Appendix A

For Students

I am a person who will SPEAK UP against bias.

Interrupt
Speak up against every biased remark—every time, in the moment, without exception. Think about what you’ll say ahead of time so you’re prepared to act instantly.
Try saying: “I don’t like words like that,” or “That phrase is hurtful.”

Question
Ask simple questions to find out why the speaker made the offensive comment and how you can best address the situation.
Try asking: “Why do you say that?” What do you mean?” or “Tell me more.”

Educate
Explain why a term or phrase is offensive. Encourage the person to choose a different expression. Hate isn’t behind all hateful speech. Sometimes ignorance is at work, or lack of exposure to a diverse population.
Try saying: “Do you know the history of that word?”

Echo
If someone else speaks up against hate, thank her and reiterate her anti-bias message. One person’s voice is a powerful start. Many voices together create change.
Try saying: “Thanks for speaking up, Allison. I agree that word is offensive and we shouldn’t use it.”

Appendix B

Role-Playing

What will you say? What will you encourage students to say?
The best way to be ready to speak up is to prepare. The more you and your students can identify stereotypes and explain why they are hurtful—or just inaccurate—the easier it will be to respond the next time you hear one. Remember, your response can have an impact.

Here are some prompts to get you started, along with background information to help you address the inaccuracies.

→ An elementary student holds up the corners of his eyes and says “Ching chang chong chong” as a Korean student walks by.
Making fun of someone’s physical appearance, especially in cases where the traits being mocked are related to race, ethnicity or cultural background, is dehumanizing. The same holds true for mocking another language.

How can a student bystander respond? What about an adult overhearing the taunt?

→ A parent is angry because your classroom is inclusive. “I don’t understand why my son has to do group work with a retarded boy. Why aren’t they in their own classroom?”
Because children use the word “retarded” as a slur, it should be discouraged. The child has an intellectual disability.
The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates the least restrictive educational environment. In many districts, that means inclusive classrooms. Learn more about it at idea.ed.gov.

Explore whether the parent has curricular or pacing concerns that prompted the remark and address those.

*How can you make it clear that you are attentive to the needs of his child and also appeal to the parent’s sense of fairness?*

> During a service project planting trees at a local park, you hear a group of students laughing as one of them complains, “Why are we doing this? This is what Mexicans are for.”

The idea that any one ethnicity is particularly suited to any one profession is a form of stereotyping.

Mexicans, like every other group of individuals, occupy a range of positions in a variety of industries.

Students from middle-class, dominant-culture backgrounds may enjoy unearned advantages that allow them to feel above particular tasks, even those performed in the service of others.

*What does this student understand about stereotypes and privilege? What do those who were laughing understand about them?*

> During a staff meeting, some teachers cheer when the principal announces that students from a nearby trailer park will be attending a different school next year.

Teacher attitudes matter. The stereotype that students from a particular neighborhood, or those who live in poverty, are low achievers or disciplinary problems can have a real impact on their achievement and behavior. Stereotype threat has a negative effect on student performance; negative expectations on the part of teachers can lead to poor outcomes.

This is a good scenario in which to employ the “tell me more” strategy. Ask role-playing teachers to explain why they clapped. Be ready to provide information on how teacher expectations influence student performance.

*What might the principal in this case do? What might an individual teacher do or say?*

> On the way to lunch, you hear a girl say to her friends, “C’mon bitches, let’s go eat.”

When the targets (in this case women and girls) of a pejorative word reclaim it and use it endearingly or as a sign of solidarity, it’s often defended as language re-appropriation.

There is much debate over whether the original sexist, malicious intent of the word can be undone by this in-group usage. Sometimes re-appropriated words backfire and perpetuate the stereotypes the speaker wishes to debunk. Sometimes the words are used for shock value.

*Why did this student choose that word? What other words could she have used? How can she be gently stopped?*

> A lesbian student comes to you, upset. A classmate told her that homosexuality is a sin and she is going to hell unless she chooses a different lifestyle.

The right to be safe and welcomed at school applies to all students, including LGBT students.

Bullying or coercion, even if based on sincere religious belief, has no place in school.

*How would you advise the girl to respond? What else can you do?*

> During group work, you hear a boy say to a girl, “Stop PMS-ing and just take notes, OK?”

