LGBTQ+ Issues in Schools: A Guide for Students and Educators

 Reviewed by Lanie Gray, teacher and LGBTQ advocate

> Editor's note: We recognize that many LGBTQ+ teachers feel left out of the conversation when training occurs, resources are provided at their schools, or in articles like this one. The way information is presented may even seem to assume you don't exist. We also know that many LGBTQ+ teachers are unable to be safely "out" at school due to unaccepting school cultures, and those who are out often experience challenges cisgender, heterosexual teachers don't, such as name-calling from students, distrustful and unaccepting parents, or being discouraged from bringing their loved ones to events to which staff families are invited.
>
> We want to let you know that we "see" you and understand you may be struggling. This guide intends to function as a resource for all educators. We have also included some information that may help you with your own struggles throughout the piece, as well as a list of resources at the bottom that you may find helpful. Thank you for all you do for your students and the world!

Educators and students know that feeling supported and safe in school is essential for academic success and mental health. Still, many have questions about how to ensure these things for LGBTQ+ learners. For years, there has been discussion over how to ensure the inclusion of special needs, second language, and racially and ethnically diverse students, but recognizing the unique needs of LGBTQ+ students is a more recent development. Many teaching programs provide little to no training in this area, and few school districts mandate professional development for this necessary advancement.

This guide is geared toward students and educators at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels. It includes information about the importance of LGBTQ+ inclusion in education, legal concerns that could arise, and actionable steps to support LGBTQ+ students. We also provide a wealth of resources for students, teachers, and families to help improve academic achievement and socioemotional security.

A Note About Terminology
We will generally use LGBTQ+—meaning lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and others who place themselves as part of the community but aren't accurately represented by these letters—in this piece. However, there will be times when different acronyms are used. This is because different sources use acronyms related to their own studies. To learn more about terminology, see our glossary at the bottom of this page.

How Many of My Students are LGBTQ+?

In 2017, the CDC Youth Behavior Surveillance Report conducted a nationwide survey of schools that teach students in grades nine through 12. They discovered that 2.4% of those students stated they were gay or lesbian, 8% said they were bisexual, and 4.2% were unsure of their orientations. That same year, the CDC surveyed students in 10 states and nine urban school districts to discover how many students identified as transgender, with a result of 1.8%.

However, people are likely to be aware of their gender identities and/or sexual orientations well before high school. A study by the Family Acceptance Project shows that children as young as two can express gender identity, and some people know as early as the first grade that they're attracted to people of their own gender. In Washington D.C. alone, 6.2% of middle school students identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual as far back as 2012—and more and more people are identifying as such every year.

If you're a college professor, you should also assume you have LGBTQ+ students in each class. In 2017, GLAAD discovered that 12% of the total population identifies as LGBTQ. Those between 18 and 34—the age range at which many attend college—were the most likely to openly identify as such, with a full 20% of that population owning these identities and orientations.

So, how many students in your room will be LGBTQ+? A high school class of 25 students would statistically have these *approximate* numbers:

- One gay or lesbian student
- Two bisexual students
- One student questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity
- Zero to one transgender student

Assuming there is no crossover between groups—it's not uncommon for people to tick multiple boxes of identity and orientation—that is up to five students (one-fifth of your class). Additionally, these studies didn't include students who identify as genderfluid, pansexual, etc., so the numbers could be higher.

It's also important to consider the adult population involved with schools. As 12% of adults identify as LGBTQ+, a class of 25 students with two parents or guardians each would statistically mean there are six LGBTQ+-identifying guardians in that group—likely more, as parents and guardians of current students tend to be in the younger age groups, which are more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ than their older counterparts. Additionally, if your school has 200 staff members, that statistically means 24 of them identify as LGBTQ+. Remember: Not everyone is out or feels comfortable sharing this information with school staffers, and it's impossible to know if someone is LGBTQ+ just by looking at them. As such, it's essential to always use inclusive language in your everyday conversations, professional development sessions, and so forth, as well as ensure that your classroom materials don't solely include stories or images of heterosexual, cisgender parents and children.

Why LGBTQ+ Students Need Supportive Teachers and Administrators

It can seem daunting to understand the specific needs of LGBTQ+ students, how those differ from the needs of other diverse groups, and how to adjust your methods for their well-being. However, it's essential to ensure that LGBTQ+ students feel safe and supported—in fact, it can be a matter of life and death.

> **I feel like my school isn't trying very hard to be inclusive or make productive change, but the students and specific faculty members are. We have a GSA and a district organization which are both really helpful, but are mostly student led. I wish the adults would TRY HARDER!**
>
> –Anonymous Student Respondent to Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) Survey

Why Do LGBTQ+ Students Need Educators' Help?

Most educators studied Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs during their training. The needs are in a pyramid shape, and the lower levels must be met before the higher levels can be. The order from bottom to top is:

- **Basic needs:** food, shelter, clothing, etc.
- **Safety:** stability in finances and home life, freedom from harassment and bullying, etc.
- **Social:** positive interactions with others, supportive friends and families, etc.
- **Esteem:** feeling positive about oneself
- **Self-actualization:** the ability to use one's talents, show their personality, and grow academically and socially without worrying about the opinions of others

In other words, if a student doesn't have their basic human needs met, they can't feel safe. If a student doesn't feel safe, they're less likely to experience positive social interactions. If they feel socially rejected or isolated, their self-esteem is affected negatively. If they don't feel confident, they can't reach their true potential.

