Focus: Gender Justice

Making Schools Safe Learning Havens for LGBTQ Students

by Stephanie Garcia, Ph.D., & Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

LGBTQ students face attacks and discrimination daily in our schools. A student says to another, "That's so gay!" An adult tells a student that being gay is a sin. A coach chides a male student athlete, "You throw like a girl!"

Statements like these are distressing and harmful. In the United States, 60% of students feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation (Kosciw, et al., 2018).

Over time, educators have become more sensitive to gender and gender identity issues, yet many challenges remain. Boys perceived as unmanly and effeminate are bullied, harassed or assaulted by their peers. Girls who identify as "butch" are sometimes ridiculed by peers and counseled by adults to look more "normal." A gay boy "comes out" to a counselor and pleads that he not tell his parents. Same sex couples cause a scandal when choosing to attend their prom. Some quote their religious faith to defend discrimination and abuse of LGBTQ students.

Students have a right to be safe in school and to have the support of educators to learn and grow toward their potential. Students and teachers alike should have schools that are safe places, free from bias and discrimination. Educators have an ethical mandate to value every student as they present themselves and a legal mandate to support each student's learning. But many educators are ill-equipped to challenge bullying

and harassment and proactively support victims.

A school's culture affects the success and socio-emotional status of students and teachers. Whether explicit or implicit, bias impacts people's thoughts, emotions and behaviors. Policies and practices must challenge homophobia and support acceptance of all students exactly as they are and how they express themselves.

Useful Resources for Schools

The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments *Safe Place to Learn* resource affirms, "Every school should be a safe place to learn, and every school should exert multiple efforts to that end" (2016). Making this real requires diligence from multiple sectors within the school community. A serious effort to transform a school must go beyond an isolated training session for staff.

Instead, educators can create an anti-bias and safe learning environment through focused and strategic planning, professional development and follow-up activities. In the process, school administrators and teachers can strengthen their abilities to appreciate differences, unique individualities and lived experiences of their students.

Teachers can model being strong listeners who are sensitive to students' experiences with trauma. Adults in a school can learn to recognize

"Student safety is foundational to student learning. Gender-based injustice and discrimination against LGBTQ students are not just harmful to students' well-being; they also have long-lasting academic and societal impacts."

– Celina Moreno, J.D., IDRA President and CEO

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biases, and teachers can teach critical thinking that deepens compassion and acceptance for students by students.

The implementation guide of the *Safe Place to Learn* package organizes the resource to help three groups: (1) administrative leadership, (2) building staff, and (3) staff responsible for interceding with and responding to students. The authors suggest that district- and school-based leadership study the guide in preparation for disseminating the general staff training series. The IDRA EAC-*South* can work with school districts and schools that are in its 11-state service area (Get details online: https://www.idra.org/eac-south).

Four key areas to address follow.

Reframe communication – School leaders can provide guided opportunities for staff to critically and honestly examine their own attitudes and evidence of implicit bias. Teachers can promote and model healthy relationships and behaviors. Teacher communication holds the power to increase respect, positivity and empowerment for today's youth.

Analyze school policies – School leaders may need to remove policy language, such as in codes of conduct, that is not clear or penalizes students on issues covered in this article. For example, some schools prohibit students from wearing clothing supporting LGBTQ issues. IDRA recently cautioned the Texas Legislature on this issue. IDRA National Director of Policy, Advocacy and Community Engagement, Morgan Craven, J.D., shared, "Even for the exact same behaviors, students of color, students with disabilities and LGBTQ students are more likely to be punished – and punished more harshly

– than their peers" (2019). It is vital to critically analyze school policies to examine underlying assumptions and make revisions to ensure equity.

Confront myths and stereotypes head on – Materials exist that help educators understand the issues that harm LGBTQ students, help disprove myths and point out the damage stereotypes does to students (see resource list in box at right).

Prevent and eliminate harassment and violence – *Safe Place to Learn* is a good, free resource package by the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments that is designed to help establish and maintain a safe, supportive learning environment and mitigate factors that interfere with learning. This implementation guide confronts sexual harassment, implicit bias and the presence of trauma. All three of these areas are crucial for all schools to address for all students (Aldebot-Green, et al., 2014).

IDRA EAC-*South* carries out an important mandate for justice and equity in all our schools, including technical assistance and training for Title IX, an act that includes protections and support for students based on gender, including LGBTQ students. From school district administrators in Georgia and Texas to teachers in Virginia, the IDRA EAC-*South* provides training for school districts to ensure a safe and equitable school environments for all students. We can respond to a request that is within the mandates of the program and conduct onsite assistance tailored to the needs of a school.

