



How to Make Your School's Curriculum Inclusive

Growing numbers of schools are incorporating LGBTQ facts, issues and perspectives into their curricula, whether the class is health, social studies, history or literature.

Why should our school's curriculum be inclusive?

Some educators recognize that LGBTQ people currently enjoy greater visibility, acceptance and rights and want their curricula to reflect that. Others want to promote greater awareness of human diversity, or take a proactive response to the dangers of bullying. Still other administrators are compelled to find ways to teach acceptance of diversity after a violent or discriminatory incident at their school.

Whatever the reason, studies show that inclusive curricula have a positive impact and are associated with reduced harassment and safer environments for all students. LGBTQ-inclusive curricula can also be one part of good planning or intervention to help reduce a

school's exposure to liability for school-related harassment and discrimination.

Are school curricula legally required to be LGBTQ-friendly?

The First Amendment and federal laws like the Equal Access Act generally protect students' expressive rights, but they do not control curricular speech by schools and school officials. These laws do not, however, restrict schools' authority to design curricula.

Schools constantly make choices about what to teach and what to exclude from curricula, and the law upholds these choices, with good reason. Geography instruction does not have to include "flat-earth" theories to be fair to that point of view, and health classes do not

DON'T BLOCK THE NET

How to keep youth- and LGBTQ-friendly sites accessible.

Many school districts use Internet-filtering software to prevent student access to certain websites on school computers. Unfortunately, sometimes this software blocks access to sites that provide valuable assistance and resources for LGBTQ youth. If you are concerned that this may be an issue in your district, consider taking the following steps:

- Log onto a school computer and try visiting LGBTQ-supportive websites such as lambdalegal.org, pflag.org, glsen.org and gsanetwork.org. Next, try visiting anti-LGBTQ websites such as pfox.org and americansfortruth.com.
- If LGBTQ-supportive websites are blocked, ask school administrators whether they are intentionally blocking them. If they are not, the school should work with the filtering software company to unblock these sites.
- If school administrators are intentionally blocking LGBTQ-supportive sites, they may be acting illegally — especially if they do not block antigay sites. Contact Lambda Legal's Help Desk at 1-866-542-8336 or visit www.lambdalegal.org/help/online-form for legal resources if this is the case.

have to include arguments in favor of tobacco use. If school professionals decide to include health, tolerance and anti-bullying in their curricula, that choice is also protected by the law.

Whichever road schools and communities decide to take, numerous leading professional organizations support inclusion of LGBTQ-supportive materials in school curricula, including:

- The American Academy of Pediatrics
- The American Association of School Administrators
- The American School Health Association
- The National Association of Social Workers

Furthermore, schools are legally required at the federal level, as well as commonly under state and local laws, to protect students against harassment and discrimination. It is against federal law to discriminate or harass based on sex stereotypes, or stereotyped ideas about masculinity or femininity. Many state and local laws, as well as local school policies, specifically protect students against discrimination based upon sexual orientation and gender identity. (Employees have protections against discrimination as well. See page 4.)

Inclusive curricula align with these legal requirements and also promote the safety and well-being of students and staff.

What are some ways we can promote awareness of LGBTQ subjects in our curriculum?

- **History, social studies and civics teachers** can include the discussion of LGBTQ rights, activists, political figures and key events, such as the 1969 Stonewall riots, Harvey Milk's election or assassination or Lambda Legal's Supreme Court victory in *Lawrence v. Texas*, a watershed for LGBTQ civil rights.
- **English, literature or humanities teachers** can include the work of LGBTQ writers and artists as well as plays, novels or films with

LGBTQ characters.

- **Health teachers** can include facts about sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, impart nonjudgmental, fact-based information about HIV transmission and prevention and combat HIV stigma by emphasizing that it affects everyone, not just LGBTQ people.
- **Counselors** can supply and prominently display LGBTQ-friendly materials relating to mental and physical health.
- **Administrators and school boards** can adopt standards that require inclusive, comprehensive, evidence-based curricula. These standards can provide guidance while allowing some flexibility within individual districts.
- **Parents and parent-teacher associations** can contact school staff and school officials to lobby for the use of LGBTQ-friendly curricula.
- **Teachers, student group advisors and student activity administrators** can structure presentations, events or discussions around annual observances such as National Freedom to Marry Day (February 12); Pride (varies, many dates in June); National Coming Out Day (October 11) and Transgender Day of Remembrance (varies, November).

TAKING ACTION:

Montgomery County School Board

How Lambda Legal helped to win curriculum inclusiveness in one school system in Maryland



In 2007, public school administrators in Montgomery County, Maryland, revised the eighth- and tenth-grade curricula to include classes on “Respect for Differences in Human Sexuality.” School officials developed these lessons with the help of an advisory panel, including community members and medical experts, and the local board approved the lessons.

But a small group of community members challenged the curriculum. The State Board of Education upheld the County’s decision. But the group, which called itself “Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum,” appealed in court, raising procedural objections and claiming, for instance, that since the curriculum was devoid of religious references, it illegally promoted the religion of “secular humanism.”

School officials’ curricular choice was supported in court by Lambda Legal, representing the local chapter of the national nonprofit group Parents, Family & Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG). A Montgomery County Circuit judge ruled in 2008 to uphold the curriculum, citing the role of trained professionals in developing the lesson plans and rejecting the opposing arguments.