We acknowledge gender in our culture constantly. In order to hold a conversation, we have to know (or guess) the gender of anyone we are talking about by using pronouns, and we make further assumptions about habits, motives, and actions based on the gender or perceived gender of each individual we talk about. Of course, we are so well-versed in how to do this that we do not think about it. In class, try giving a student a bell with instructions to ring it every time someone’s gender is referenced in conversation. You will likely be surprised at how often and constant the bell will be heard.

With those pronouns come a world of expectations that we have to confront in order to value each child in our schools. Creating a safe and welcoming environment for transgender and gender nonconformist students starts with creating a school community where students are encouraged to explore their own identities and learn about those of others. Our society still has a great deal of discomfort in talking about gender nonconformity so we have to be proactive in effectively raising the subject and teaching our students. There are five significant areas we can acknowledge and improve upon in our schools right away.
Teach Everyone About Gender

Most faculty and staff did not learn or talk about these issues when they were in school and, even when well-intentioned, do not have the experience or tools to engage in gender discussions. Moreover, since talking about sex and gender can be sensitive, many teachers and non-teaching staff fear saying the wrong thing and avoid engaging in constructive conversation or responding to offensive behavior. They need to know that the school will support them when teaching students responsibly about gender and when calling out transphobic and gender-conformist behavior within the community. In addition to written school policies, meeting time needs to be dedicated to training all staff. During this training, teach critical content, make room for naive questions, and role play possible scenarios that staff might encounter.

Teachers especially need comfortable language to use. We have to be aware that our school cultures often adhere to fairly strict gender norms and, unless examined, passively marginalize students. While we are better at anticipating that some of our students may come from nontraditional family structures and have gotten away from saying, “Go ask your mom and dad” by default, we often still ask boys to help move furniture and girls to bring snacks for the bake sale. Enforcing gender roles and norms damages all of our students since they will all, at some point in their lives, have interests and experiences that do not conform to traditional male and female roles.

Likewise, students need direct instruction on gender and gender identity. This may fit into your school’s sexuality education, science, or social studies classes; it needs to be a regular and intentional part of the school’s curriculum. These classes should teach the difference between biological sex and gender, explain that both may be ambiguous and along a spectrum of expression, and explore how privacy and personal preference matter a great deal when being supportive.

Provide Specific Support for Gender Nonconforming Individuals

If you have transgender students, it is essential to proactively reach out to them before they have to sit through classes about gender identity. Parents and school counselors often know how best to reach out ahead of time so that transgender students feel as comfortable as possible. Some students would rather have that conversation at home while others may prefer to speak with a trusted adult at school. If they are out, they are likely to think all eyes are on

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them during the class and worry that they might be called on to explain or teach their peers. They are not the target audience and are not likely to learn new information themselves during class. That said, seeing their issues addressed and witnessing their classmates engaged in learning can be remarkably affirming. It is likewise affirming for students who may be questioning their gender identity but do not yet have the vocabulary or understanding to seek support and guidance. Teachers need to remember that it is their job to be knowledgeable about the content and to teach it without drawing unnecessary attention.

Strong schools also make space for discussion among the community as a whole and by providing affinity space for underrepresented students, families, and staff. These two types of experiences actually have opposite purposes: community-wide engagement on an issue such as transgender people are largely for the benefit of the cisgender community since they are designed to provide windows into the transgender experience for those without a reference point. Transgender individuals and family members already have this experience first-hand and, therefore, need the opportunity to connect with other trans people to unpack their personal experiences.

Support affinity space for any groups that are seeking community within your community. Sometimes people from the dominant groups feel threatened or uncomfortable with affinity spaces to which they are not welcomed, but we must value the needs of our underrepresented groups despite this discomfort. Depending on the size of your community and the number of LGBT students and families, you may need to have a group that mixes all of these constituencies in order to get critical mass. As you move forward, make space for more general groups to break into smaller, more specific groups such as parents of transgender students or transgender students meeting separately from LGB students, since those are very different experiences.