Unfortunately, LGBTQ+ students meet barriers at every level and potentially at higher rates than many of their cisgender and straight peers. For example, in terms of basic needs, any student can suffer from a rough home life or experience poverty. However, for LGBTQ+ students—even those whose families *can* provide for them—many don't have these needs met. A good number of these students, often unbeknownst to school staff, live without a home, a safe place to stay, or access to nutrition or healthcare. Lambda Legal reports that between 20% and 40% of homeless youth in the United States are LGBTQ+, largely owing to rejection from their family and mistreatment or misunderstanding from staff and residents at shelters and foster homes. Many of these homeless youth engage in dangerous activities like sex work to survive, which adds their lack of security.

While schools should be safe places for everyone, for many LGBTQ+ youths, they aren't. GLSEN, the premier resource for LGBTQ+ students and inclusive education in the U.S., reported in their 2017 National School Climate Survey that 59.5% of LGBTQ students feel unsafe due to their sexual orientations, as do 44.6% because of their gender expression. The vast majority experienced verbal harassment, over a quarter reported physical harassment, nearly half dealt with cyberbullying, and almost 60% said they had been sexually harassed—all at school. Many also reported feeling discriminated against at school in terms of discipline, particularly because of rules that disproportionally affect them, such as gender-normative dress codes. Additionally, and perhaps most disturbingly, 56.6% heard homophobic comments and 71% heard negative comments about gender expression *from teachers and staff.*

Learning can feel like an impossible feat for many LGBTQ+ students when they don't even have their basic needs met or fear for their safety. In fact, LGBTQ+ students who report feeling victimized or discriminated against at school frequently have lower GPAs than their peers, are less likely to want to attend college, and experience higher absenteeism.

Most staff members don't deny these problems exist. Another GLSEN study showed 21.1% of middle and 22.9% of high school teachers have heard homophobic remarks at school; 5.2% of middle and 5.1% of high school teachers have heard transphobic comments; and 43.2% of middle and 40.5% of high school teachers have heard "gay" as a synonym for "stupid" or "bad." Despite this, the aforementioned School Climate Survey shows that 47.2% of students felt staff members *never intervene*, while only 3.6% said they *always* intervene. 55.3% of students said they don't report negative encounters to staff because they doubted teachers would do anything or believed the problems could worsen. Of those who did report issues to staff, 60.4% said the report was not followed up on, or they were told to ignore what happened.

As a school staff member, you know you can't see everything and often rely on student reports. But, as the study shows, those reports aren't likely to happen. You also know that while a student may perceive that nothing was done, there may have been action taken, but the results were protected by privacy rules—or that you reported the issue as mandated by your school, but the next level did nothing.

Therefore, teachers and staff must be vigilant and intervene publicly. This should begin on the first day of school when laying out classroom expectations and continue throughout the year. When you hear a negative comment or microaggression, even a simple "knock it off," "that's not acceptable," "remember our rules," or similar statements to the offending student can go a long way. They show your students that you won't tolerate such things and that you're there to support *every* student. To drive the point home, follow up with the offending student after class to talk about what happened and issue consequences if necessary—sometimes there was a slip of the tongue or a misunderstanding of a word or phrase used, but sometimes the incident was intentional. Speak with the affected student as well, and explain to them that privacy issues are involved, so you can't necessarily share actions taken—but assure them they have been or will be. Read more about overcoming barriers to intervention.

A Special Note to Administrators

While 52.8% of LGBTQ+ students said they'd feel comfortable talking with a school counselor and 42.3% said they'd feel comfortable speaking with a teacher, only 25.9% said they felt they could talk to administrators. In fact, nearly 26% felt their administration was *unsupportive* of the LGBTQ+ community. It's essential, therefore, that you take extra steps to ensure your

LGBTQ+ students know you support them. Create inclusive school rules for both teachers and students—and enforce them. You can learn how to do this by attending LGBTQ+ trainings for educators, such as those provided by GLSEN. If you can't find a training scheduled in your area, contact GLSEN directly and tell them you want to learn—they'll be happy to help. You can even arrange for them to run a workshop for your staff.

What Are Microaggressions?

"Microaggressions" are "the everyday, subtle, intentional—and often unintentional—interactions or behaviors that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalized groups," according to Kevin Nadal, a psychology professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Everyone—no matter how strong of an ally they are to marginalized groups—commits microaggressions. These can include, but aren't limited to, asking a person of color where they're *really* from, creating physical space between oneself and a person different from them, using words like "tomboy," using phrases like "boys will be boys," and assuming someone's gender based on their appearance. This also encompasses overt but historically accepted phrases, like "smear the queer," "gay" and "retarded" as negatives, and "throwaway" slurs students or teachers may have grown up saying, like "transsexual" instead of "transgender" (unless a person specifically states they prefer the former).

The way to handle these things the first time is a conversation—ask the student (or a fellow teacher) what they meant or why they used the words they chose, and offer suggestions about what to do or say instead (e.g., "ridiculous" instead of "gay"). People may get defensive, especially if they didn't realize they did it, but stay calm and firm. If the microaggressions continue without attempts to stop the habits, issue consequences if the offenders are students or speak to administrators if the offenders are staff members.

