

Best Practices to Improve the Education and Work Environments of Middle Schools and High Schools for and with Trans Students, Teachers, Staff & Administrators



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The goal is for everyone to have a safe learning and work environment.

What Does Transgender Mean?

A transgender person (or trans person) is someone whose sex, gender, and/or gender expression differs from the one assigned to them at birth. Language describing trans people and specific trans identities may vary due to influences of geographic, cultural and demographic variables, thus it is important to be flexible and inclusive since there are over 100 different trans identities. Some trans people may engage in body modification to masculinize or feminize their appearance in order to survive and thrive, though it is not specific to one type of trans identity. Every trans person's sex, gender identity and gender expression should be honored and respected regardless of one's physical body or characteristics.

Update Policy and Forms

- Many trans people do not go by their birth names, therefore ask on school forms and/or when meeting new co-workers or students "What name do you prefer to be called?"
- Include "gender expression" and "gender identity" in your official school nondiscrimination policies. This helps to provide a safe educational and work environment for everyone, especially in matters of protecting against violence and harassment, and discrimination in tenure, promotion, admissions, and financial aid.
- Create specific guidelines about how to record, document, and address issues of harassment and verbal and physical abuse dealing with gender expression or gender identity, from student to student, employee to student, employee to employee, and student to employee. It is important to respond visibly and quickly to any act of intolerance directed toward a trans person in order to establish a clear standard that no acts of harassment or violence will be accepted at your school.
- Develop guidelines about how to assist trans students and employees in navigating your school system, including addressing concerns with bathrooms, locker rooms, school identification picture cards, name changes, requesting school transcripts after a name change, possible issues of harassment, and any gender segregated classes or activities, such as physical education, etc.

Use Appropriate Language

- Be gender inclusive with all interview guide questions and surveys, and avoid having only 2 categories: "male" and female," or 4 categories: "male," "female," MTF" and "FTM." To effectively collect demographic information and acknowledge the diversity of sex and gender identities, using two separate questions is recommended (see example below). Many trans people may not currently identify as "transgender" for a variety of reasons. Some may believe it is part of their past and not a present identification, others may not identify with that word.

Your specific identification and the language you use to describe yourself are important to us to provide you with the best education and services. Please ask us if you have any questions or need clarification.

1) What is your sex/gender? (Please select **ALL** that apply)

- Female
- Male
- Transgender Female/Transwoman
- Transgender Male/Transman
- Genderqueer
- Additional Category: Please specify: _____
- Decline to State

2) What sex were you assigned at birth? (Please select **one**)

- Female
- Male
- Decline to State

Rationale and points to highlight for two-question recommendation above:

Asking people to check all in the first question allows people to check off more than one category if they view their sex or gender in a multifaceted way. For example, a person may identify as a “female” and also a “transgender female.” This may be similar to race or ethnicity in which a person can be more than one race or ethnicity.

The first question requests a person’s current sex/gender. Both terms “sex/gender” are asked since there are a variety of definitions today of what is “sex” and what is “gender.” In many cases people will mix up or conflate these terms and regardless of one personal definition, for data collection purposes including both versus just one is beneficial for accurate data collection.

With regards to the definition of these terms some believe that “sex” is only “male” or “female” and is strictly biological and can never be changed. Some believe one’s sex can be changed but only through hormone therapy and genital surgeries. Yet, others believe that the definition of sex goes beyond narrow medical definitions of genitalia, chromosomes, hormone levels, and reproductive abilities, which often disregards the vast natural differences of biological characteristics that exist among people. They believe the term sex today encompasses also legal, policy, cultural and social issues and a person should not have to undergo surgeries to reassign the sex they were given at birth. This has major implications for document changes (such as birth certificates, passports, driver’s licenses, etc.) and U.S. state and national laws (for example, the United Kingdom (2004), Spain (2006), and the state of Iowa (2006) allows trans people to change their legal sex on their birth certificate without undergoing any surgeries). (For further discussion about sex please see Devor, 2002; Sausa, 2006; Vade, 2005).

The definition of the term “gender” or “gender identity” often referring to “man” or “woman” also varies. Some believe that sex is one’s biology and gender is socially and culturally constructed (thus you can change your gender but not your sex). This definition has led to an offensive and crude saying: “Gender is between your ears and sex is between your legs.” Others recognize that one’s gender identity includes one’s social status, self-identification, legal status, and biology, noting that it is more complex than originally

assumed and that new gender theories have moved us beyond an antiquated dichotomous explanation of gender identity to include multi-dimensional and multi-layered concepts. (For further discussion about gender please see Devor, 2002; Sausa, 2006; Vade, 2005).

