



# Gender Inclusive Schools

By Kim Westheimer

## What principals need to know about gender identity and **supporting transgender students**.

**E**arlier this spring, educators at a school in Wisconsin planned to read the book *I Am Jazz*, a picture book about a transgender student. Amid backlash, the school canceled the reading. But in response, parents and community members rallied to show their support for gender diverse students by hosting a reading of the book at a local library. Hundreds of supportive parents and students attended.

This community isn't alone: across the country, schools are grappling with controversies around gender and inclusion. Educators, students, and parents are advocating for conflicting policies related to transgender students, while courts are weighing in with equally divergent opinions. The Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR), along with the Department of Justice, issued guidance for states and school districts that affirms the rights of transgender students to fully participate in their schools. Twenty states sued the federal government, asserting that OCR overstepped in its interpretation of Title IX, the federal law that addresses gender equity. A federal appeals court echoed OCR's interpretation of Title IX, ruling that a Virginia transgender boy should be allowed to use boys' bathrooms. This decision was appealed and in October of 2016, the Supreme Court announced that it would review the case.

Amid the noise that often surrounds these controversies, it's easy to lose sight of what's at stake here: the central mission of schools to provide supportive, respectful environments for students to learn and grow. With an eye on this mission, we can take a step back from divisive discourse and give school communities the opportunity to grapple with the complexity of gender and examine how gender affects not only transgender students, but all of us.

Here is some foundational information about gender and school safety, along with initial steps that can help you create gender inclusive schools.

### **Gender Binary**

Most of us grew up thinking that gender was simple. There were boys and there were girls. We knew who was supposed to wear pink and play with dolls and who was supposed to wear blue and play with monster trucks. This is a binary gender world that creates neat categories for everyone and conflates biology, gender expression, and gender identity.

This binary definition of gender is still very present in most schools. Students are routinely asked to arrange themselves by boys and girls, whether while lining up for class or dividing themselves up at recess. There are spoken and unspoken gendered expectations about how students should dress, excel, study, and play.

### **Gender Spectrum**

Viewing gender on a spectrum more accurately reflects the complexity and diversity of human experiences. This is not a new concept. Throughout history, many cultures have recognized and sometimes venerated people who didn't fit into the boxes of male and female. Many Native American tribes have language to describe people who identify outside of the gender binary. In the Cree language, the word *aayahkwew* means "neither man nor woman"; in the Mohawk language, *onón:wat* means, "I have the pattern of two spirits inside my body." On the Indonesian Island of Sulawesi, five genders are recognized, including *bissu*, people whose embodiment of both male and female endows them with the ability to bridge human and spirit worlds.



## REFLECT ON THIS

The central mission of schools is to provide supportive, respectful environments for students to learn and grow.

To better understand the gender spectrum, it helps to become familiar with three core elements of gender: The body, gender identity, and gender expression.

**The body:** When we think of the body and gender, we generally think of physical attributes such as external sex organs, sex chromosomes, and internal reproductive structures. While for most people, these physical attributes line up in a way that is typically understood as male or female, this is not the case for everyone. People who are intersex are born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit typical understandings of female or male bodies. Naturally occurring intersex conditions demonstrate that sex can best be understood across a spectrum.

Research in neurology, endocrinology, and cellular biology is beginning to suggest a broader biological basis for gender, one in which the brain plays a significant role in how someone experiences their gender.

**Gender identity:** Gender identity is an individual's deeply held sense of being male, female, or another gender.

Most people don't question their gender identity or have their gender identity questioned

by others. Their identity and biological sex line up in a manner that meets cultural expectations for what it means to be a man/boy or woman/girl. The word cisgender describes people whose identity and biology line up in this way. Cisgender is an important word because it names the dominant experience rather than seeing it as the default.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, by age 4, the majority of children know their gender identity. While no one is surprised that cisgender children recognize their gender at this age, questions arise about how young children can know their gender identity at an early age.

In fact, for transgender and other gender-expansive children, their knowledge and expression of their gender identity can be complicated by lack of support or language to express who they are. Some are aware of and express their identities as early as age 2 and others not until adolescence or later.