Menstruation and its related side-effects (imagined or otherwise) are used to marginalize women and exclude them from particular job functions or decision-making roles. PMS references are sexist barbs used to portray women and girls as over-sensitive, emotional, inconsistent, irrational and angry.

*What was this student trying to convey to his female classmate? Is there another way to say it?*

> You put students into groups and overhear one turn to another and say, “Good, you can be our token black.”

“Token black” indeed tokenizes the black student by characterizing him and all his contributions as “token” and
not integral to the completion of the project. This student’s contributions are marginalized before the assignment even begins.

“Ironic” racism calls attention to race in what the speaker intends as witty, modern and post-racial ways but really just reinforces stereotypes and dehumanizes people of color. If the “humor” in the joke is based upon someone’s group membership, it’s a racist joke, even if it’s meant to be ironic.

What did this student mean to imply with his statement? How might the student being singled out as a token feel?

➤ A boy who likes attention gets laughs by chanting to a classmate with hearing aids, “Can you hear me now?”

Making fun of someone for a physical disability isn’t funny.

What effect did this student’s humor have on the classroom environment?

How might the targeted student felt when this comment was made?

➤ A teacher criticizes a girl about her earring: “Don’t you realize that those look ghetto?”

“Ghetto” is a layered term that has specific stereotypical connotations (urban, poor, racial) and shouldn’t be used in the school environment except in a historical context, e.g., the Warsaw Ghetto.

Does the context and significance of the comment change if this teacher is from a background similar to the student? Does the significance change if a student makes the comment?

➤ During an informal chat, a parent offers to hire a “bunch of illegals” to paint your classroom.

People are not illegal. Their actions might not have followed the law but the people themselves are not illegal. Characterizing anyone by a single factor is dehumanizing.

Race and class privilege insulates students and parents alike from the experiences of those from different backgrounds.

In many states, hiring an undocumented immigrant is a crime.

Can the offer of help be disentangled from the bias? Would asking for the speaker to explain their intent or addressing the issue of inappropriate language lead to different outcomes?

➤ A fellow teacher made a joke in the faculty lunchroom about the band students, calling them “band fags.”

Like the r-word or the n-word, the f-word has no place in a welcoming school; respectful and appropriate language should be expected of all teachers.

Epithets used to characterize or marginalize a group of students hurt efforts to build community in school and perpetuate bias, in this case anti-LGBT bias.
POLICIES
This guide is not about dissecting and rewriting district or school policies. But policies do matter. Take the time to read your school's policies on biased or discriminatory behavior. Knowing the policies will inform some of your responses, especially when behavior has crossed the line.

Finally, what is the policy in your own classroom? Is it established on the first day of school, or do you wait for something negative to happen and then develop classroom rules?

Consider creating a classroom constitution while also teaching about the U.S. Constitution. “A New Set of Rules” (available at tolerance.org/activity/new-set-rules) can help lead the way.

TAKING COLLECTIVE ACTION
Here are three longstanding school-wide campaigns that can help create inclusive school environments that challenge bigoted behaviors.

Mix It Up at Lunch
A program of Teaching Tolerance
www.mixitup.org

Day of Silence
A program of GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network
dayofsilence.org

MORE ON SPEAKING UP
Speak Up: Responding to Everyday Bigotry
This is a companion guidebook to Speak Up at School. Published in 2005, it contains valuable advice for all people about addressing bigotry and hate. tolerance.org/publication/speak/speak

Faced with the Real World, Will You Speak Up?
tolerance.org/blog/faced-real-world-will-you-speak

CLASSROOM LESSONS
A Time to Speak: A Speech by Charles Morgan
tolerance.org/activity/time-speak-speech-charles-morgan

United We Stand
tolerance.org/activity/united-we-stand

Breaking the Barrier
tolerance.org/activity/breaking-barrier

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‘Conversion therapy’ poses as a medical treatment—but it’s really a type of bullying. Know what it is and how to help when LGBT students are told to ‘pray away the gay.’

BY SEAN PRICE  ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH NEGLEY

AT AGE 14, John Johnson (not his real name) came out to his parents after one of several suicide attempts. His father, a conservative Roman Catholic from a military background, was especially upset to find out that his son was gay. He cornered John in their Houston home and beat him, breaking his leg and sending him to the hospital. John ran away to stay with friends. His mother found him and convinced him to return home. However, his parents insisted that he begin conversion therapy.