It takes hard work and planning, but it can be done. Schools can be safe learning havens for LGBTQ students.

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Discipline Strategies to Combat Faulty Assumptions that Target Black Male Youth

by Daryl V. Williams, Ed.D.

No student group is more or less likely to misbehave (NAACP LDF, 2017; Fabelo, et al., 2011). But Black male students are punished more often and more severely in our nation's schools. While only representing 8% of public school students, Black males account for 25% of students receiving out-of-school suspensions and 23% of students expelled (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). From office referrals to suspensions and expulsions, the most substantive impact of school discipline is on Black males (Anyon, et al., 2014).

For instance, Black male students are more likely than their White peers to receive an office referral for mild behaviors, such as disrespect, excessive noise and insubordination (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba, et al., 2002). Interpretation of these behaviors is subjective, meaning educators and administrators perceive them to be more or less serious depending on the identity of the student. In addition, many educators have the common misperception that exclusionary discipline deters inappropriate behavior.

A recent study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that schools with higher rates of suspensions have "substantial negative long-run impacts" in educational attainment and in the criminal justice system. These negative effects are more pronounced for males and people of color. (Bacher-Hicks, et al., 2019)

The use of suspension and expulsion in school discipline results in reduced instructional time and negatively impacts students' academic performance (NAACP LDF, 2017; Morris & Perry, 2016). IDRA's study in 2016 found that zero tolerance discipline policies in Texas likely contributed to high attrition rates of Black students and Hispanic students (Johnson, 2016).

Additional studies show the significant linkages between suspension and expulsion and justice system contact leading Black males into the school-to-prison pipeline (Fabelo, et al., 2011; Jagger, et al., 2016; Monahan, et al., 2014; Mowen & Grent, 2016; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Schools with high numbers of students of color and males tend to incorporate prison-like features, including police presence, security and surveillance measures, and stringent discipline policies. These schools are less likely to use restorative practices, have sufficient counseling services or mental health supports, or maintain strong community engagement to improve school climate.

School leaders and policymakers should use alternative, non-exclusionary discipline strategies and other actions when addressing behavior among all students, including the following.

Incorporate restorative justice programs to ensure that all students, regardless of race or gender, have equal opportunity to receive appropriate and restorative disciplinary responses.

Change the school climate from a prison-like environment that emphasizes the presence of police and resource officers, surveillance cameras, metal detectors and mandatory zero-tolerance practices into healthy learning and living systems that meet the needs of the whole child through strong school-community partnerships.

Ensure there is a sufficient number of school mental health professionals and counselors to provide necessary supports to students (academically, socially and emotionally).

Expand family and community engagement to open dialogue about joint goals for student success. Family and community members can work in partnership with the school to monitor discipline and other data and to identify strategies.

Review academic and instructional practices that impact the learning environment. Teachers can incorporate differentiated instruction strategies and culturally-responsive pedagogy to spark

Many educators have the common misperception that exclusionary discipline deters inappropriate behavior.

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students' imaginations and increase engagement in the classroom.

Initiatives such as these are working. While the rate of out-of-school suspensions for Black males was 25% in 2015-16, this is a decline from 38% in 2013-14.

The IDRA EAC-*South* works with schools in the U.S. South to address disparities in school discipline. Our assistance builds capacity to increase positive school climates, revise discriminatory student discipline practices, and establish effective family and parent engagement (Johnson, & Velázquez, 2019). More information is available at https://www.idra.org/eac-south.

Resources

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IDRA EAC-*South*
Family Engagement
Online Assistance Package

Few people question the value of parents being involved in schools. But many school leaders labor with traditional strategies that have little meaning or success. This IDRA EAC-*South* Family Engagement Web-based Technical Assistance Package is designed to provide educators tools for embracing what, for many, is a new vision for engaging with families and community members.

This free web-based package includes five chapters, each with a video and supporting resources, infographics, articles & podcasts.

Chapter 1	Chapter 2	Chapter 3	Chapter 4	Chapter 5
Introduction to Family Leadership in Education	**Authentic Outreach**	**The Six Principles of Family Engagement**	**School Strategies for Family Engagement**	**Education CAFE Overview**
Get an overview of family leadership in education and its benefits.	See how authentic family outreach differs from traditional ideas of parent outreach. And get specific strategies for implementing authentic outreach.	Explore the six principles of creating meaningful family leadership in education.	Get some strategies for schools that support family leadership in education which is the key path for families to influence policy and practice.	Find out how Education CAFEs work and hear from members on how it has helped them and their schools.
5:15 min.	4:30 min.	4:52 min.	5:43 min.	3:08 min.

https://idra.news/webFamEngage

The IDRA EAC-*South* is the equity assistance center that provides free or low-cost technical assistance to schools in the U.S. South. With roots in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the four federally-funded equity assistance centers help school districts build capacity to confront educational problems occasioned by race, national origin, sex and gender, and religion.

