

One basic area of student diversity that schools rarely acknowledge is gender. However, gender inclusive schools and classrooms welcoming all children are within any school community's reach.

When someone with the authority of a teacher describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. – Adrienne Rich

There are a number of schools today that have worked to intentionally establish gender inclusive environments for their students. Fortunately, there is a growing knowledge base about the steps necessary to create conditions in which the gender diversity of every child is accepted, valued, and nourished.

While schools should do this work due to the positive impact on all students, increasingly schools must do this work. Legal compliance, adherence to new federal and state policies, as well as society's shifting recognition and acceptance of gender's complexity all underscore the degree to which this topic is coming into focus. Beyond these external forces, children and youth are expanding ways in which they think about gender, both their own and that of their peers. Our educational institutions are obligated to respond accordingly.

Gender Inclusive Schools - An Introduction

Why Gender Matters: It's About Every Student

As one of the most fundamental aspects of self, gender impacts everybody. All of us can point to a time in our lives when we were burdened by unfair limitations or expectations because of others' beliefs about our gender. Regardless of a student's age, [gender impacts a child's experience at school across the grades](#). There is abundant research about the relationship between students' sense of safety and their ability to succeed in school, and gender is one of the factors that greatly impacts perceptions of safety. As a primary socializing agent, schools have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to be inclusive of all students, regardless of their Gender identity or expression. In this role, educational institutions and the professionals associated with them can significantly impact the degree to which gender diversity in children and teens is viewed – either positively or negatively.

Beyond supporting our young people as individuals, we cannot afford to have any of our students cut off from interests, talents, or intellectual pursuits that may ultimately contribute to our society. School is the place where our children should be exploring ideas and discovering new skills. It is inexcusable that any child might be prevented from pursuing their passions simply based on others' perceptions of their gender. By sending a message that certain pursuits are off limits simply because of a person's gender, we lose access to an incredible source of human potential. How many great discoveries, new inventions, cures for disease, or works of art have we lost simply because people believed they couldn't, or shouldn't, do something because of their gender?

Gender and the Law

The right for every student to attend school in a safe and supportive setting regardless of gender is supported by a vast number of legal protections at the federal, state and local level. In April 2014, the US Department of Education made an [historic announcement](#) reaffirming a 2010 declaration that “Title IX’s sex discrimination prohibition extends to claims of discrimination based on gender identity or failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity,” and emphasized that the department’s Office of Civil Rights readily accepts such complaints for investigation.

This guidance builds on court decisions and a 2012 opinion by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) that gender identity discrimination falls under sex discrimination, which is barred by Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Equal protection language in the US Constitution and special education laws (under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) are also increasingly being used to guarantee the rights of Gender-expansive students to access educational services. [Across the country a growing number of states](#) (Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Iowa, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington) have enumerated gender identity and expression protections in schools.

At least 160 cities and counties have passed their own laws prohibiting gender identity discrimination including Atlanta, Boise, Buffalo, Cincinnati, Dallas, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Louisville, Madison, Miami, Nashville, New Orleans, and Pittsburgh. Additionally, state and local educational institutions are issuing clear guidelines and expectations about [best practices](#) for ensuring that all gender-expansive youth are supported at school.

Gender and Bullying

There is a reason the legal protections described above exist. Our society’s limited understanding of, and appreciation for, gender diversity has a very important consequence: bullying. Individuals who are seen as different are frequently targets for mistreatment. But unlike many forms of diversity, when individuals perceived as different with regards to gender are the targets, [there is frequently an indifference](#), if not overt approval, for the mistreatment they face. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that in many cases these young people are not supported at home either.

Of late, a great deal of attention has been paid to the bullying of LGBT students, particularly at the secondary level. Teen suicides have been all too familiar in the nation’s headlines. However, what is critical to recognize is that much of the mistreatment leading to these tragedies is in fact grounded in issues of gender that are present almost as soon as our children enter school. Not being masculine or feminine can be cause for real cruelty among kids beginning as early as pre-school. Long before sexual attraction or orientation are even being considered, elementary school students are targeted based on their perceived lack of conformity to their peers’ gender norms. Even more frightening, in addition to bullying by peers, students sometimes find the teachers, coaches and other school staff charged with protecting them indifferent to the cruelty they face; in some cases they are the perpetrators of bullying themselves.