Providing a space for people to state their specific trans identity or identities and adding the “additional category” helps to clarify which of the 100 or so trans identities they may be. There are many more trans identities than MTF or FTM, and some believe that only having the categories male, female, MTF, and FTM is reductionary and simply recreates a narrow binary thinking about sex and gender. For example today “transgender men” may identify as: transguys, trannyfags, studs, men, males, genderqueers, gender outlaws, gender fluid, bois, FTMs, two-spirit, transsexual men, MSM, TMSM, gay men, etc. Depending on the needs of your data collection, it may be helpful to find out what current terminology is being used by these men to provide more effective health interventions, outreach, counseling and testing, creating educational materials and media campaigns, etc.

The second question requests a person’s sex assigned at birth. Though many people are born with an intersex condition currently only “male” or “female” is assigned to each new born and only one of those two categories are placed on a birth certificate in the U.S.

It is important to note that some people born with an intersex condition may also identify as transgender, though most do not. It is important to not conflate the issues of trans people and people with an intersex condition by placing them both within the transgender umbrella. In addition, the inclusion of “Intersex” as a gender or sex category is not recommended for a variety of reasons including the fact that most people with an intersex condition identify as male or female, as highlighted by Emi Koyama from the Intersex Initiative Portland [for further information about this please see Emi Koyama’s article at www.ipdx.org/articles/letter-outsidein.html]. The health care needs of people with an intersex condition should be a priority for all health professionals [for further information and education please contact The Intersex Society of North America at www.isna.org].

● Avoid recreating binary sex and gender categories for trans people. Often language that assumes only two sexes or genders is used to describe all trans people, such as Female-to-Male (FTM) and Male-to-Female (MTF). Though some trans people may use these terms because it has been historically used in mental health and medical literature, many trans people today use “transwoman,” or “woman,” or “female” to describe themselves, or “transmen,” “man,” or “male” to describe themselves. There are also many other trans identities, such as genderqueer, gender variant, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, and so forth. And trans people may also identify with more than one trans or gender identity. Language is continually evolving therefore it’s imperative to keep up to date.

● Provide workshops, guest speakers, and professional training to encourage students, teachers, staff, and administrators to use gender-neutral language and not assume the sexual orientation of a trans person. For example, use *parent* or *guardian* instead of *mother/father*, use *partner(s)* instead of *girlfriend/boyfriend*, use *spouse/domestic partner* instead of *husband/wife*. Also, remember that a student may have only 1 or more than 2 parents or guardians. One suggestion for asking this information on a form is:

Please list names of all parents or guardians:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

● Respect trans people by using appropriate pronouns for their gender identity and expression. If you are unsure, just politely ask the person. Also, some people may prefer not to use any pronouns or use gender neutral pronouns such as “ze” instead of he or she, and “zir” instead of his or her.

Create a Safe Environment

- Be an ally to and advocate for trans people. Create an atmosphere in which derogatory remarks regarding trans people are not acceptable. Challenge all put-downs immediately and dispel myths and stereotypes about trans people. When negative remarks and put-downs go unchallenged it normalizes the behavior as okay and fosters a hostile learning and work environment.
- Hire openly trans teachers, staff, and administrators who would provide valuable knowledge about trans needs and concerns, as well as help trans students and employees feel represented in your school.
- Encourage role models and mentors through special peer mentoring programs, and by having openly trans teachers, staff, and administrators or trans allies who are trained and designated as safe people to approach for information and support. This can be done for students as well as employees.
- Establish support and discussion groups that are specific to addressing gender diversity and trans experiences for students, staff and parents. You may need to establish different groups for students, staff, and parents, so people feel safe participating and discussing any concerns and questions among their peers. Please remember that many parents are trans allies or trans themselves and could be wonderful resources and/or facilitators of groups or assist in organizing educational events for the school.
- Do not “out” trans people who do not wish others to know about their history or experiences. Please ask their permission before telling others and honor confidentiality. Note that some people may be out in some aspects of their lives, but not in all.
- Remove *MEN’s* and *WOMEN’s* restroom labels, or create additional gender inclusive *RESTROOMS* that are convenient to access. Gender inclusive bathrooms are helpful for trans people, as well as family members and care givers of children and differently-abled adults who may need assistance in the bathroom. Many trans people have been verbally and physically harassed, and even physically removed by security personnel, for entering the so called “wrong” bathroom. This is especially common for people who do not fit into the dichotomous gender norms of our society, such as a masculine or androgynous woman who has been mistaken as a man entering the women’s bathroom. To help create a safer atmosphere for trans students and employees, universal gender inclusive restrooms are essential. [If you are creating gender inclusive restrooms at your facility in addition to men’s and women’s restrooms, please note that some trans people will prefer to still use the men’s or women’s restroom because they identify as such, therefore please do not simply section off all trans people to the gender inclusive bathrooms. Please allow for the differences in gender identity among trans individuals by creating spaces for everyone to feel comfortable and safe.]
- Form collaborations with trans students, employees and allies to address issues at your school to improve safety, awareness, and education for the entire school community. A working group or task group of interested people can be effective in organizing efforts and resources. Collaborate with local and national trans organizations for resources and education, and learn from other schools that have accomplished similar efforts at their schools.
- Include trans specific and trans positive literature, brochures, books, magazines, artwork, and posters in your lobby, hallways, bulletin boards, and office. This helps people to feel welcomed and more comfortable.

