

Building LGBTQ+ Inclusive Schools

When I was in high school, my friends and I used to gossip about which teachers we thought might be gay. At the time, it was teenagers just chatting and having a good time. Looking back, I realize that we were searching desperately for examples of adults who were like us. Role models who could show us that it was possible to live a normal adult life and be queer.

As a queer educator, this is one of the reasons I feel it's important that I am out to my students. I want my LGBTQ+ students to see what's possible. I also want my non-LGBTQ+ students to see that queer people are normal people who care about them and make them do homework. But one caring adult doesn't make all of school a safe space for our LGBTQ+ youth. Every educator has a role to play in providing these students with a welcoming space to learn and grow.

According to GLSEN's 2019 National School Climate Survey, there are four facets to a supporting environment for LGBTQ+ students. These are:

- Comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies
- Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs)
- An LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum
- Teachers and school staff who are supportive of LGBTQ+ students

Most schools know the benefit of anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies. If your district needs to update its policies, the Michigan State Board of Education Model Anti-Bullying Policy [https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/SBE_Model_AntiBullying_Policy_Revised_9.8_172355_7.pdf] and MOASH's Bias Incident Response Best Practices recommendations [https://www.moash.org/uploads/1/1/5/8/115876627/bias_incident_best_practices_web.pdf] are a great place to start. Good policies, however, are just the start.

Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) have a proven positive impact on school culture both for LGBTQ+ students and straight, cisgender students. They give students more control over their own school experience and a place within school where they can be their most authentic selves. The presence of a GSA sends a message of inclusion to all students. If you're helping your students establish a GSA, please check out the GSA Network's guide to building your GSA [<https://gsanetwork.org/resources/building-your-gsa/>].

Rudine Sims Bishop's concept of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors has framed our discussions around inclusive curriculum for the last 30 years. LGBTQ+ students also need to see themselves in their curriculum. Every subject of study has historical figures who are queer. From Walt Whitman to Alan Turing, Bayard Rustin to Gilbert Baker, LGBTQ+ people have always contributed to society. When I went to college and first realized that there were people I had studied whose queerness had been ignored, it felt like I had been deliberately cut off from my own history. Normalizing queer identities within your curriculum helps reduce the isolation felt by many queer youth.

While reactive anti-bullying policies are necessary, we all know that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. As an educator, creating spaces where homophobia, transphobia, and queer-antagonism are unacceptable is key to supporting LGBTQ+ students. When you hear anti-LGBTQ behaviors, GLSEN has a great 5-step approach to handling the situation.

1. **Address it immediately.** Stop the behavior in the moment. Even if you say to yourself that you will address it with that student later, the rest of the class is seeing inaction, and your queer students are wondering if they can trust you.
2. **Name the behavior.** This is as simple as describing what you saw or heard and putting a name to it. For example: “That’s a derogatory word, which is not welcome in my classroom.”
3. **Use the teachable moment.** This could be done in the moment or later, with the entire class or just those affected, but don’t let the moment disappear. Have a conversation about what happened.
4. **Support the targeted student.** Don’t assume you know how they are feeling or what they need. Ask them, even if it’s not in the moment, and then do your best to provide what they need.
5. **Hold students accountable.** Sometimes, we think that by completing steps 1 through 4, we have handled the problem, but it’s important that consequences are consistent, bullying policies are followed, and that we remain fair with our students. For that reason, follow through with any policies and consequences set forth by your school or district.

In addition to addressing these moments in our classrooms, teachers have the power to build supportive communities and normalize LGBTQ+ identities. We can do this by decentering gendered language, like swapping “mom and dad” for “parents” or removing phrases that unintentionally reinforce outdated gender roles, like asking for strong boys to help carry something heavy. Most LGBTQ+ discrimination boils down to gender roles and punishing those who break what is expected of their gender. The existence of LGBTQ+ people can challenge deeply entrenched notions of what it means to be a man or a woman. By refusing to segregate students by gender wherever possible, challenging ideas that certain interests are for boys or for girls, using the 5-step approach to interrupt when gender stereotypes are being upheld, and helping our students interrogate their gender-based views, we can build a culture where all people are safe and included.

Our LGBTQ+ students need us to create spaces where they are safe. All educators, no matter how they identify, play a role in creating a more just, welcoming society.

WHEN YOU WITNESS ANTI-LGBTQ BEHAVIORS

1

ADDRESS IT IMMEDIATELY

2

NAME THE BEHAVIOR

3

TEACHABLE MOMENT!

4

SUPPORT TARGETED STUDENT

5

HOLD STUDENTS ACCOUNTABLE

Source: GLSEN