**Gender expression:** Gender expression can be defined as the ways we express our gender through dress, mannerisms, or language. Societal expectations of gender expression are reinforced in almost every area of life. As early as age 3,



children have been shown to internalize environmental messages about social groups, leaving them clear about the gendered choices that boys and girls are “supposed to” make with toys, colors, clothes, and games.

Just as understanding of gender varies among different cultures, these ideas also change over time. For example, in the early 1900s in the U.S., pink was considered a masculine color (derived from strong, warlike red) and blue was considered a dainty color more appropriate for girls.

### **Support, Safety, and an Inclusive Climate**

In a recent study by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, one in four students reported hearing school staff make negative remarks related to students’ gender expression. It is no surprise then that students who expressed their gender in ways not associated with their biological sex were twice as likely as their peers to feel unsafe at school and twice as likely to miss school because of safety concerns.

Fortunately, inclusive policies and practices can go a long way to improve school climate. A 2016 study by Human Rights Watch investigated the impact of access (or lack of access) to

school facilities on transgender students. For the study, Tanya, a mother from Texas, explained her 9-year-old transgender son Elijah’s struggles: “A year ago at this time, he was having a really hard time, and he’d go into the girl’s bathroom and girls would yell, ‘There’s a boy in here!’ and he couldn’t go to the boys’ bathroom, and so he stopped going to the bathroom. There were a lot of meltdowns,” she said.

When Elijah mentioned suicide and was briefly hospitalized, his mother spoke to administrators to ensure that he would be treated as a boy when he started at a new school in the fall. Tanya recalled: “He was kind of worried about going to a new school, and he said, ‘If I can go as a boy, okay.’ He’s just fallen into it, and he’s so much happier... He’s making friends who know him as a boy.”

Gender inclusivity is critical for transgender students, but it also makes school safer for all students. When schools implement procedures to diminish harassment based on gender expression, students report greater connections to school personnel, which are associated with greater feelings of safety, according to 2010 school climate research by Washington State University researchers.



## Components of a Gender Inclusive School

To promote a healthy, supportive climate, schools should strive to be gender inclusive by enacting the following strategies:


- Recognizing that gender impacts all students;
- Interrupting binary notions of gender;
- Normalizing gender diversity;
- Questioning limited portrayals of gender;
- Supporting self-reflection by students, educators, and caregivers; and
- Teaching empathy and respect.

Here are six steps your school can take to engage the entire school community in this process:

**1. Hold staff training** that builds teacher and staff understanding of and sensitivity to gender identity and diversity.

- 2. Recruit a staff team to draft new or augment existing policies** that clarify your school position on gender inclusion. Create a plan to increase awareness of these policies among staff, families, and students.
- 3. Engage families** in conversations about gender through evening events, newsletters, and inclusion in planning committees. Invite family members to share their own experiences of how they and their children have been limited by rigid gender norms.
- 4. Review bathroom policies** to ensure that there are **non-stigmatizing options for all students**. If possible, provide single-stall bathrooms that are available to all, but not mandated for any students.
- 5. Revise forms or paperwork** to reflect gender diversity. Give families and students opportunities to identify a student's gender identity along with the pronouns and names by which the student wants to be referred.
- 6. Have posters, books, and other imagery** that model gender diversity. Work with your librarian to identify age-appropriate books.

Beyond these general steps, encourage teachers to craft classroom lessons that build awareness of and understanding about gender. They may consider integrating content into existing lesson plans across disciplines including literature, art, science, and social studies. This can help make the classroom a supportive space for students to articulate their own feelings about their identity and decrease bullying. In the recent film *Creating Gender Inclusive Schools*, a third-grade teacher engaged her class in conversations about gender. At first, she was skeptical, but she was surprised by her students' capacity to hold these thoughtful, healthy conversations. "Nine-tenths of [bullying] would disappear if we deal with each other's differences in a different way," she said.

Finally, school leaders can set an example for staff, students, and parents by being inclusive in action and words. Find opportunities to discuss gender diversity through current events, history, or your own experiences. Teach and model respect across the board. Talk to students about valuing each other for their unique qualities. With patience, education, and empathy, principals can establish supportive school environments that allow all students—of all genders and identities—to thrive. 

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