

Making the Grade:

How to Find an LGBTQ+ Inclusive School District



Co-Developed by the
Human Rights Campaign Foundation and
the School Board Integrity Project



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Dear Friends,

Every student deserves to learn in a school where they can thrive and feel safe, supported, and welcomed for exactly who they are. Yet, with growing threats and a hostile climate coming from the highest levels of our state and federal governments, that promise isn't always guaranteed.

For LGBTQ+ students and families, finding a district that meets this standard can feel like a test. But it's the belief of both the Human Rights Campaign and the School Board Integrity Project that no family should have to worry about whether their child will be welcomed, included, or encouraged to reach their full potential at school. That's why we've created the resource, *Making the Grade: How to Find an LGBTQ+ Inclusive School District*, to **put the power in your hands**.

Inside, you'll find information, guiding questions, a clear checklist, and practical tips to help you grade any school district. These are the same criteria we use to evaluate policies and practices, so you can confidently identify inclusive environments and recognize warning signs when they appear.

Think of this as your study guide for choosing the right district. **With the right information, you can ensure that your school truly makes the grade.** Our hope is that this guide becomes more than just a resource, that it's a tool you share with friends, a conversation starter with school district leaders and neighbors, and a reminder that you have the power to help shape the schools in your community.

When families are informed, engaged, and connected, we can build the safe, welcoming schools every student deserves. Thank you for being part of that work.

With gratitude and solidarity,



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SECTION ONE:

Why School District Policies Matter for LGBTQ+ Students

School district policies shape the daily experiences and overall culture of schools, while creating a foundation of safety and belonging across the district community. They guide how schools operate, how staff make decisions, and how students are supported. Clear and inclusive policies are essential for LGBTQ+ students, families, and staff.

Inclusive policies that explicitly protect sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression send a strong message: **every student has the right to learn in an environment free from harassment and discrimination, every family has the right to be recognized and affirmed, and every staff member has the right to work in a respectful workplace.**

A school policy is a formal statement adopted by a school board or district that establishes school rules and standards.

CORE COMPONENTS OFTEN INCLUDE:

- **Purpose:** Why the policy exists and what it aims to accomplish.
- **Definition:** Key terms such as 'gender identity' or 'bullying' are used to ensure clarity.
- **Expectations:** Requirements for students, staff, and administrators to uphold the policy.
- **Procedures:** Steps for implementing the policy, including communication with families, staff training, and enforcement.
- **Accountability:** Clear responsibility to ensure the policy is followed and processes for addressing violations.

Strong policies translate key values into consistent action. Clear policies prevent harm, promote positive school climates, and empower educators and families to work together in the best interest of every child.





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SECTION TWO:

Where to Find Policies and Facts

You don't have to rely on word-of-mouth. Many answers about a district's practices and policies can be found in **public records, district websites, and other community sources.**

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL WEBSITES

- Look for a **Policies** or **School Board Documents** section on a school district's website.
 - » These are often found under School Board, About, or Discover tabs.
- Review policies that may be grouped under headings such as Students, Instruction, Education Programs, or District Overview. Key policies to look for include:
 - » Gender Inclusion / Gender Identity & Expression / Transgender Students
 - » Nondiscrimination / Equal Educational Opportunity
 - » Anti-Bullying / Anti-Harassment
 - » Dress Code, Extracurriculars, Facilities Use, Student Rights, Title IX
 - » Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)
- Also, explore the sections on Mental Health, Student Services, Curriculum, Community Engagement, and Strategic Planning. These can often highlight a district's additional support structures or benchmarks.
- Check **parent and student handbooks** for codes of conduct, students' rights, school policies, and available resources.
- Use the **staff directory** to identify superintendents, equity coordinators, principals, or school social workers who can also help to provide key insight into the district.

STATE AND EXTRADISTRICT RESOURCES

- Visit your **State Department of Education** website for data on demographics, discipline, test scores, and climate surveys.
- Look for **statewide LGBTQ+ protections or guidance.**
 - » Consult the **HRC State Equality Index** for a snapshot of state laws. Review reports and information from **local advocacy groups** that track inclusivity.
- Connect with **parent networks** (such as PFLAG chapters) for firsthand insight.



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OTHER SOURCES

- Review **school board meeting agendas, recordings, and minutes** to learn how leaders vote and communicate about the issues that are most important to you and your family.
- Scan **local news and community outlets** for progress (such as Pride events and DEI investments) or warning signs (such as book bans and lawsuits).
- Talk with **families, educators, and community leaders in the district**. Personal stories often provide the clearest picture of whether a school is truly inclusive.