Data related to gender-based bullying [paints a frightening picture](#). Moreover, beyond the daily challenges gender-expansive young people face, there exists a far more dangerous and

longer-term impact. When bullied in school based on perceived gender differences, [young adults face many challenges](#) including health disparities, depression and reduced life satisfaction. Once again, our society's biases around gender hurt individuals, and exact a price for all of us as we deal with the consequences of our misguided and narrow perspectives.

Thinking Critically About Difference

Schools that explicitly recognize gender diversity establish conditions in which conversations and activities exploring other forms of difference become possible. In embarking on a path to expand students' understanding about gender diversity, schools set a tone in which the examination of differences across multiple domains is accepted and encouraged. Exploring gender becomes an on ramp for students to consider complex issues in other aspects of their lives. Racial, cultural, religious, linguistic, socioeconomic and many other forms of difference can now be examined from the perspective of critical analysis grounded in this initial study and understanding of gender.

Coming to recognize gender in all of its complexity allows students to see concepts in more realistic terms. Helping them understand the idea of a spectrum—a range of possibilities and not simply the “opposite ends” of a binary—builds their capacity to critically examine concepts in other areas of learning as well as building their appreciation for gender and other forms of diversity. In building students' perspectives about gender and gender diversity, schools are able to introduce notions of ambiguity and degree that will serve them as they explore other complex topics for the rest of their lives.

Creating Gender Inclusive Schools

What is a Gender Inclusive school?

A gender inclusive school makes certain that regardless of one's gender identity or Gender expression, students are included in all aspects of the school environment without restriction or limitation of any kind. These schools, through intentional practices, policies and other actions demonstrate this focus in ways large and small. From systemic strategies to subtle interactions, [a gender inclusive school](#) states clearly to its community, “all genders are welcome!”

Where to Begin? A Framework for Gender Inclusive Schools

When focusing on the intentional development of gender inclusive school settings, it is helpful to think in terms of [four discrete entry points](#): Internal, Institutional, Interpersonal, and Instructional. This work begins by expanding our own perspectives of gender. Personal entry points focus on individual educators' own understanding of gender and reflection about how each person's experiences and beliefs impact the work they do with students, beginning with their own gender story. Using a growing list of writings about gender as well as resources and tools such as [Understanding Gender](#) and [My Gender Journey](#), this entry point is really an ongoing process of personal exploration upon which educators build their gender inclusive practices, applying a lens of gender awareness to all they do in their role within a

school community.

Institutional entry points are structural steps that create a foundation for gender inclusive practices to take hold. Through this entry point, schools demonstrate to their community that the institution recognizes and honors gender diversity and actively work to reflect a more complex understanding about gender. An important first step in this area [is to assess the degree to which your district or school systematically recognizes and addresses issues related to gender diversity](#), and to [plan for responding accordingly](#). Other examples of this entry point includes [visual signs and other symbols](#) about gender acceptance, [registration forms](#), and other student information systems that recognize students' gender diversity, and [formal policies](#) and administrative regulations guiding schools efforts to be more gender inclusive.

Interpersonal entry points are the various ways in which individual interactions and communications are utilized to reinforce a school's commitment to gender inclusion. Supported by many of the institutional components, these "teachable moments" require intentional behaviors in the day-to-day interrelationships of a campus. They literally voice a school's commitment to honoring the gender diversity of all students. [From the manner in which they set up and run classrooms](#) to their [use of language with students](#) and parents, teachers and leaders can literally "walk the talk" through these relational and conversational approaches.

Instructional entry points are specific ways in which teaching and learning are used to instill greater awareness and understanding about gender. Whether standing alone or integrated into other aspects of instruction, instructional approaches are the most direct way to impact students. Another wonderful support is the use of literature introducing gender-expansive themes. These are becoming increasingly plentiful at the [elementary-grade reading level](#), along with a [growing list titles](#) for middle and high school students.

The Gender Inclusive School: Concrete strategies for creating a safer and more accepting school climate for all students.