LGBTQ+ BIPOC Students

Students who identify as both Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC) and LGBTQ+ experience additional challenges that their white LGTBQ+ peers don't. GLSEN created comprehensive reports on Black, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), Latinx, and Native and Indigenous LGBTQ youth. These reports show that all BIPOC LGBTQ student groups reported feeling more unsafe at school due to their sexual orientations or gender identities than for their ethnic/racial identity alone—though the majority said dual bias and victimization were common. This bias doesn't necessarily come only from their peers either, as these students are suspended at higher rates than their white LGBTQ peers. Additionally, LGBTQ BIPOC students were more likely to attempt suicide than white LGBTQ youth.

Interventions with BIPOC LGBTQ students are similar to those for LGBTQ+ students in general. However, research shows they benefit from having school clubs related to their races/ethnicities, particularly ones that are LGBTQ+ positive or are specifically for LGBTQ+ BIPOC students. Additionally, take special care when speaking with them about their experiences—the majority of teachers are white and must be willing to listen and learn. Advisors of such organizations should meet regularly, whether they're within the same school, district, or region, to work together to overcome their own biases about people who are BIPOC, LGBTQ+, or both. Even the best allies have unconscious biases and often aren't fully informed about the groups with whom they're working.

> **Racial/ethnic minority LGBT youth have to develop both their sexual and racial/ethnic identities as they develop their overall identity. And as members of intersecting marginalized groups, they may encounter stigma at multiple levels, which can influence their identity formation, their lived experiences and their life trajectories.**
>
> –Vinny L. Chulani, M.D.

LGBTQ+ Youth and Suicide

It's a topic no one wants to think about, but one that teachers and staff members at all levels must be keenly aware of: the suicide rates of LGBTQ+ students. According to The Trevor Project, suicide is the second most common reason young people die, "with LGBTQ youth being 4 times more likely to consider suicide, to make a plan for suicide, and to attempt suicide than their peers." To put that into hard numbers regarding LGBTQ+ people between the ages of 13 and 24, over 1.8 million have seriously contemplated suicide, 1.2 million of whom are 13 to 18 years old.

While these numbers are shocking, don't assume that every LGBTQ+ individual is suicidal. If a student comes out to you, there are questions you can ask to determine if they're safe (see our section about what to do in this situation), but you shouldn't jump to insisting they see a counselor unless you feel that it's necessary. Doing so can make a student think you believe they're "crazy." If you believe a student to be suicidal, visit our page on what to do in that circumstance; most importantly, you should immediately seek help and don't leave them alone.

I'm a Student. How Can I Help MY LGBTQ+ Peers?

The number one thing you can do for your LGBTQ+ peers is to accept them for who they are. Secondly, as the cliché goes, "if you see something, say something." This can be scary; there's no denying it. Although no one is perfect and intervenes all the time, everyone should try to. If you hear someone say, "that's so gay," you could tell them, "please don't use that word as a negative." If you see someone being harassed, you could either tell the harasser to back off or invite the victim to walk away with you—there is safety in numbers. If you see physical harassment, get an adult—you don't want to get injured in the process or be accused of involvement in the fight. Whether or not you intervene in an event, always find a trusted adult to report it to. Records are very important to the staff's ability to "build a case,﷼? if necessary.

If you think someone may be in danger—for example, if a friend has told you they're scared to be at home—immediately find and tell a trusted adult. If you believe a friend is suicidal, check out our article about that—though the basics are to get them help immediately and, if you're with them, don't leave them alone. You may be afraid of losing the friendship, and while that could happen, it's a risk worth taking to save a life.

What Does the Law Say About LGBTQ+ Issues in Schools?

The United States Constitution mandates "all kids be given equal educational opportunity." This means that all learners, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, disability, etc. have the right to a free education that meets their needs. However, LGBTQ+ students' rights tend to vary by state, county, or city. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) outline some norms that public school students can reasonably expect, regardless of location:

- All records, including sex assigned at birth, are confidential.
- Bullying, harassment, and discrimination, whether from other students or staff members, is prohibited.
- Dress codes can't include gender-normative standards or rules against LGBTQ+ supportive imagery unless the clothing is distracting (e.g., if the clothing features curse words).
- School staff shouldn't "out" students to their families or peers. This includes transgender students; if they're out at school but not at home, staff members need to be careful to use the names and pronouns their parents use when speaking with them.
- Students can be open about their identities and orientations.

For LGBTQ+ teachers and staff worried about job security, the Supreme Court ruled in 2020 that it's unlawful to fire a person based on their sexual orientation or gender identity in any business—including schools—that has 15 or more employees. If you believe your job is at risk (or you've been dismissed or suspended) due to being LGBTQ+, document any interaction that leads you to this belief and involve a lawyer, Lambda Legal, or your union if you're a member.

Exceptions to LGBTQ+ School Laws

Both religious and secular private schools can have rules that don't meet these norms unless they receive government funding—and even then, it's a bit of a gray area. However, it's still important to protect your peers and students from discrimination or harassment—bullying is bullying, no matter the context or location. Additionally, religious schools specifically are exempt from the abovementioned Supreme Court employment ruling, meaning they can legally dismiss anyone involved in the education of youth in a faith-based environment, just for being LGBTQ+.