SECTION THREE:

Identifying Welcoming States and Municipalities

School district policies rarely exist in isolation. The protections schools adopt often reflect state laws and local ordinances. For example, a state nondiscrimination law that includes sexual orientation and gender identity can set the stage for districts to adopt similar protections.

State and municipal laws create the guardrails that either support or restrict school boards on inclusion, nondiscrimination, and student protections.

Yet local districts don't always follow through, even in states with strong equality laws. Because each school board is its own governing body, policies and practices can still vary widely within the same state.

The Human Rights Campaign provides several online tools to help families and advocates examine state and local laws that influence district policy:

- + **HRC State Equality Index:** A comprehensive report reviewing state-by-state laws and policies that affect LGBTQ+ people and their families.
 - » **HRC State Score Cards:** A quick-reference scorecard summarizing statewide LGBTQ+ laws and protections, based on the HRC State Equality Index.
- + **HRC Municipal Equality Index:** An evaluation of local laws and policies in municipalities nationwide.

These resources are excellent starting points for identifying places across the country where LGBTQ+ students and families are most likely to be supported, and where additional precautions may be necessary.

- + Inclusive states provide guardrails. Strong nondiscrimination laws, anti-bullying statutes, and inclusive education policies create a safer baseline for students.
- + Municipal protections add another layer. Cities and counties that embrace inclusion often set the tone for schools, shaping leadership and community climate.
- + But local governance still matters. School boards are their own elected governing bodies. They can choose to align with—or fall short of—state and municipal protections.

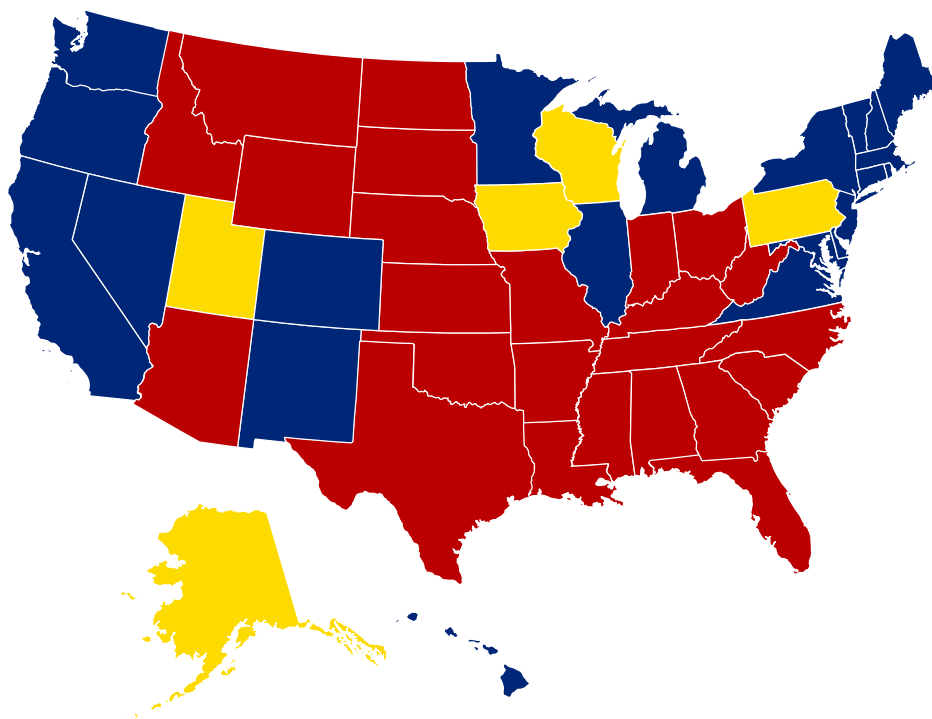
That's why the rest of this guide is so critical. Even in the most welcoming states, families need to know how to evaluate whether a specific district is truly living up to the promise of inclusion and whether it is the right fit for their students.



