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EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES: Helping Educators to Support LGBTQ Students

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Helping Educators to Support LGBTQ Students

PART I: THESE CHANGING TIMES



In the 45 years since Congress passed Title IX prohibiting sex discrimination in federally funded education programs, the country has engaged in a cultural shift. We now view gender as a spectrum. Polling reflects growing acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) individuals. In August 2017, for example, an NBC News poll said that 60% of Americans support same-sex marriage (Murray, 2017).

We now recognize that not every child

fits easily into a specific male and female category. Students who do not fit into a single, discrete category are often referred to as *sexual or gender nonconforming*. Gender markers are fluid across the full spectrum of racial and ethnic communities. Today's young people, across the gender spectrum, are often aware of their own and their peers' sexual identity, expression, and orientation. (McCaskill, 2017).

Despite increased awareness of and more positive media attention to gender diversities, LGBTQ youth continue to face many challenges. In younger children, boys who enjoy stereotypically girl activities encounter more resistance than girls who enjoy stereotypically boy activities. Girls do not encounter as much opposition until they reach puberty.

Although we have made progress with LGBTQ acceptance and understanding, we find that boys have significant fear of

pushing outside the box. In some places, homophobia remains profound; the concept extends to any appearance, emotion or feeling that is considered to be feminine. Being called “gay” or “fag” is not just directed at gays and lesbians; it is the most common form of harassment of all teenagers (Kosciw et al., 2012). Verbal harassment negatively affects 85% of LGBTQ students. More than 25% are physically harassed at school, while 13% of LGBTQ kids actually assaulted. Almost half (49%) are threatened by their peers on social media (NCWGE, 2017).

Distinct from how they are viewed or treated by others, LGBTQ youth may view themselves negatively. These challenges include feeling different from peers, feeling shame about sexual orientation, worrying about parents’ and other adults’ responses, and being rejected and harassed. Many teenagers keep their questions and sexual orientation a secret, because coming out in an unwelcome climate can be fatal (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009).

PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?



As with all equity areas, relationships matter. Educators who wish to support LGBTQ students should consider the following:

LEARN THE LANGUAGE.

- *Cisgender* refers to those whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.
- *Gender expression* refers to the way a person acts to communicate gender within a given culture, through clothing, school behaviors and activities, and social interests (American Psychological Association, 2011). Some children call themselves *gender queer*, and some professionals refer to transgender teens as *gender variant*.
- *Gender fluidity* refers to those who move back and forth across the male-to-female spectrum.
- *Gender identity* refers to one's

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sense of self as male, female, some combination of male and female, neither male or female or both.

When a child's gender identity and biological sex are not congruent, the person may identify as transsexual or as another transgender category (American Psychological Association, 2011; Merriam Webster, 2017).

- *Sexual orientation* refers to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted. Categories include gay or lesbian (homosexuals), straight (heterosexuals), and bisexuals. Research suggests that sexual orientation occurs on a continuum and may even change over time. (American Psychological Association, 2011).
- *Trans girls* are children who were born with male genitals yet identify as girls.
- *Trans boys* are children who were born with female organs yet identify as boys.

WATCH FOR DANGER SIGNS.

Some LGBTQ teens exhibit signs of depression, manifested by isolating themselves socially and having lower self-esteem and lower school performance. Educators should be alert for these signs of distress because LGBTQ youth have more than twice the

rate of suicide ideation than straight kids (Adelman & Braverman, et al., 2013). LGBTQ teens who do not have safe spaces to come out risk being teased mercilessly. Lesbian and gay students (often exacerbated by race, ethnicity, religion, and geography) are often forced into isolation at a time when they truly need connection and support. To thrive as individuals and as members of society, we need a sense of community and closeness, regardless of our social class, race, culture, or gender.

UNITE WITH THEIR PARENTS.

A 2010 study by San Francisco State University found that LGBTQ adolescents with accepting parents not only were more confident, but also were at much lower risk of depression and substance abuse (Sadowski, 2010). Teachers can help with this evolution. Allowing children to express their own chosen identity, even at a preschool age, can prevent frustration and anger down the line. According to Ehrensaft, "It is not a matter of labeling or projecting into the future, but knowing who your child [or student] is right now" (2012).

REVIEW AND STRENGTHEN SCHOOL POLICES.

Review your school's policies to ensure they include comprehensive

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bullying/sexual harassment policies that specifically speak to nonconforming gender youth. Educate your students and staff. Provide professional development for school staff so they have a better understanding of how to support LGBTQ students, increase their accountability when they see students at risk or when they see students who are engaging in harassing and bullying behaviors. Address cyber-bullying by understanding and defining prohibited actions clearly. Educate your students as to how they can report incidents and what consequences they will face if they engage in cyberbullying. Explain how to protect themselves online by never giving out personal information.

FOSTER AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE.

Support student activities and clubs that engage LGBTQ students. Examples include Gay-Straight Alliance, Safe Schools Coalition, and the Trevor Project. Provide programs and information for family and community members so that adults and their LGBTQ children are both protected and encouraged to meet (or exceed) educational expectations. PFLAG

(formerly known as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), has a comprehensive website with toolkits and resources. It also has chapters that will work directly with your school to provide support, resources, and training.

Sound school practices and policies will help students – all students – to have the freedom to find out who they are, speak their minds, identify their own passions and skills, and achieve. The adults who are responsible for our children must be held accountable to learn to respond early and effectively to bias, bullying, and harassment.

Educators must model and be more accepting of gender diversities so that students can develop the skills necessary to respond to a more hostile world and become resilient.

* Developed from an article by Susan Shaffer and Phyllis Lerner for IDRA'S EAC-South. Susan Shaffer is President of MAEC and Executive Director of the Center for Education Equity (CEE). Phoebe Schlanger is CEE's Publications Editor.

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