

Transgender Students and Schools

Some lesbian, gay, bi, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) people have made incredible contributions to this world. They've been scientists, diplomats, athletes, artists, soldiers and human rights activists. Some of the people in your history books were LGBTQ, but you never learned that about them either because of the prejudices of the people who wrote those books or because the person lived at a time when people didn't understand or talk about sexual diversity.

In the U.S. at least 5 LGBTQ individuals -- mostly young trans people of color -- die in brutal hate crimes every year. Thirteen states and Washington, DC prohibit hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity; 17 others, on sexual orientation (but not gender identity). Fifteen have hate crime laws that mention neither of these types of crimes and 5 have no hate crime laws at all.

From the Safe Schools Coalition
<http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/whatisageappropriate.pdf>

Despite the dramatic advances related to the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals, discrimination and bullying of LGBT students remains a significant concern at schools. This is especially so for transgender students. (See the brief glossary of terms appended). Such individuals continue to face wide-spread discrimination and have few legal protections when compared to other minority groups.

While exact numbers are not available, estimates suggest that at least 0.3% of adults in the United States (i.e., 700,000 people) identify as transgender (Gates, 2011). The current generation of young people may be more willing to acknowledge LGBT identities, so previous data probably underestimate prevalence. In any case, transgender youth are an increasingly visible and persecuted minority.

Harassment, Discrimination, and Exclusion Experienced at School

A study by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) revealed that 90 percent of transgender students surveyed had experienced derogatory remarks at school with respect to gender expression. Only 11 percent of these students reported that school staff intervened upon hearing such negative remarks (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009). These data suggest that harassment is frequent, and support often is not forthcoming at schools.

Harassment against transgender students comes from students and even staff. It includes shaming students for deviating from gender norms and may include attempts to coerce them into behaving more in line with stereotypical gender roles. Although attacks usually are verbal, a survey revealed that 12% of LGBT youth had been physically assaulted due to their gender expression. Even youth who are not transgender or even LGBT may be harassed for non-binary gender expression, with gender nonconforming boys facing intense harassment (Pardo & Schantz, 2008).

Discrimination manifests itself in various ways at school. A commonly cited problem is gender-segregated restrooms. Transgender students generally must use restrooms designated for their sex as assigned at birth. Entering such enclosed spaces designated for a gender with which they do not identify and may not even look like can be alienating, stressful, and a location where harassment is likely (American Psychological Association, 2009).

*The material in this document reflects work done by Alexander Levine as part of his involvement with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA,
 Email: smhp@ucla.edu Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu

Minorities often experience feelings of alienation and exclusion. For transgender students, these feelings may be compounded daily by the absence of representation and discussion of transgender individuals and culture in classroom and school-wide activity. For example, only 16% of transgender students report finding LGBT-related topics in school curricula and readings; 43% indicated not being comfortable discussing LGBT issues in school (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009).

Transgender Youth and Mental Health Problems

As with others experiencing barriers to learning at school, long-term consequences of negative experiences at school span a range of mental health, social, and societal concerns. Compared to peers, transgender youth have been described as particularly vulnerable to mental health problems. They can feel fundamentally distressed about the sex and gender they were assigned at birth. (This is labeled gender dysphoria in DSM-5.) Harassment, discrimination, and exclusion can counter feelings of well-being and exacerbate negative self-image, stress, anxiety, feelings of depression, and learning and behavior problems.

47 percent of transgender students reported skipping school at least once in the past month because they felt unsafe, and harassed transgender students earn on average lower GPAs than their peers (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009).

Other mental health concerns arise related to considerations about formal gender transition. Students wanting to make the transition commonly experience significant disapproval and negative input from others, particularly parents. And while transitioning to the gender with which they identify may alleviate some gender dysphoria symptoms, transitions are associated with other mental health concerns (UCSF Center of Excellence for Transgender Health, 2015). These arise from such factors as adaptation difficulties, encountering new forms of environmental stress, and reactions to hormonal medication.

50 percent of transgender youth reported they had seriously contemplated suicide, and transgender individuals are at risk for alcohol and substance abuse and for engaging in unprotected sex (American Psychological Association, 2009).

Legal Protections for Transgender Students

While specific legal protections vary from state to state, protections for transgender students have been increasing in recent years. Nevertheless, transgender students lack rights in many states. There are no federal laws which explicitly protect people from discrimination or harassment on the basis of gender identity and gender expression. However, in 2014 the Department of Education declared that Title IX, the federal law which prohibits sex discrimination in government-funded education, applies to discrimination against transgender students (Margolin, 2014). This declaration has not resulted in nationwide school policy changes.

Currently, 15 states (California, Colorado, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Vermont, Washington, and North Carolina) and the District of Columbia have specific legal protections for transgender students (Margolin, 2014). An example: California's School Success and Opportunity Act of 2013 amended Section 221.5 of the state's education code to permit students to participate in sex-segregated programs and use sex-segregated facilities in accordance with their gender identity, and not their legal sex. California's standards are echoed in laws in Massachusetts, Colorado, and Maine (American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California, 2013).

Examples of School Policies

With respect to policy at the school level, it is noteworthy that only 12 percent of transgender students surveyed by GLSEN reported that their school had policies specifically protecting transgender students (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009). The trend seems to be that it is mostly large urban districts that detail the rights of LGBT students and the actions schools should take to ensure the rights are protected. Here are a few examples:

Los Angeles, California : Schools should be mindful of a student’s privacy in regards to their transgender status. Official records use the student’s legal name and gender, but unofficial records may also include the student’s preferred name, labeled “Also Known As.” Students are permitted to use restrooms and facilities and participate in sports and activities which correspond to their gender identity. School dress codes are required to be gender-neutral. School administration and staff are expected to respond to harassment situations and support students’ gender expression and identity (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2014).