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Equality Map



BLUE STATES: STATES WORKING TOWARD INNOVATIVE EQUALITY

- | | | | |
|---------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| ▪ California | ▪ Maine | ▪ New Hampshire | ▪ Vermont |
| ▪ Colorado | ▪ Maryland | ▪ New Jersey | ▪ Virginia |
| ▪ Connecticut | ▪ Massachusetts | ▪ New Mexico | ▪ Washington |
| ▪ Delaware | ▪ Michigan | ▪ New York | ▪ Washington, D.C. |
| ▪ Hawaii | ▪ Minnesota | ▪ Oregon | |
| ▪ Illinois | ▪ Nevada | ▪ Rhode Island | |

YELLOW STATES: STATES WORKING TO SOLIDIFY EQUALITY

- | | | | | |
|----------|--------|----------------|--------|-------------|
| ▪ Alaska | ▪ Iowa | ▪ Pennsylvania | ▪ Utah | ▪ Wisconsin |
|----------|--------|----------------|--------|-------------|

RED STATES: STATES LACKING BASIC EQUALITY

- | | | | |
|------------|---------------|------------------|------------------|
| ▪ Alabama | ▪ Indiana | ▪ Montana | ▪ South Carolina |
| ▪ Arizona | ▪ Kansas | ▪ Nebraska | ▪ South Dakota |
| ▪ Arkansas | ▪ Kentucky | ▪ North Carolina | ▪ Tennessee |
| ▪ Florida | ▪ Louisiana | ▪ North Dakota | ▪ Texas |
| ▪ Georgia | ▪ Mississippi | ▪ Ohio | ▪ West Virginia |
| ▪ Idaho | ▪ Missouri | ▪ Oklahoma | ▪ Wyoming |



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SECTION FOUR:

Asking the Right Questions

Policies are not just words on paper. They set the expectations for how students, families, and staff are treated, and they give LGBTQ+ students protections that can make the difference between feeling unsafe and being able to thrive as their authentic selves. A strong district should have policies that:

- + **Protect students from harm** by explicitly prohibiting bullying, harassment, and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.
- + **Ensure inclusion** through affirming curriculum, supportive student clubs like GSAs, and access to inclusive extracurricular programs.
- + **Provide accountability** by requiring staff training, designating clear points of contact, and outlining processes for responding to incidents.
- + **Affirm identity** by establishing gender support plans, clear guidance on names and pronouns, and equitable facility access.

For families, the value of a policy comes down to lived experience. A nondiscrimination policy only matters if it leads to real protections when bullying or harassment happens. A commitment to inclusion only matters if it results in welcoming clubs, classrooms, and experiences for LGBTQ+ students.

Questions to Start With (Policy Basics)

- + Does the district's anti-bullying and nondiscrimination policy explicitly include protections for sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression?
- + What training and professional development do teachers and staff receive to support LGBTQ+ students and their families?
- + Are there GSAs or similar clubs that provide safe spaces and leadership opportunities for LGBTQ+ youth?
- + How does the district respond to and follow up on incidents of bullying, harassment, or intimidation?
- + Does the curriculum affirm LGBTQ+ identities, including in sexual health education, history, and literature?



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Questions for Digging Deeper (Policy Detail)

- + Is there a dedicated staff member (such as an equity, diversity, or LGBTQ+ coordinator), and how can families connect with them?
- + Does the district provide gender support plans or written guidance to affirm and support transgender and nonbinary students?
- + How are extracurricular activities and sports made inclusive for LGBTQ+ students?
- + Do dress codes, bathroom and facility access, and extracurricular participation policies **explicitly protect LGBTQ+ students?**
- + How does the district engage families and the broader community in building inclusive and welcoming schools for all students?

Why These Questions Matter

The answers reveal whether real protections back up a district's stated values. Together, strong policies, consistent practices, and a supportive school environment create the conditions for LGBTQ+ students to feel safe, seen, and able to thrive.

****Extra Credit: Going Beyond Policy to Understand School Culture***

Policies tell you what a district has promised. Culture and climate reveal whether those promises are kept. Families can get a fuller picture by asking questions such as:

- + Have student or family surveys been conducted, and do they show that LGBTQ+ students feel safe, included, and able to be themselves?
- + What systems are in place to ensure teachers and administrators respond quickly and consistently to issues that arise, and how can families track follow-up?
- + Are LGBTQ+ affirming posters, books, and resources available and visible in district classrooms and libraries?
- + Are diverse families represented in school communications?
- + Do all schools in the district apply policies and expectations in similar ways?