Conversion therapy comes in many forms, ranging from informal chats with counselors to aggressive physical coercion, but all are based on the belief that a gay male or a lesbian can be changed “back” to heterosexual behavior. It isn’t just alarmed parents who turn to this therapy. Many LGBT individuals seek out such treatment in an effort to leave behind the social stigma of homosexuality.

Supporters of conversion therapy frequently try to get their message into classrooms (see Conversion Therapy in Schools, p. 52). Thus, it’s important that educators know more about

Not Just for Christians
Many people attribute conversion therapy efforts solely to conservative Christians. It’s true that most counselors and “ex-gay” spokespersons are evangelical, born-again Christians. However, secular, Jewish, Catholic, Mormon and Muslim conversion therapy programs exist as well.
them and their cause. Wayne Besen of Truth Wins Out, a group that combats anti-LGBT extremism, points out that educators are among those most likely to deal intimately with teenagers like John who are going through conversion therapy. “As long as people are made to feel ashamed for who they are, these groups will exist,” Besen says.

**Going Straight**
Conversion therapy goes by many names, including ex-gay therapy, reparative therapy and reorientation therapy. Whatever it’s called, the treatment is based on the belief that homosexuals are actually heterosexuals in denial. Most advocates of conversion therapy believe that gay men and lesbians have psychological issues, and that if those issues are addressed properly in therapy a straight life is possible. “‘Gay’ is a self-chosen identity,” says the website of Parents and Friends of Ex-Gays and Gays, or PFOX.

But conversion therapy has no grounding in mainstream medicine. It is a pseudoscience—junk science. That’s why it has been condemned by such groups as the American Psychological Association (APA) and the American Medical Association (AMA). Dr. Jack Drescher, a New York psychiatrist who has written extensively about the conversion therapy movement, says that most of its practitioners are religious counselors. Many of them are unlicensed and all base their treatment on theories that are scientifically unsound. Drescher says that there is a popular belief, for example, that parents cause children to be homosexual.

As part of the treatment, conversion therapists also bombard patients with anti-gay and anti-lesbian stereotypes—that homosexuality is a grim, dead-end lifestyle; gay men are doomed to die of AIDS; lesbians just need to get in touch with their feminine side; all homosexuality leads to unhappiness and despair, Drescher says. “It’s like a concentrated burst of homophobia.”

**What Hell Looks Like**
For John, conversion therapy began at about age 14 and did not let up until he was 20. At first, the sessions were helpful in some respects. He was a troubled young man with a drug problem in addition to dealing with his family’s contempt for his sexual identity. John’s first conversion-therapy counselor

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**Talking Points**

Here are three common arguments made by supporters of conversion therapy and some ways to refute them.

**We have testimonials from “ex-gays” that conversion therapy works.** Anecdotes are not evidence. There are plenty of “ex-gays” who have renounced their conversions.

**You’re just biased against ex-gays.** It’s neither wise nor even possible to turn a gay person straight. Conversion therapy is not based on science, and there is no statistical track record that it works. Medical professionals have warned that it can cause depression.

**Science doesn’t know what causes sexuality.** This is true, but it has no bearing on whether it’s healthy to expose a teenager to conversion therapy. As the American Academy of Pediatrics states, “Therapy directed at specifically changing sexual orientation is contraindicated, since it can provoke guilt and anxiety while having little or no potential for achieving changes in orientation.”

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**Conversion Therapy in Schools**

Supporters of conversion therapy like to present their programs to schools as a kind of antibullying measure. PFOX President Greg Quinlan says that his group’s flyers urge “tolerance for all”—especially ex-gays. He also says that “PFOX has distributed informative flyers in some of the largest school districts in the country.”

Last February, a high school in Montgomery County, Md., became the target of a PFOX leafleting campaign. PFOX took advantage of the district’s policy allowing nonprofit groups to send flyers home with students. Many students and parents were outraged by flyers saying, among other things, that people can choose to be heterosexual. “If only one part of you has gay feelings, should your whole life be gay identified?” the flyer asked.

School administrators might be tempted to ban distribution of these types of flyers, but such efforts can often backfire by giving ex-gay groups and conversion therapists an excuse to claim that their free speech rights have been violated. That’s why the Southern Poverty Law Center urges educators, parents and community members to counter the false propaganda with the most powerful tool at their disposal: facts.