Give Transgender Students Space to “Be” Their Gender

Like other minority groups, transgender people and their families are often asked to speak for their entire community. For students, this can be particularly problematic since their goal is often to be treated as their preferred gender without bringing extra attention to being transgender. This is in contrast to lesbian, gay, and bisexual...
people, with whom transgender individuals are often grouped. LGB people generally anticipate being seen as LGB their entire lives; having a partner of the same gender is usually visible and acceptance includes others acknowledging a different-looking couple. Many transgender people, especially those going through adolescence when conformity is often a desire, simply want to be treated as their preferred gender. Acceptance does not always include being “out.”

As a society, those in dominant groups often feel like they can ask personal questions of underrepresented people. This is commonly seen in schools when families of color are disproportionately asked to share their experiences and lead multicultural endeavors. Transgender and gender nonconformist people are often asked highly personal questions by otherwise well-meaning people. While we would never think of asking a typical student about their private parts, questions about genitalia are frequently directed to trans people as if other people have the right to know what is underneath their clothing.

Invite guest speakers who are transgender and willing to speak about their experiences. Outside speakers are usually open to responding to questions from cisgender people that might be inappropriate in typical conversation. At Sheridan, we hosted the author Alex Myers who shared his own experience and specifically taught our community about the impact of personal questions on transgender people. Subsequently, he offered to answer some of those questions himself in an effort to educate our community and shield our transgender students from those questions.

Examine Your Curriculum

Even though we teach that gender is a spectrum, many schools still divide boys and girls for sex education classes which contradicts the curriculum and implies that deep down everyone does fall into one gender bucket or the other. We often separate boys and girls because we want to teach them separately about their own bodies; but, not all students identifying as one gender have the sexual body parts associated with that gender, and students who identify as gender non-binary do not fit into either bucket. Research also suggests that as many as one percent of people are biologically intersex which further complicates our de-

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sire to separate everyone into two discrete groups. If you decide that you must break into single-gender groups, find a discrete way to ask any transgender or gender nonconformist students how they would like to participate, including the option of opting out of a particular lesson.

During instruction, precise language can also make the curriculum clearer while simultaneously making the classroom experience emotionally safe for all students. For example, by talking about “people with vaginas” instead of “girls,” teachers are not generalizing incorrectly about all girls and are leaving room for the ambiguity that comes with gender identity.

The more we talk about these issues in primary and elementary grades, the easier it is for students to internalize important messages. Younger students need very concrete examples which can often be found in well-selected children’s books. They will often have questions about gender roles and expectations, and we have to help them understand that generalizations around gender are not “rules” they have to follow. When they have transgender and gender nonconformist classmates, they are often concerned about their friend being treated fairly and need tangible suggestions such as speaking up if someone misgenders their friend or suggests they should or should not do something based on their gender. It is equally important that the adults in your community know and teach the difference between gender expression and gender identity, and emphasize that they are independent of each other.

Embrace Change

Schools also need to assess their physical space and habits around gender. While students should be encouraged to use bathrooms and locker rooms that match their gender identity, many transgender people prefer individual bathrooms that are not gendered at all. Many schools have single-person bathrooms that are inexplicably labeled for one gender or the other and can be easily transitioned with gender-neutral signage. Schools also need to move away from dividing students into boys and girls out of routine.

Teachers need training in how to feel empowered and compelled to counteract insulting language. While many teachers may be comfortable telling a student not to use “gay” as an insult (and many transgender and gender nonconformist students on the
receiving end of homophobic slurs from peers and adults who do not even know or understand the difference), that is not enough. You have to engage the students in conversation, use real life scenarios, and discuss experiences that those students can relate to. Ask students how many of them have felt uncomfortable with anti-LGBT language but did not know what to do. Ask who stood up and who regrets not standing up. Ask how the situation would feel if a close friend was the target of the harassment. To do this, teachers need to have clear language they can use and clear support from their administration that when parents push back, the school will stand behind its teachers in their support of the right of all students to a safe learning community.

We also have to remember that this is ongoing work, not just a checklist to be completed. By keeping in tune with these and other emerging issues, we continue to make our schools safer for all students...

**Additional Resources:**

- GLSEN’s Support Safe Schools & Trans Youth. [https://www.glsen.org/safeschools](https://www.glsen.org/safeschools)

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