What Educators Can Do When They Worry About Legal Issues

If you're a teacher, administrator, or another staff member, you not only need to be sure you're following the laws, but you must also hold students and—while it may be intimidating—other staff members accountable. Teachers and staff must handle bullying issues directly and report any violations of the law—whether in school expectations or individual behaviors—to administration. If you're an administrator who believes your district is in violation of the law, report that to the superintendent's office. All violations must be documented, including the date and identities of the involved parties. If no action is taken, escalate your concerns to the next level, such as the superintendent's office if you're a teacher or your state's department of education if you're an administrator. If you feel unsafe when reporting and are a union member, involve your union early in the process. If you aren't a union member, find a trusted staff member to back you up or consider contacting a lawyer for advice.

What Students Can Do When They Worry About Legal Issues

If you're a student who experiences or witnesses any of these standards being violated, you should find a trusted adult and make a report. Additionally, document each incident, including the date and involved parties. If harassment or other issues happen digitally, take screenshots or save the evidence another way. Remember, staff members are also required to protect the privacy of others, so you may never find out how a situation was handled. However, if problems continue and the person you reported the incident to can't seem to solve the issue, escalate your concerns to higher powers; for instance, if you initially reported to a teacher, report to the principal. If the principal knows and the behavior continues, contact the school district administration.

How Can K-12 Teachers and Administrators Make LGBTQ+ Students Feel Included and Supported?

> **While there has been an increased interest in training educators on topics like inherent bias and equity and inclusion, these trainings often do not include LGBTQ issues…**
>
> –Edutopia

Build Relationships With Students

Educators understand the importance of building relationships with students, beginning on day one when instituting expectations.

If you're a teacher, you can make students feel more comfortable sharing with you if you're open during your initial presentation. Not only should you share some information about yourself (your family, your likes/dislikes, or why you went into teaching) to make you seem more "human," but you should also declare that you care for all of them, regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity/expression. At the initial roll call, ask students if they have a name they prefer—and write it down, including a pronunciation guide if needed. While a lot of teachers feel they need to ask about pronouns aloud, many students are shy about this—or they may not know what they want to use yet. If you want to ask about this, you could include it on an "about me" form as a "skippable" question, making it clear no assumptions would be made if skipped. You could even add, "Do you want me to use these pronouns publicly, or is this just for my own information?" Also, include a question about who they live with so you discover the genders of their parents immediately—you don't want to threaten to call someone's mom if they have two dads! (However, using a gender-neutral term like "parents" or "guardians" is best if you don't know who a student lives with or when speaking about the concept at large.)

If you're an administrator, ensure interactions with students and parents make it clear that you support the LGBTQ+ community, and explain the rules around that. A strong message can be sent by including LGBTQ+ school groups in activities other organizations participate in, like homecoming parades, assemblies, and group yearbook photos. Open state that you mandate the inclusion of and support teachers in using LGBTQ+ issues in their curricula (such as full lessons from resources like GLSEN and Teaching Tolerance or featuring LGBTQ+ figures and history in curricula). Building relationships also helps—even in a school with hundreds of pupils, learning the names of students—not just the ones whom you frequently see in your office—can go a long way in showing you care.

As time goes on, reiterate your acceptance through words and actions, speak to your students one-on-one frequently, and always be willing to listen.

Put Up Safe Space Posters

Once you have taken a workshop session from GLSEN—or at least thoroughly read through their entire Safe Space Kit and reached out to the organization with any questions you have—consider putting up Safe Space posters and stickers in and around your room. The kit includes a wealth of valuable information to guide you. These are available for purchase, or you can download and print them for free. Simply seeing the posters around the school and in classrooms reminds your students about your priorities daily. However, do *not* do this unless you are fully versed and invested in what the Safe Space kit represents. Even if your intentions are good and you consider yourself an ally, not knowing exactly how to use it can be challenging for you and harmful for your students if issues are handled incorrectly.

If you're an administrator, take a workshop from GLSEN or similar organization that supports LGBTQ+ youth in schools. After this, explain to your teachers why these posters are allowed and teach them about how to best be a supportive educator—ideally bringing in experts to run this workshop, even if you feel well-versed yourself. Don't require every teacher to put these up in their classrooms, as some of them, unfortunately, may not truly have a "safe space" environment—either because of their beliefs or because they don't feel well-trained in supporting students effectively. It's absolutely a teacher's legal and ethical responsibility ensure students' safety and well-being, and you, as an administrator, need to make it clear that their beliefs don't trump requirements regarding bullying for *any* reason. Students shouldn't be misled into believing they can safely talk to someone when they can't. (However, be sure to remind staff members that their beliefs or lack of training don't excuse ignoring or participating in microaggressions, bullying behaviors, etc. and implement conversations about and consequences for doing so.)

Institute Expectations and Enforce Them

Most teachers spend the first several days of school explaining their expectations for student behavior. Many classroom rules include the word "respect." However, respect means different things to different people, so be clear about what it means in your room. It's okay to address that respect may mean something different in another teacher's classroom, and they should follow that instructor's expectations while there. But in your LGBTQ+ inclusive classroom, point out expectations related to that.

A great way to go about this is to explain language intended for everywhere, sometimes called LIFE, skills. No school or workplace should allow biased language of any sort, and those that do can face legal consequences—including homophobic or similar terms, particularly after the Supreme Court's ruling about LGBTQ+ people in the workplace. Be explicit in explaining that the inclusive language skills they'll learn in your classroom apply to the outside world, stopping the question "when will I ever use this?" before it gets asked. Ask a Manager is an excellent blog about navigating the working world and covers topics like this. If you've only worked in education, which is incredibly different from other industries, this can provide a frame of reference for other careers.

