

TRANSGENDER STUDENT SUPPORT

Cultural proficiency doesn't just mean learning how to support students from different races and ethnic backgrounds but also addressing gender-related issues.

BY THE HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN FOUNDATION IN PARTNERSHIP WITH NATIONAL CENTER FOR LESBIAN RIGHTS, GENDER SPECTRUM, AND AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION

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 their child's well-being.

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.

For many school counselors and administrators, addressing transgender issues begins with a transgender or gender-expansive child enrolling at their school or a current student starting to express his or her gender identity in a new way. Although this article focuses on 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.

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.

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 such as "I have a girl brain and boy body" or vice versa and behavior such as 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.

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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 the student's 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.

As visibility and awareness of transgender people increases more parents, counselors and health care 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.

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.

TRANSITION SUPPORT

BY RYAN HILL

Being transgender, commonly referred to as trans*, is not a walk in the park. Although the concept is pretty simple, in reality it is mentally and physically draining, thought-consuming and stress-inducing.

I came out to my parents in middle school, at the end of eighth grade. However, I didn't change names or even pronoun until shortly before beginning high school several months later. At that point in my life, I just wasn't ready. I was still questioning my identity and unsure of how to best proceed. So I started high school under my original, female name, using female pronouns.

And every day it killed me.

It was hard keeping my transition a secret, especially from those who knew me well. The disconnect between home, at the time the only place I used male pronouns and a male name, and school was tough. My own name began to become foreign to me. Sometimes I would start to write my male name; I wouldn't respond when teachers called my female name out.

I was a freshman more than three years ago, before the whole trans* movement, and opposition, picked up steam. I was the first person to transition at my high school, so there were no policies or procedures set in place. Well before the school year started, my mom contacted my school counselor and explained the situation. The biggest problem was

dressing out for gym and the whole locker room situation. The school arranged for me to use the bathroom in the gym teacher's lounge to dress out. Although I got harassed a bit for it, I felt safer and more comfortable that way, as I hadn't had surgery yet nor started hormones.

An issue I ran into, which I know is hotly debated now, was which bathroom to use. I definitely was not going to use the female bathroom; I didn't feel comfortable there, nor did I belong there. Even before I fully transitioned I was being called "sir" and "young man," solely based on the way I dressed. The solution the school came up with was to use one of the two single-stall bathrooms. And not even the one in the nurse's clinic. I was told I could use the bathroom that sat between two classrooms, meaning I'd have to interrupt a class if I ever want to go to the bathroom. Worse yet, it was on one extreme end of the school, not a central location. In the end, I chose to not use the bathroom at school but rather wait until I got home. It's a habit that has stuck for four years, even though no one would notice or care if I used the male bathroom now.

Fast-forward a few years and I couldn't have asked for a better outcome. While being trans* is still a big part of my identity, it's not something that consumes me all day and night. Ever since I had surgery and started hormones, I've become

more confident, more outgoing. I feel "normal," like any other male student at my school.

But I know others who haven't had such an easy trip, and I think that's one of the most important things for people, school counselors, teachers and students alike, to know. Everyone's transition is different. Not every trans* person has the same experiences, the same feelings. Some have body dysmorphia, others don't. It's not just about understanding but being supportive. I was lucky to have family members who supported me wholeheartedly, despite their own concerns. But I know kids whose parents are apprehensive, unsure, unaccepting. When I came out, knowing I had a school counselor I could openly talk to, teachers who supported me and would do anything for me, was beyond reassuring. I know many didn't really understand much about what it meant to be trans* or how it really felt. Although I had fears of harassment, I realized most students are dealing with their own problems as well. Hardly anyone made a big deal about my transition, and few questioned it. But having that supportive structure backing my decision really helped my transition, at least at school, go smoothly.

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Creating a tailored gender transition plan is the best way to ensure the process is thoughtfully constructed and accounts for these various factors.

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, 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 the student's ability to learn.

Another crucial element in supporting transitioning students 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.

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.” 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.

Supporting transgender students 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.

It is the responsibility of each school and district to ensure 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.

Although 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 schoolwide culture of inclusion and respect for difference

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Planning is essential, but that doesn't mean the process of supporting a transgender student will be without its challenges, anticipated or otherwise. Although 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. And the process is ongoing, as new situations can present themselves even years after a student has socially transitioned.

Whether you're a school 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 students' lives but in the lives of their family, other students, educators and those in your community. 

This article is reprinted from “Schools in Transition: A Guide to Supporting Transgender Students in K-12 Schools,” published by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation. Download the complete publication at <http://www.hrc.org/resources/schools-in-transition-a-guide-for-supporting-transgender-students-in-k-12-s>. For more information and resources on supporting transgender students, visit www.hrc.org. <http://www.welcomingschools.org/resources/school-tips/transgender-youth-what/>.