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Strategies for Increasing Girls' Participation in STEM

by Paula Johnson, Ph.D., & Michelle Vega

Underrepresentation of young women in STEM education negatively affects their future career paths and results in countless missed opportunities for achievement and discovery in those fields. The implications are even larger for girls of color and for those who are economically disadvantaged. These disparities exist due to wide gaps in science, technology, engineering and mathematics representation and access.

Female students perform equally well as males on standardized tests in math and science, and they tend to earn higher grades than their male peers during high school (Buddin, 2014). But, in education and workplaces, gender equity in STEM is still elusive.

A study conducted by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) concluded that the educational environment around girls shapes their interests and achievements in STEM studies (Hill, et al., 2010). The report points to environmental and social barriers, including stereotypes, gender bias, and the climate of science and engineering courses that continue to hinder women's progress in STEM.

As society grows its digital economy, it is critical that we position women to be successful within this economy. This includes creating access and opportunity for girls to learn about STEM study and career pathways and encouraging and expecting girls to join the STEM workforce.

Following are some strategies for promoting STEM equity in the classroom. For more suggestions, see IDRA's eBook: *Girls and STEM Education – Research Overview and Resources* (https://budurl.me/IDRAeBgSTEMp).

Show the Range of STEM Opportunities

To encourage more girls and girls of color to participate in STEM studies, schools can be more explicit about the range of STEM areas. Schools can also deliberately infuse stories of women's contributions in the STEM fields and how it benefits girls to pursue advanced coursework in this area. This helps students see themselves in such fields and gives them a chance to find the right fit for themselves.

Encourage STEM Investigations

Teachers can encourage students to conduct STEM investigations based on their own interests and expertise, particularly related to issues in their communities. This can take the form of individual projects or larger project-based learning programs. The key is to demonstrate the application of STEM to real-world questions. For example, a team of youth concerned about the effects of an open sewage treatment plant in their south Texas neighborhood conducted experiments on water quality and presented their findings to the city council (Montemayor, et al., 2017).

Provide STEM Mentoring Opportunities

It is important for girls to connect with successful women in STEM careers. Reaching out to female STEM mentors provides access to professionals who can answer field-related questions. For example, IDRA's Texas Chief Science Office program that the IDRA EAC-*South* is managing in Texas connects students with STEM professionals within their community and empowers students to pursue their STEM interests. Students create year-long STEM action plans in their schools and pursue them to completion throughout the school year.

Explore STEM Careers and Studies

STEM is a vast landscape of opportunity, and there are many career pathways and college programs to share with students. Elementary school teachers can begin the process by helping students make connections between STEM classes and future career options.

Chief Science Officer (CSO) Shreya [left] with CSO Riley [right] in San Antonio. Shreya says the CSO program has helped her lead and speak up more. She is working on starting a robotics club at her school.

WEBSITE
Learn about the Chief Science Officer program:
https://www.idra.org/services/chief-science-officers-program

Many programs outside of school interest young students and engage the whole family. Museums, zoos, scouting organizations, and STEM clubs can offer workshops and events for students. Having a strong knowledge base in STEM topics gives students the opportunity to approach higher level coursework in high school with confidence.
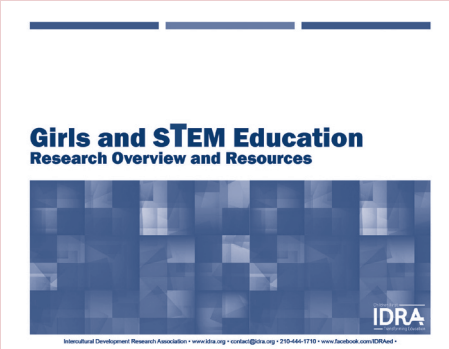
Nurture Family Engagement in STEM Learning

Dr. Linda Kekelis (2017), founder of Techbridge Girls, offers the following suggestions for engaging with families for STEM connections.

Bring on the toys. Games like tool sets, blocks, Legos and Tinker Crates give students opportunities to develop skills in science and math. Jenga and Tetris increase critical thinking and engineering principles. Practicing STEM skills in a fun environment allows students to build mastery in these areas in a stress-free setting.