When explaining your expectations, consider—based on your particular administration's attitudes and with their support in case of parent or student complaints—including a list of unacceptable words. Don't post these anywhere; include them in your opening discussion. Some students don't realize that "gay" meaning "bad" isn't okay (and no reasonable administrator would have a problem with you pointing this out). Others may have no problem with using full-blown slurs—especially if they hear them at home

—which is where it can be tricky with administrators. Listing out these words can be a shock to the system, both for you and for the students, but that blow may be exactly what is needed to ensure students really listen and understand what they can't say.

When enforcing these rules, call out problems when you see them occur and follow up with the child who violated the rule. If disrespect was directed at a student, speak with them as well. If you have an LGBTQ+ student in your room who is out to you, observe their reaction and follow up with them if necessary, even if they weren't the target. If it's a first offense and seems accidental, a discussion with the student may be all that's needed. If the student did this aggressively or has a history of violating expectations, issuing consequences and/or referring them to the school counselor is in order. Remember, students who are exhibiting bullying behaviors may be going through something themselves, so counselor involvement is vital.

An excellent resource for how to frame these discussions is provided by the Anti-Defamation League. They provide specific, actionable steps teachers can take in various scenarios—structured vs. unstructured settings, considering whether to call things out publicly or discuss them privately, using developmentally appropriate methods, and so forth.

Use Inclusive Language

Inclusive language can be a challenge for both students and educators, as it involves introspection, researching microaggressions, and changing habits. Statements that were deemed acceptable a few years ago are now recognized as hurtful—and ingrained phrases can be hard to avoid without practice. While some words and phrases are known slurs or microaggressions and should be easier to avoid or correct, other phrases are less obvious. Here are some of those phrases and what to say instead:

Instead Of That, Say This…
Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls Folks, students, friends, class, everyone
Act like a man, man up, etc. Square your shoulders; plant your feet; act with courage; take a deep breath and give it all you've got. Regarding clothing or "unmasculine" behaviors, say nothing.
That's not ladylike. That's not school appropriate; that's unprofessional; that's impolite. Regarding clothing or "unfeminine" behaviors, say nothing.
Opposite sex/both sexes If talking about biological/chromosomal sex, "all sexes." If talking about gender, "all genders," or "different genders."
"They" can't be singular. You must use he/she or him/her in writing. They *can* be singular. Most writing styles have accepted this, and it has been used throughout history.
Mankind, man vs. man/society/self, etc.* Humankind, person vs. person, etc.

*For things like “mankind” and types of conflict, explain to students that these may appear on standardized tests or in textbooks. While students and teachers should advocate for change, students shouldn’t skip test questions or answer in a way that may result in lost points. Even changing to “person vs. person” on an exam could be unrecognized by an automated test scoring system or counted as incorrect by a human grader who doesn’t know or agree with the terminology.

Additionally, there are outdated terms to avoid unless an LGBTQ+ person **specifically tells you** to use them—always take their lead. If they do, also keep in mind that other LGBTQ+ people may feel uncomfortable with those same terms, because each person and situation is unique. This list isn’t all-inclusive, but here are a few examples from GLAAD and the University of Maryland:

Instead Of That, Say This…

Biological man/woman	Cisgender man/woman
Hermaphrodite	Intersex
Homosexual	Gay or lesbian
Lifestyle	Orientation or identity
Preferred pronouns	Personal pronouns, pronouns
Sex change/reassignment	Gender affirmation
Sexual preference	Orientation
Transsexual	Trans, transgender (not transgendered)

Remember, accepted terms are ever-evolving, and you should continue to learn and change as needed.

Include LGBTQ+ History and People in Your Curriculum

While this may seem like a task solely for history teachers, anyone can integrate significant LGBTQ+ figures or events in their classes. Representation matters—kids seeing people like them achieving greatness helps them believe they too, which is why it’s essential to include LGBTQ+ and BIPOC events and figures alongside straight, white ones. English/language arts teachers can include work by LGBTQ+ authors and mention their orientation/identity when discussing background—even without a deep dive, this increases representation and visibility. Math and science teachers can make sure to mention any mathematicians or scientists who identified as LGBTQ+, and biology curricula can be updated to include information about intersex people rather than strictly teaching the binary. Arts courses can include and discuss LGBTQ+ artists.

Administrators, you need to allow and encourage these practices in your schools. Research the topic so you can defend your choice to higher-level administration, parents, and community members if need be.

Start a Support and Advocacy Group at Your School

As of 2016, 35.8% of GLSEN survey respondents reported having an LGBTQ+ student support group, such as a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), Queer Student Alliance, or Gender and Sexuality Alliance. However, 8.5% said they didn’t even know what one was! The study also showed that schools with such alliances were associated with better perceptions of LGBTQ+ people overall. Legally, any public school that has noncurricular clubs must allow an LGBTQ+ group if one is wanted and can’t treat it differently

than they would, say, a math club. GSA Network and GLSEN provide resources for students and staff members hoping to start such a club, though there are many other organizations you could look into to determine the best fit for your school.

Online Learning and LGBTQ+ Students

Online learning is becoming more common at all levels, from kindergarten to college. Just like in traditional classrooms, it's important to build relationships with students. However, many teachers ask: how do I ensure a truly supportive classroom when teaching from a distance?