New York, New York : Schools are expected to work closely with students and parents to keep a student’s transgender status confidential. The school may use a student’s preferred name and pronouns on school records, even if they do not match the student’s legal status. Students may join sports teams and other gender-segregated activities in accordance with their gender identity. The policy does not explicitly allow transgender students to use restrooms in accordance with their identity, but notes that they cannot be required to use restrooms which conflict with their gender identity, stating that they may be afforded access to a private restroom. Students may follow gender-specific dress codes which align with their gender identity (New York City Department of Education, 2015).

Columbus, Ohio : Schools should protect the confidentiality of transgender students. Transgender students may participate in athletics without discrimination on the basis of gender identity. It is not stated whether transgender students have rights to be known by their preferred name and use restrooms and dress in accordance with their gender identity (Columbus School District, 2015).

Huntsville, Alabama : The school board policy prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender. However, the policy manual makes no mention of transgender students, or even LGBT students in general (Huntsville City Board of Education, 2015).

Improving School Environments for Transgender Students

As schools transform their student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system, they must fully embed plans for addressing the rights and well-being of all students. Special attention is needed to minimize harassment, discrimination, and exclusion at school. School policy must explicitly protect and support all students; curricula must represent and positively portray all subgroups in society; social and emotional learning must emphasize a sense of community and respect for all.

With specific reference to LGBT students, studies suggest that

- promoting respect for gender identity and expression, fostering resilience, encouraging tolerance and a respectful school community are facilitated when all students learn about sexual and gender diversity;

- pursuing such desirable outcomes is further facilitated when staff use a youth's preferred name and pronouns, respect gender identity privacy, and value individual contributions (Pardo & Schantz, 2008);
- feelings of welcome and safety are engendered by intervening to prevent harassment, discrimination, and exclusion and taking appropriate action when problems arise and by decreasing emphasis on gender binary through use of mixed-gender rather than segregated activities (including providing for organizations such as Gay-Straight Alliances);
- addressing problems related to access and use of school facilities and activities in ways that align with students' gender identity.

About Teaching School Children about Sexual and Gender Diversity

The *Safe Schools Coalition* has outlined age-appropriate ways to teach school children about sexual and gender diversity. They emphasize teaching acceptance of diverse forms of gender expression and sexuality from a young age, focusing on normalizing LGBTQ individuals in school curricula by showing their accomplishments alongside those of heterosexuals beginning in middle school, and teaching appropriate terminology and legal contexts in high school. Such an approach gradually introduces LGBT concepts to all youth, and promotes acceptance of diversity, which is essential to preventing children from forming negative attitudes towards LGBT. This is particularly important in showing a different perspective to students who may only hear negative things about sexual and gender diversity.

Learning About Sexual Diversity at School: What Is Age Appropriate?

<http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/whatisageappropriate.pdf>

Concluding with a Student's Perspective

“Transgender individuals continue to face high levels of harassment, discrimination, and intolerance from society and their peers, reflecting ugly prejudices within a seemingly increasingly LGBT-friendly nation. No one deserves to face prejudice and even risk their personal safety simply for authentically expressing their identity in a way that harms no one else. Schools have the potential to help end these grossly unfair prejudices.

By supporting transgender students and integrating them into the student population, schools can help transgender students feel like the normal and valued members of society that they deserve to be. Since success in school has a strong influence over success later in life, supporting transgender students in schools through policies emphasizing equality and diversity can help transgender individuals close the gap between them and their peers. As one of the first large social environments all children experience, schools have the potential to promote diversity of gender expression rather than propagate socially constructed and sometimes harmful stereotypes. Educating students on the diversity of gender expression and promoting acceptance of diversity can encourage all students to be tolerant of gender nonconformity and to even accept their own nonconforming characteristics. This would help lead to more accepting future in which individuals of all gender identities are viewed as equal and valuable members of society.”

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For more, see the Center for Mental Health in School's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on:
>LGBT – Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Issues – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3017_02.htm

Also, see the following for more about the role of young people:

- >American Civil Liberties Union – www.aclu.org/lgbt-rights
- >Amplify Your Voice – <http://amplifyyourvoice.org/>
- >Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere – www.colage.org/programs/youth
- >Gay Straight Alliance Network – www.gsanetwork.org
- >International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission – www.iglhrc.org/cgi-bin/iowa/content/takeaction/index.html
- >Lambda Legal – www.lambdalegal.org/publications/out-safe-respected
- >National Gay & Lesbian Taskforce's Creating Change Conference – www.creatingchange.org
- >Safe Schools Coalition – www.safeschoolscoalition.org/youth/activists.html
- >Youth Resource – <http://www.youthresource.com/>

Brief Glossary

adapted from <http://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>

- Sex classifies humans as male or female. Medical professionals usually assign a sex to an individual at birth based on the person's genital anatomy.
- Gender identity is how an individual views their own gender, and is usually considered an inseparable aspect of their personal identity. A person may consider themselves to be male, female, somewhere in between, or neither.
- Gender expression is how a person portrays their gender through features such as their name, pronouns, clothing, hairstyle, voice, behavior, and body.
- Transgender is an adjective describing people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differ from what is normally expected of their sex as assigned at birth. The term describes how a person feels about their gender, and is not dependent upon the person's appearance or upon any medical procedures they may or may not have had.
- Cisgender describes people whose gender identity does align with their sex as assigned at birth.
- Transition is the process in which transgender individuals begin to publicly express themselves according to their gender identity. It may, but does not necessarily, include any of the following: adoption of a new name, becoming legally recognized as a different gender, dressing differently, undergoing hormone therapy, and surgery.
- LGBTQ has been adopted to include those who identify as Queer.