



Working with Transgender Students

From gender-neutral restrooms to safe changing areas, school districts are learning how to accommodate transgender students.

School professionals should take active steps to protect and promote the well-being of a particularly vulnerable youth population: transgender students.

If your child is transgender, or if you're an educator working with transgender youth, your children or students are dealing with issues that have become increasingly visible. Transgender youth have gained more acceptance in the media and society. Transgender students – and all people who challenge gender stereotypes and expectations – should know they are no longer alone.

However, transgender students can still confront serious misunderstandings, insensitivity and discrimination.

In a 2007 study by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 87 percent of transgender students reported that they had been verbally harassed because of their gender expression, and 53 percent reported that they had been physically harassed. The more harassment that students faced, the less likely they were to maintain higher GPAs, attend all their classes and plan for college.

You can take action to protect transgender students from harassment, to support their expression and to ensure that they are treated equally.

Do transgender students have the right to express their gender identity in school?

Yes. Some states have passed gender-identity antidiscrimination laws that apply to educational settings. Some states have also passed laws that specifically prohibit bullying on the basis of gender identity. Frequently, there are other explicit protections in place for transgender students at the local level.

However, even in states that lack such specific protections, transgender students still have enforceable legal rights from several sources. More general state and local laws may be used to protect transgender students facing discrimination, harassment, and privacy issues. Federal statutes like the Equal Access Act and Title IX of the Civil Rights Act protect equal opportunity and free expression rights. The U.S. Constitution — like many state constitutions — guarantees equal protection, so public schools must present valid reasons for treating someone differently.

By learning about the applicable laws in your jurisdiction (contact Lambda Legal’s Help Desk at 1-866-542-8336 or visit www.lambdalegal.org/help/online-form for more information) you will be better prepared to encourage policies protecting transgender rights. But remember that these laws are a floor, not a ceiling. Schools can and should do more than the legal minimum to ensure safety and equal education for transgender students.

How can educational professionals be supportive of transgender students?

We live in a society that often rewards people who fall into one category or another — male or female, masculine or feminine — and often discriminates against those who do not. When communicating with transgender students, you can try to think from their perspective. To be

supportive, there are certain actions that can be very helpful.

DO use inclusive, non-gender-specific language.

DO create an affirming environment where individual gender expression is supported and there’s room for discussion.

DO create a forum for antiviolence discussions with other students, or hold an assembly program addressing bullying.

DO invite guest speakers to share their experiences as transgender youth or adults.

DO support transgender students in creating a forum, such as a trans-inclusive gay-straight alliance (GSA, see page 22), for communication and support.

DON’T make assumptions about transgender students, such as what gender a person is, or whether that person prefers to be called “he” or “she.” Ask them, respectfully.

DON’T ask a transgender student invasive, inappropriate questions about his or her body or sexuality.

How can we develop transgender-inclusive policies in our school?

As a first step, ensure that your school district’s nondiscrimination policy specifically bars discrimination and harassment based on “gender identity and expression,” not just “sexual orientation.” After this policy is adopted, make sure that the entire school community is aware of it.

Next, issue comprehensive guidelines to help administrators and teachers implement the nondiscrimination policy and to ensure equal access to educational programs. These guidelines should:

- instruct school personnel to protect transgender students’ rights and privacy.
- instruct school personnel to respect transgender students’ gender identity and use the students’ preferred pronouns (i.e. “he” and “him,” or “she” and “her”).

“TAKE PROACTIVE STEPS TO HELP TRANSGENDER STUDENTS FEEL INCLUDED, AND MAKE OTHER STUDENTS AWARE OF TRANSGENDER ISSUES.”

- address the use of sex-segregated school facilities and activities.
- respect transgender students’ self-expression, including students’ choices to dress in clothing and accessories that assert their gender identity, and to wear clothes, stickers, and the like that express transgender pride.
- recommend steps to help transgender students feel included, and make other students aware of transgender issues, such as by teaching diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity in health classes.

Should school administrators provide special bathroom and locker facilities?

Transgender students often face particular challenges when using bathrooms or locker rooms. Because these facilities are traditionally segregated by sex, transgender students can face harassment from other students or even discipline from the school for using bathrooms or locker rooms that conform to their gender. As a result, some transgender students avoid these facilities, which can lead to health risks. Accommodating transgender students is simpler than schools expect. You can:

- allow students to use the restrooms or locker rooms that conform to their particular gender identity.
- hang curtains or designate private spaces in

locker rooms, where transgender students can feel comfortable changing.

- create unisex bathroom facilities.
- allow transgender students to use the teachers’ restrooms.

Should schools let transgender athletes play with the team that corresponds to their gender identity?

Transgender athletes have participated in a variety of sports events, from recreational leagues to the Olympics. You can make sure transgender athletes enjoy a level playing field when it comes to school sports participation.

DON’T assume that transgender athletes will have unfair advantages on the playing field, or that they won’t be accepted by their teammates.

DO adopt a case-by-case approach to athletic participation, consulting with each student to determine which team is safest and most appropriate for the individual.

DO educate coaches and student athletes about respect for gender identity.

For more information on this topic, contact Lambda Legal’s Help Desk at 1-866-542-8336 or visit www.lambdalegal.org/help/online-form, the Sports Project at the National Center for Lesbian Rights (www.nclrights.org/) or another organization that advocates for transgender athletes.

The Los Angeles Unified School District

This school system is a model for creating policies and facilities that respect transgender students.



In 2005, the school district administration for Los Angeles — the largest district in California and the second-largest in the United States — created guidelines instructing staff on how to address issues related to transgender and gender-nonconforming students.

The guidelines are comprehensive. They

- instruct teachers to address students by the pronouns of their choice (i.e., “he” and “him” or “she” and “her”).
- update the school’s student database to include his or her preferred name (which may be distinct from the student’s legal name).
- direct staff to protect students’ privacy by disclosing gender identity on a need-to-know basis.
- allow students to use the restroom or locker room that conforms to his or her gender – and make alternatives available according to the preferences and needs of each student.
- let students dress according to the gender identity that they consistently assert at school.
- treat gender-identity-based harassment or discrimination with the same seriousness as any other harassment or discrimination.
- allow for the possibility of transfer between schools when necessary.

By adopting thorough guidelines for school staff, the Los Angeles Unified School District has helped teachers and administrators to develop a safe, respectful environment for transgender students — and, in the process, has set an example for other districts around the country.