Many of the above suggestions still apply. You can include rules about kindness in your expectations and LGBTQ+ information in your curriculum, just like in a traditional classroom. You can also have a Safe Space poster in the background of your video classroom, use inclusive language, and reach out to students individually to build relationships. Call out anti-LGBTQ+ comments or microaggressions when they occur and document them appropriately, even if you opt to delete them—screenshots are your friend. While some online schools may have clubs, this isn't common—so, instead of starting a club, you can share resources for online organizations that students can join.

Coming Out at School: Tips for Educators and Students

What to Do if a Student Comes Out to You

As a school staff member who has shown support to the LGBTQ+ community, you may have the privilege of students coming out to you—in fact, you may be the first adult they ever talk to about this. This should be handled delicately, safely, and, most importantly, supportively. GLSEN and My Kid is Gay offer suggestions about how to handle this conversation:

- Accept their statement at face value. Never suggest they might be confused.
- Applaud their courage and thank them for telling you.
- Ask if they have told anyone else, particularly their families. (Refer to the legal section regarding outing students.) If a student tells you they aren't out at home, ask them to update you if they make that decision so you can adjust accordingly (such as using correct names and pronouns)—but don't encourage them to do so.
- Find out what they need from you, but don't assume they need anything more than your support. You should keep resources on hand, so you don't have to scramble.
- Assure them you'll keep their confidence unless you're worried about their safety. Explain what a mandated reporter is.
- If they come out as transgender, genderfluid, etc., ask if they want you to use new pronouns or a different name and if they want you to do so only one-on-one or around others.
- Assure them that you're always there to listen.
- Ask them if they feel safe at school and at home. If they say no, dig for details:
  - If they say they're not comfortable telling their parents, but they don't feel unsafe, you don't need to report it. If they report abuse of any sort, you do.
  - If they say there are staff members who are making them uncomfortable, without outing the student, talk to administration about reviewing school policies with the staff or having an LGBTQ+ training session, such as those offered by GLSEN.
  - If they say students are being nasty to them, be sure to keep a close eye out for these issues and intervene without outing the student. Be mindful of groupings for projects.

What to Do if You're a Student Considering Coming Out at School

First of all, congratulations on considering taking this brave step! The Trevor Project suggests a few questions to ask yourself before doing so on page 16 of their Coming Out Handbook. Be prepared for all possible outcomes, both positive and negative,

and have a plan in place for what to do if things don't go well. However, people may pleasantly surprise you!

Bear in mind: "Sexual orientation and gender identity are not set in stone!" You may come out one way and later realize you better fit with another (or additional) orientation or identity. Don't feel you need to put yourself in a new closet by pretending to be who you initially came out as. People may be a bit confused, but that's their problem, not yours.

If you decide to come out, there is no "correct" way to do it. Coming out is highly personal, and you should do it in whatever manner makes you feel safe. That said, there are a few suggestions you could use to guide your process, which you can modify or ignore based on your needs:

- Have informal discussions about LGBTQ+ issues and people's feelings on them before choosing who to come out to.
- Find a person you feel comfortable coming out to—a friend, a teacher, a parent, whoever!—and start with a one-on-one conversation rather than coming out to everyone at once.
- Consider your timing. Rushed or emotionally-charged moments aren't the right ones. If you're coming out to a parent, do so at a time when things are calm, and you can engage in a lengthy conversation—if it's five minutes before they leave for work, you're in the middle of an argument, or you're heading to a family event, hold off. If you're coming out to a teacher, choose a moment when they're not expecting another class to enter or at the end of the day if you need to catch a bus. With friends, again, wait for a calm time—if they're dealing with something of their own, they may not be able to process or respond like they otherwise would—and avoid a moment when they or you can't stick around for a conversation.
- Tell the person/people you come out to exactly what you need from them.
- Don't feel pressured to be out to everyone. If you've found a supportive environment at school but don't believe you'll find one at home, you can hold off on telling your family until you're no longer under their roof. If you have a supportive family but feel your school won't be the same, you can be out at home and tell your parents to not share the information with your school. If your friends are your support, tell them to keep the information quiet until you're ready to tell others.
- Learn about your local laws and policies, so you know what rights you have.
- Locate an LGBTQ+ support community, either in-person or online, to turn to when needed. See our resources at the bottom of this page for ideas.

Students Being Outed by Others

No one should ever out another person without a legitimate safety concern involved.

If you're a staff member who wants help from a more knowledgeable peer, ask in general terms. Only mention a name if you believe the student is in danger, and bring that to a counselor, social worker, or administrator.

If you're a student who wants to learn how to better support an LGBTQ+ friend, ask a trusted adult for resources in general terms. If you're worried about a friend's safety—for instance, they made suicidal comments or shared that they have been kicked out of their parents' home—tell an adult; this is the only time you should name your friend. All school employees are mandated reporters and must find assistance for them.

If you're a parent who wants help from a staff member, *ask your child first.* Otherwise, there are many resources out there for you; see our list to parent resources at the bottom.

If you're a staff member and someone outs a student to you, listen, then act. Ask why they're telling you and if the student knows this conversation is happening—though don't bring it up to the student; wait for them to come to you personally. Offer whatever supports you can but remind them that the coming out process is highly personal, and they shouldn't spread this information around.

How to Overcome Barriers to LGBTQ+ Support in Education

Unfortunately, education has a long history of barriers to supportive and inclusive learning environments. For instance, Mendez v. Westminster and Brown v. Board of Education showed us the level of resistance to allowing students of color access to an equitable education, and the "PARC" and Mills cases brought to light the then-desired exclusion of special needs students.