In the Montgomery County schools case, Superintendent Joshua Starr wasted no time in calling the flyers “reprehensible and deplorable.” Local groups partnered with Teaching Tolerance to put out a flyer explaining the disturbing truth about conversion therapy and offering resources to educators looking to offer an inclusive environment for all students—straight and LGBT alike.
“As long as people are made to feel ashamed for who they are, these groups will exist.”

listened to him and helped him work through some of those issues.

However, that counselor’s work did not change John’s sexual identity as his parents wished, so they found another counselor. John says that this pattern repeated itself. “When [counselors] were deemed as not making a change quick enough, my parents would fire them and hire a more stringent practitioner of reparative therapy until it got worse and worse.”

According to John, all of his counselors were evangelical Protestants. “I’d be brainwashed day after day after day, with them telling me about what hell was like and how I was going to be there,” he recalls. “And they began to ‘heal’ my relationship with my parents by trying to prove that my father was distant and my mother was overbearing. They were trying to show that I had this brokenness sexually and they were using my [drug] abuse against me.”

**Lending an Ear**

John could not escape conversion therapy, even after he went to college at Texas A&M University, because his parents still paid the bills. Finally, at age 20, he was able to secure his own financial independence. “We didn’t talk for a year after that,” John says. “But finally my father had a stroke. And on what we thought was his deathbed we finally came to grips with each other and forgave each other for what we had done.”

John and others who’ve been through conversion therapy say that teachers can be lifesavers for kids who are dealing with much more than the usual teenage frustrations. “I think the biggest thing that a teacher can do is just to be there for the student,” he says, “for them to say, ‘If there’s ever something I can do—if you need [time] during lunch—then let’s sit down and talk.’”

That may be easier said than done, however. Students dealing with conversion therapy may also have other secrets. For example, some may be dealing with legal issues, such as physical abuse, that teachers are obligated to report. “It’s really difficult,” John says, because teachers then have to decide whether “to inform the parents about the issues that these children are having,” ignore the situation or try “to help the child by being a mentor to them.”

John’s friend Charles Banta found that one teacher helped both by listening and by being a good role model. Growing up in the small town of Wheatland, Iowa, Charles was 15 when he began conversion therapy. Charles’ religious parents had always been vocally anti-gay, so he desperately hoped the treatment would work. However, that feeling changed completely after meeting some of his band director’s gay friends. “I saw these successful older gay people just living their lives,” said Charles, who is now 19. “And at that point I started to wonder if I could just live being gay.”

But, says Charles, a teacher doesn’t need to be gay, lesbian or bi to be a good role model. Also, small gestures can mean a lot. His English and history teachers allowed him to write freely on LGBT topics, something that helped boost his confidence. He agrees with John that just lending an ear to a student who’s in conversion therapy might save a life.

Having a strong LGBT community at school helps a lot too. However, most schools aren’t there yet. “I just went back to my school a couple weeks ago during spring break and encouraged them to put up Safe Zone signs,” Charles says. “If anyone had been willing to display that sign [when I was in school,] it would have given me a little more courage to go and talk about it.”

John says that he now enjoys a fragile peace with his family. He has joined the Marine Corps and built a strong group of friends. “What finally made me overcome [the trauma caused by the years of conversion therapy] was a very close friendship that I had at A&M and in the military,” John says. This friend “was able to see me for who I was, even though I never actually told him that I was gay until about a year ago, when Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was repealed.”

Today, John is committed to educating people about conversion therapy. “This is my cause,” he says. John believes that parents and educators need to know about the dangers of conversion therapy. But, he adds, it’s even more vital to reach out to teens who are facing the same darkness that he escaped. “It’s all about giving them the hope that life will get better sooner or later.”

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**Toolkit**

We have two flyers to help you—and LGBT students—in school:

“Know Your Rights” gives students straight answers to their questions.

“Providing Safe and Supportive Environments for LGBT Youth” has advice for educators.

[VISIT ➤ tolerance.org/therapy-of-lies](http://tolerance.org/therapy-of-lies)
URLs to share:

http://www.tolerance.org
http://www.welcomingschools.org
http://www.hrc.org
https://gsanetwork.org

Religious Diversity in the Classroom, five-part webinar series
Social Boundaries Activity: Map It Out