Operating from these principles, Gender Spectrum's comprehensive guide, [The Gender Inclusive School](#), seeks to expand the approaches educators can take to help all students feel safe within their schools or classrooms. Recognizing that schools face a multitude of complex factors as they relate to children and issues of gender, the guide flexibly responds to varying situations, communities, and conditions. Schools integrating the ideas and activities with comprehensive policies focused on the protection of all students will lead to the development of campuses grounded in kindness, respect, and acceptance. Inclusive of concrete tools and approaches for each of the four entry points, The Gender Inclusive School, is a roadmap to a safe and supportive school climate. The result is an authentic, unfettered and inclusive learning community celebrating the gender diversity of all children.

School Professional Development and Support

Gender Inclusive schools do not happen by accident. The development of the policies, programs, and practices that characterize climates welcoming to students regardless of their

gender takes careful planning and thoughtfulness. Gender Spectrum works in partnership with schools throughout the world to develop more welcoming spaces. Rather than a formulaic approach, we work closely with educators to design a program of training and support that is tailored to the specific context of the institution. Given the unique traits of each district, school, and community, we utilize the framework described above to identify the most effective path towards greater gender acceptance for that setting.

Educators as Protective Agents

Regardless of where the work begins, Gender Spectrum's approach to creating more inclusive spaces for all students rests on a fundamental belief: that all educators are committed to and responsible for the safety and well-being of the students with whom they are privileged to work. Every adult on campus is there in service of creating conditions in which students can learn. As such, each is an educator who works as part of collection of caring adults charged with making sure all students feel seen, supported, and safe. An important aspect of developing a gender-inclusive school is to name the crucial role every adult plays in its creation, and then providing them with the tools for making it a reality.

Overview of GS Professional Development Programs

Gender Spectrum's various levels of training and support are designed to meet the needs of any educational institution interested in becoming more welcoming of all students respective of their gender expression or identity. Our experience has shown that there are three distinct developmental stages that schools move through on their way to becoming truly gender inclusive.

The first is about **urgency and perspective**: most teachers and other educators have had little or no training about gender. Thus, the first step on the road to greater acceptance is awareness about fundamental notions of gender and their impact on their students.

Next is an explicit focus on the various **practices** that lead to more inclusive conditions. Whether a teacher, secretary, classroom aide, campus supervisor or any other adult, there are specific ways in which to either support more gender acceptance or to inhibit it.

The third stage is the **institutional consolidation** of these approaches. By working to systematically imbed greater awareness and gender inclusive practices, schools at this stage demonstrate an integrated approach in which the whole is larger than the sum of its parts.

Our professional development programs are designed with this developmental lens in mind. Featuring a wide variety of resources and methods for utilizing them, they can be tailored to meet the specific needs of a school in any context. Components of each include training, advice, and resources for making the creation of a gender inclusive school an achievable goal.

Supporting Gender-Expansive Students

While working proactively to be more gender inclusive benefits all students, for many leaders and other educators, this work begins with a new Transgender or other gender-expansive child enrolling at their school, or a currently enrolled student expressing a desire share their gender identity or expression in some significant way. These events can be unsettling, even frightening. However, in creating more accepting conditions for students of all genders, these schools also are well-positioned to meet the specific needs of transgender and other gender-expansive students and their families and caregivers. Rather than a moment of crisis, a gender-expansive student's enrollment will affirm the truly gender-inclusive climate a school has worked so hard to create.

The School/Home Partnership

Working as a Team

For some families of gender-expansive students, experiences with schools have been challenging, and in some cases combative. Often facing systems unprepared or unwilling to meet their child's needs, parents may approach their child's school ready to do battle. It is critical that educators are especially focused on building trust with the family, acknowledging their fears and articulating your commitment to ensuring their child's well-being. By genuinely demonstrating that their gender-expansive child is a [welcome addition to your community](#), schools position themselves to establish an authentic partnership with families. In so doing, you are setting up a relationship grounded in a common cause: the child's successful experience at your school.

So what does demonstrating this welcoming attitude look like? Certain structural elements can help— forms that acknowledge Non-binary gender, mission statements and policies that explicitly reference gender identity and expression, visual images and signs celebrating gender diversity. So too can sharing reflections about your own experiences in coming to understand the complexity of gender. Describing professional development activities, referring to readings or other resources related to gender are further examples of your commitment.

It may also be the case that the school is observing things about a child's gender that the family is not seeing away from school. It is not uncommon for a child to "try on" a more expansive presentation on campus - through clothing, choice of friends, preferred activities, and/or in their writing or artwork - than they might display at home. In these situations, the school may be getting an indication of the child's evolving gender before the family is even aware of it (or perhaps is willing to acknowledge).