While most people would say the results of these cases—desegregating schools and allowing special needs children to have equitable educational access—are positive, things continue to be far from perfect. This is particularly true regarding LGBTQ+ acceptance in schools. Here are a few of those roadblocks and suggestions about how to address them.

A Lack of Educator Training in LGBTQ+ Issues

Teachers report feeling varying levels of comfort in intervening with different types of bullying behaviors, with 11% feeling very or somewhat uncomfortable getting involved with these behaviors when they relate to gender identity/expression, and 9.9% disclosed feeling that way regarding orientation. 10.4% of the respondents stated they didn't take part in supportive efforts because they didn't know how to do so.

How To Address This
School districts and colleges should collaborate with LGBTQ+ advocacy groups, such as GLSEN, the Anti-Defamation League, and Teaching Tolerance, to create professional development for their teachers. Teaching colleges should include LGBTQ+ issues in their curricula.

Resistant School Personnel

While it would be wonderful if all educators and staff members were on board with supporting their LGBTQ+ students, as we saw with the segregation and special education cases, not all are. A 2016 study showed that 11.8% of teachers didn't believe that school personnel are obliged to provide a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ students; additionally, 15% of teachers felt actively engaging in supportive efforts was unnecessary, and nearly 10% thought the topic was inappropriate.

Even if teachers are willing to be supportive, their administration isn't viewed as universally willing to allow them to do so. In that same study, 11% of teachers said their administration was unsupportive of their efforts, and 7.5% believed their jobs would be at risk if they engaged in supportive practices.

How To Address This
A thorough training of educators about the importance of LGBTQ+ inclusion is essential. Issues of harassment, microaggressions, and refusal to intervene when problems arise need to be handled, first by a discussion and then by disciplinary action. Remember, the law protects these students from teachers and administrators who engage in or refuse to prevent these behaviors. Administrators, if one of your teachers is being bothered by another educator for creating a supportive environment, you should address that. If you're a teacher who is afraid of your administration, contact your union for support if possible, know your rights, and meet with them prepared with evidence disputing their stances. If the administrators are engaging in biased behaviors, contact their bosses—anonymously if necessary.

Parent, Community, and Government Resistance

The number one external reason teachers gave for not engaging in supportive activities was parent and community backlash. If you look at the comments section on any article about LGBTQ+ issues in schools, it's easy to see why—comments range from issues about morality to outright threats against educators. There is even governmental resistance; as of 2019, only four states required schools to teach LGBTQ+ history, and six states have laws specifically prohibiting the "promotion of sexuality" in schools by saying anything positive about LGBTQ+ people in health or sexual education courses. In fact, Alabama's law says, "classes must emphasize, in a factual manner and from a health perspective, that homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under the laws of the state."

So, the fear of backlash is understandable.

How To Address This
Unfortunately, there isn't a magic bullet for handling the backlash that seems to come from all sides. Education on LGBTQ+ issues and de-escalation for all members of school staff is a good start—when supported with hard data, it can be easier to back up choices when challenged, and knowing how to calm upset parties can keep everyone safe. All staff members should document negative interactions with parents or community members in case they need to address concerns or protect themselves from threats. Administrators, you're *absolutely essential* here—you need to support and protect your teachers. Tell them from day one that you won't tolerate parents threatening or harassing your teachers and staff, take over communication with those parents if necessary, and allow your employees to take legal action if they fear for their safety. Be prepared to defend your school's decision to all outside parties.

Glossary of Terms

There are hundreds upon hundreds of terms associated with the LGBTQ+ community—The Trevor Project shows that LGBTQ+ youth surveyed reported more than 100 sexual orientations *and* more than 100 gender identities! The following are frequently misunderstood terms, as defined by PFLAG, you may encounter. *Note: These definitions were taken directly from their glossary to ensure accuracy. Additional terms and expansions upon the ones below can be found on their site.*

Affirmed Gender
An individual's true gender, as opposed to their gender assigned at birth.

Agender
Refers to a person who does not identify with any gender.

Asexual
Refers to an individual who does not experience sexual attraction.

Cisgender
Refers to an individual whose gender identity aligns with the one typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Gender
A set of social, psychological, and/or emotional traits, often influenced by societal expectations, that classify an individual along a spectrum of man, woman, both, or neither.

Gender Binary
The disproven concept that there are only two genders, man and woman, and that everyone must be one or the other. Also implies that gender is biologically determined.

Gender Expression
The manner in which a person communicates about gender to others through external means such as clothing, appearance, or mannerisms.

Genderfluid
Describes a person who does not consistently identify with one fixed gender, and who may move between gender identities.

Gender Identity
One's deeply held core sense of being a woman, man, some of both, or neither. One's gender identity does not always correspond to biological sex.

Intersex/Differences of Sexual Development (DSD)
Refers to individuals born with ambiguous genitalia or bodies that appear neither typically male nor female, often arising from

chromosomal anomalies or ambiguous genitalia.

Nonbinary
Refers to individuals who identify as neither man or woman, both man and woman, or a combination of man or woman.

Pansexual
Refers to a person whose emotional, romantic, and/or physical attraction is to people inclusive of all genders and biological sexes.