Monitor media messages. Schools can support families in monitoring negative messages girls learn through the media that portray STEM – and particularly computer "nerds" – in ways that are both inaccurate and demeaning. Thank-

fully, there has been an increase in programming that showcases girls and women in STEM. For example, the movie *Hidden Figures* features three inspiring Black women from different STEM fields. The film shows how their talents came together to put the first man on the moon. Educators can highlight such media in the classroom and share good examples with families.

Encourage hands-on activity trials. Schools at all grade levels can provide opportunities for families and students to participate in STEM events, like hosting a science fest or math night. Attending these functions demonstrates that families value and support students' STEM interest and exploration. Teachers can be intentional about inviting girls and their families to STEM events at the school or in the community.

Encouraging young girls to study and pursue careers in STEM is vital to our economy. If girls are entering the workforce in record numbers, it is time to provide them with the tools they need to thrive. The goal is not to merely for them to find jobs. The goal is for students to find a meaningful career – a career that will not only change their lives but open a new trajectory of their family for generations to come.

See our updated eBook:

Girls and STEM Education – Research Overview & Resources

https://budurl.me/IDRAeBgSTEMp

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In Memoriam – William S. White

One of the longest-serving leaders of a major philanthropy in the United States, William S. White passed away peacefully on October 9 at age 82. Leading the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, he built a reputation for seeking out solid, well-managed organizations and funding them to create infrastructure and sustainability in key sectors, including education. He embraced Charles Stewart Mott's belief that good things happen when people work in partnership with their communities.

One such community partnership project the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation funded was IDRA's Blueprints for Action initiative, a series of community dialogues aimed at fostering cross-race, joint Black and Latino leadership in education. IDRA held dialogues in communities in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Texas focused on fulfilling the promise of equity made by the court rulings in Brown vs. Board of Education and Mendez vs. Westminster.

Mr. White also was a founding board member with IDRA president emerita, Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, of CIVICUS, a global organization focused on developing civil society.

Mr. White's philanthropic career was remarkable for both its longevity and impact. His presence will be sorely missed, but his legacy will undoubtedly live on.

See the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation memoriam: https://www.mott.org/news/articles/in-memoriam-william-s-white

(Making Schools Safe, continued from Page 2)

Resources

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IDRA EAC-*South* Assistance

The IDRA EAC-*South*'s capacity-building technical assistance can help state and local education agencies in addressing inequities and desegregation issues impacting sex and gender equity. Among other benefits, promoting sex and gender equity can help schools ensure equal access to rigorous coursework, a healthier and safe learning climate, and high quality teaching.

How sex and gender equity may manifest itself in schools and possible technical assistance services

- Underrepresentation of girls or girls of color in advanced science and math courses.
- Overrepresentation of boys for school discipline.
- More resources placed into male versus female sports.
- Bullying and harassment of students who have self-identified or are perceived as being LGBTQ.
- Other activities, programs and services that treat students differently and inequitably based on sex and/or gender.

For more information, visit
www.idraeacsouth.org/gendersex

School Climate Affects LGBTQ Student Well-being

60% of LGBTQ students feel unsafe at school.

35% of LGBTQ students missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

92% of LGBTQ students felt distressed by hearing anti-LGBTQ remarks at school.

57% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are 3-5 times more likely to attempt suicide.

42% of transgender people will attempt suicide in their lifetime.

62% of LGBTQ students report experiencing LGBTQ-related discriminatory policies or practices at school.

Some schools have policies prohibiting students from...

- ✖ discussing or writing about LGBTQ topics in school assignments;
- ✖ attending a dance or function with someone of the same gender;
- ✖ wearing clothing or items supporting LGBTQ issues; and
- ✖ using the preferred name or pronoun of transgender and gender nonconforming students.

LGBTQ students who experienced higher levels of victimization because of their sexual orientation or gender expression...

- Were nearly **three times as likely** to have missed school in the past month than those who experienced lower levels;
- Had **lower grade point averages** than students who were less often harassed;
- Were **twice as likely** to report that they did not plan to pursue college than those who experienced lower levels; and
- Were **more likely** to have been disciplined at school.

Students who feel safe and supported at school naturally do better in school

Effective School-based Supports...

- Inclusive curriculum
- Non-discriminatory school policies
- Staff training
- Supportive educators
- Using the Chosen Name of Trans Youths
- Supportive of student clubs

Data Sources: The 2017 National School Climate Survey, GLSEN; Side by Side, 2019

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