It can then be important to share your observations with the family in an objective and supportive way. Bringing up a child's gender-expansiveness can be a very sensitive topic, and should be handled in a manner that invites dialogue with the family. By sharing your concrete examples of the student's actions and words, rather than your interpretation of what these might mean, you can engage the child's parents and caregivers in an open conversation about what you are observing. Rather than declaring what a child's gender expression means, you instead want to enlist the family as partners in a shared effort to

understand what, if anything, the child is saying about who they are.

Finally, a note of caution: you may be worried about the larger parent or community reaction to a visible shift in a student's gender or to learning a transgender or otherwise gender-expansive student is joining your school. It is essential that in your initial interactions with the child's family, these community concerns not frame your conversation. A family hearing about the school's need to "balance your child's needs with those of the other families and children," will most often be interpreted to mean, "Here we go again—yet another school where my child is not safe." This is not to say that you do not need to be responsive to community-based questions and concerns, or that eventually you may need to communicate and strategize with the family about them. It simply means that a family need to see evidence of your sincere commitment to working to support this child at the outset of your interactions, and that this commitment is not going to be compromised in the process.

Communicating a Change in Gender Status: Examining Trade-offs

What is Meant By "A Change in Gender Status?"

When a student seeks to align outward appearance, expression and social interactions with internal gender identity in a way that is new (or at least new at school), it marks a milestone in that young person's development. Typically, this will include things such as changes in a student's name or pronouns, a more "typical" gender expression, the use of facilities such as restrooms or changing rooms consistent with gender identity, participation in activities such as sports or after-school programs, and various ways of socially interacting with other students.

There are a number of [key considerations](#) that must be accounted for when a student makes the decision to publicly share their authentic gender, whether prior to becoming a student at the school or while currently enrolled. Regardless of the specific circumstances, however, schools can maximize the potential for a successful experience through a carefully thought out [Gender Support Plan](#) designed to anticipate various circumstances that may arise in the process. A [Gender Communication Plan](#) can also be helpful in situations in which the child wishes to explicitly share their changed status with the school community at large.

Gender and Sports at School

Why Sports Matter

The introduction to [On the Team: Equal Opportunity for Transgender Student Athletes](#), states "(e)ducators must address transgender issues in athletics for several reasons. First and foremost, core values of equal opportunity and inclusion demand that educational leaders adopt thoughtful and effective policies that enable all students to participate fully in school athletic programs...(t)he right of transgender students to participate in sports calls for similar considerations of fairness and equal access."

The vast majority of school or community athletic programs have no policy governing the inclusion of transgender or gender-expansive athletes. Typically, the coaches, trainers and league organizers have little or no experience accommodating a transgender athlete who wants to play on a team. Even basic accommodations can be confusing, such as what pronouns or name to use to refer to that student, where that student should change clothes for practice or competition, what bathroom that student should use, or how to apply team dress codes.

All young people should have the opportunity to play recreational sports and have their personal dignity respected. Transgender young people are no different. In fact, because transgender young people often must overcome significant stigma and challenges, it would be particularly harmful to exclude them from the physical, mental and social benefits that young people gain through athletics. The impact of such discrimination can be severe and result in lifelong harm. In contrast, permitting transgender children and youth to participate in recreational sports in their Affirmed gender can provide an enormous boost to their self-confidence and self-esteem and provide them with positive experiences that will help them in all other areas of their lives.

For information about specific guidelines and policies across the United States, visit TransAthlete.com. For a sample Model Policy regarding participation of transgender athletes, click [here](#). For further exploration, see the Transgender Law & Policy Institute's [Guidelines for Creating Policies for Transgender Children in Recreational Sports](#) and [The Transgender Athlete](#).

Conclusion

As one of society's most powerful socializing forces, schools play a crucial role in the manner in which young people make meaning of the world around them. Messages received there have a tremendous impact on how they perceive themselves and others as they receive cues from their educational institutions about what is or is not acceptable. Throughout history, this role has had a tremendous impact, both for good as well as for ill, on how differences across race, language, and disability have been perceived. So too for gender. In a period when perceptions of gender are shifting all around us, our schools once again have the opportunity, and the responsibility, to help lead the way to greater acceptance and inclusion for young people of all genders.