Personal Gender Pronouns
A personal gender pronoun, or PGP—sometimes called *proper gender pronoun*—is the pronoun or set of pronouns that an individual personally uses and would like others to use when talking to or about that individual.

Sexual Orientation
Emotional, romantic, or sexual feelings toward other people.

Queer
A term used by some people to describe themselves and/or their community. Reclaimed from its earlier negative use, the term is valued by some for its defiance, by some because it can be inclusive of the entire community, and by others who find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities. Traditionally a negative or pejorative term for people who are gay, *queer* is still sometimes disliked within the LGBTQ+ community. Due to its varying meanings, this word should only be used when self-identifying or quoting someone who self-identifies as queer (i.e. “My cousin identifies as queer?).

Transgender
Often shortened to *trans*. A term describing a person’s gender identity that does not necessarily match their assigned sex at birth.

General LGBTQ+ Resources

Below are resources for educators, students, and families regarding LGBTQ+ issues and education. Though they’re divided into groups, each resource has valuable information for everyone, and you should look through the entire section to see if other resources fit your needs.

Resources for Educators of LGBTQ+ Students

Anti-Defamation League
Though initially a resource regarding anti-Semitism, ADL has expanded their work to include “fighting hate for good” for people from all walks of life. Their site includes information about LGBTQ+ rights, education resources, and information about their many training programs.

Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals
This organization works toward creating inclusive postsecondary education environments for educators and students.

GLAAD
This organization was founded in 1985 in response to the media coverage surrounding the HIV and AIDS epidemic, which vilified the LGBTQ+ community. Ever since, they have striven to be a voice for LGBTQ+ acceptance via political acts and education.

GLSEN
GLSEN’s goal is simple: “to ensure that every member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.” For teachers, they provide educational resources and Safe Space Kits, offer training, and help establish school clubs. They also produce a School Climate Survey every two years, which covers LGBTQ+ students and their teachers’ perceptions of LGBTQ+ issues at school.

Lambda Legal
This nonprofit organization focuses on civil rights for LGBTQ+ people and those with HIV/AIDS. They provide state-specific information and assistance, offer information about public policy, and even have a legal help desk to help people understand their rights.

PFLAG
Also included under other sections, a portion of particular interest to educators is "Cultivating Respect: Safe Schools for All." This includes information about training information, updates on legal issues for LGBTQ+ rights in education, scholarships for your LGBTQ+ students, and more.

Sex Ed for Social Change (SIECUS)
This group advocates for comprehensive sexual education. They create reports that can be used by educators to help them make their case for expanding their current sex-ed curricula.

Teaching Tolerance
This thorough resource teaches educators about how to "educate children and youth to be active participants in a diverse democracy." Their site is vast and includes things like classroom resources such as lesson plans, professional development workshops and assistance, a variety of publications, and grants for teachers, schools, districts, and schools of education to help them fund the implementation of anti-discrimination initiatives.

Resources for LGBTQ+ Students

Campus Pride Index
If you're an LGBTQ+ student—or an ally who wants to attend a postsecondary institution that shares your values—the Campus Pride Index offers a database of colleges and rates them based on their support of the LGBTQ+ community.

Everyone is Gay
This site provides resources to LGBTQ+ young people, including information about national and state-by-state organizations, advice from their peers, and assistance with navigating school and life as an LGBTQ+ person.

GSA Network
This is the national hub for alliance groups. They can help you create and effectively run such an organization in your school.

Lionel Cantu Queer Center< This site, run by the University of California Santa Cruz, provides a wealth of resources for LGBTQ+ BIPOC students. **PFLAG**
This resource includes a section about LGBTQ+ safety in schools, your rights as a student, and scholarship opportunities.

The Trevor Project
This organization provides suicide and crisis prevention resources for LGBTQ+ young people nationwide. They also offer training for educators.

Resources for Families of LGBTQ+ Students

My Kid is Gay
This aptly named website provides a wealth of resources for parents of LGBTQ+ children. They offer personal stories, information about handling your child coming out, help with navigating your faith while supporting your child, and a good deal more.

PFLAG
This is the largest organization for LGBTQ+ people and their families. They provide support via phone, online, and peer group meeting methods to families and allies as they navigate the waters of supporting their LGBTQ+ loved ones while addressing their own feelings and biases. They also offer educational opportunities on a variety of topics.

TransYouth Family Allies
This organization works to support trans youth and their families through advocacy, helpful tips, support groups for family members, and more.

Safety Resources for LGBTQ+ People

24/7 Helplines

Text HOME To 741741	Chat Online	Call 1-800-273-8255
Crisis Text Line	The Trevor Project	Suicide Prevention Lifeline

If you're an LGBTQ+ person in crisis—or even if you just need someone to talk to—these resources offer free help.

- Crisis Text Line
- LGBT National Help Center (Sister site: LGBT National Youth Talkline)
- National Runaway Safeline
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
- The Trevor Project
- Trans Lifeline

Meet the Expert



Lanie Gray

Lanie Gray teaches high-school English at Olathe North High School in Olathe, Kansas, where she also is faculty advisor for the Gender & Sexuality Alliance. As a nationally certified trainer for GLSEN, Lanie has conducted numerous workshops for educators and others in public service, and she has worked within her own school district and within the larger community to advocate for inclusive, equitable policies regarding the LGBTQ community. She has helped contribute to legal briefs for federal court cases involving LGBTQ student rights as well as to professional publications covering LGBTQ topics in education.