Increase Awareness & Provide Educational Training

- Take a trans sensitivity inventory of your school. Schedule periodic educational workshops and in-service trainings to provide important current information and assist with concerns or questions about the needs of trans people for your students, as well as your teachers, staff, and administrators. Continual education is also helpful to address changes among teachers, staff, and administrators, as well as the ever-changing student body, and keep everyone up-to-date on current resources.
- Ask for help from trans specific local and national organizations. Build collaborative relationships between your school and local centers, organizations, and support groups for referrals, education, and services.
- Hire specific point people to be trans resources for students and employees. These people can be extremely advantageous in assisting with concerns or questions, providing in-services or workshops for the school, and effectively dealing with everyday challenges in updating and representing the school on trans issues and gender variant youth.
- Encourage all school organizations or clubs, especially a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual (LGB) club or Gay-Straight Alliance, to be inclusive of trans people. Please remember that simply adding the “T” is not enough. Therefore, organizations and clubs are encouraged to add the “T” (or change their name entirely to be more inclusive), AND also continually educate and bring awareness of trans issues to your members. Please don’t use the excuse of “we have not done the work yet” as a reason to continually delay including the “T” and therefore not include trans people and their needs in your organization, since this is transphobic.
- Encourage teachers to include trans positive films, articles, books, guest speakers, and panels in their curricula to provide a place for open discussion, increased awareness, and education about the various issues affecting trans people and gender variant youth.
- Train health care providers, health educators, and counselors at your school to be knowledgeable about and sensitive to the health and medical needs of trans individuals. Trans health care, mental health, and social service needs may include: Body modification (tucking/binding, hormone therapy, silicone injections, gender confirmation surgeries); Disclosure of gender identity to parents, friends, partners and others in their social network; Self-esteem and self-efficacy; Immigration issues; Legal assistance with name and/or sex/gender changes on documents (birth certificate, passport, driver’s license, etc); Dating violence; Mental health issues; Substance use; Discrimination and stigma; Hate violence; Medication adherence; Body image concerns; Birth control, pregnancy and parenthood; STDs/HIV; Sex work; Homelessness, transient housing, or couch surfing; etc.
- Train public safety officers, school security guards, and custodial staff to be knowledgeable about and sensitive to the safety needs of trans individuals.

Establish Resources

- Designate resource people in your school to update and provide trans specific resources for students and employees.
- Create a Resource Guide for trans students and employees that provide trans specific services and are trans friendly. These resources may include hotlines, list serves, websites, recent articles, books, brochures, listings of local and national trans organizations, and listings of local support groups and health care providers who provide services for trans people. Having an accurate and current base of information is helpful for making effective referrals and attaining vital knowledge. Please update the resource guide once a year. Please make sure your

personal library and especially your school library provides current books, videos, journals, and magazines on trans issues and experiences.

● Learn about the variety of current list serve discussion groups, web sites, and other electronic media for further information about trans people and their experiences. Also create special school list serves as a way of providing support for students, teachers, staff, and administrators, and building connections to share information.

● Provide funding for students and employees to attend trans specific conferences to educate themselves and encourage them to present or share the information and resources they gathered with students and co-workers.

References:

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Sausa, L. A. (2006). Translating research into practice: Trans youth recommendations for improving school systems. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, 3(1), 15-28.

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