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Worksheet: Making the Grade

Your School District Report Card

Even in states with strong equality laws, local districts don't always uphold them. Each school board is its own governing body, which means **policies and practices can vary widely, even within the same state.**

This report card gives you a simple way to 'grade' your district on 10 key subjects that most affect LGBTQ+ inclusion in a school district. Use it to identify strengths, spot gaps, and get a clearer picture of where a district stands on creating safe, welcoming schools.

HOW TO USE THIS WORKSHEET

To make it easy, each potential answer for the 10 subjects on the checklist is color-coded:

Blue = Strong, inclusive policy or practice

Yellow = May indicate some progress, but is incomplete or inconsistent

Red = Missing, harmful, or exclusionary policies or practices

After you've gone through all 10 subjects:

- Add up how many **blue**, **yellow**, and **red** answers you've identified for each of the 10 subjects.
- Use the evaluation at the end of this worksheet to see your district's grade.

1. Nondiscrimination Policies

- ☐ **The district's nondiscrimination policy *explicitly* includes sexual orientation and gender identity.**
- ☐ **The policy includes *at least one* of these protections, but not both.**
- ☐ **The policy is general and does not specifically name sexual orientation or gender identity.**

2. Anti-Bullying Policies

- ☐ **The anti-bullying policy explicitly names sexual orientation and gender identity.**
- ☐ **The policy includes one of these protections but not both.**
- ☐ **The policy does not specifically name sexual orientation or gender identity.**



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3. Transgender & Non-Binary Student Policies

- ☐ The district has a standalone policy or guide to support transgender and non-binary students.
- ☐ The district has some policies that provide support, but no standalone guide.
- ☐ No policies exist to specifically support transgender or non-binary students.

4. Name & Pronoun Guidance

- ☐ Students have access to update their chosen name, gender markers, and/or pronouns in official school records.
- ☐ No process or policy exists for updating chosen name and pronouns.

5. GSAs & Inclusive Student Clubs

- ☐ Schools allow student-led clubs (like GSAs- Gender & Sexuality Alliances) that create safe spaces for all students.
- ☐ Schools do not allow these clubs.

6. Visual Signs of Inclusion

- ☐ Teachers, staff, and administrators are allowed to display Pride symbols (e.g., flags, stickers, posters, etc.).
- ☐ There is no policy about Pride symbols.
- ☐ Staff are not allowed to display Pride symbols.

7. LGBTQ+ Curriculum in the Classroom

- ☐ Students are automatically included in lessons with LGBTQ+ content, with a parent opt-out option.
- ☐ There is no clear policy on opt-in or opt-out for LGBTQ+ content.
- ☐ Students must opt in (with written parent permission) to receive LGBTQ+ content.

8. LGBTQ+ Inclusive Sex Education

- ☐ Standard sex education includes LGBTQ+ topics.
- ☐ LGBTQ+ topics are included but require an opt-in.
- ☐ LGBTQ+ topics are not included in sex education.



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9. LGBTQ+ Inclusive Libraries

- ☐ Libraries include age-appropriate books featuring LGBTQ+ characters and topics.
- ☐ No policy exists regarding LGBTQ+ books.
- ☐ LGBTQ+ books are discouraged or banned.

10. Institutional Commitment

- ☐ The district has a dedicated staff member or office responsible for LGBTQ+ inclusion work.
- ☐ The district has DEI staff but no specific LGBTQ+ inclusion lead.
- ☐ There is no DEI staff or office in the district.

Evaluation

Number of Blue Answers: _____

Number of Yellow Answers: _____

Number of Red Answers: _____

9–10 Blues	<i>A:</i> The district is leading on inclusion.
7–8 Blues	<i>B:</i> The district has a strong foundation, with room to grow.
4–6 Blues	<i>C:</i> The district shows mixed results; watch for gaps and push for progress.
1–3 Blues	<i>D:</i> The district is falling short; students may not be fully supported.
0 Blues	<i>F:</i> The district is failing to support LGBTQ+ students.

Final Grade

This District's Grade: _____

SECTION FIVE:

Flag It – Identifying Red and Green Flags in School Districts

Policies and promises matter, but what really counts is how a district shows up in practice. Families can learn a lot by watching for the signals a school community sends. These flags can reveal both the climate students experience day-to-day and how committed leaders are to creating safe, affirming schools.



Green Flags: Signs of Inclusion

- **Positive coverage:** Local or student news highlighting inclusive work such as Pride celebrations, diversity initiatives, or student clubs like GSAs.
- **Affirming resolutions:** School board votes or public statements on the district website supporting LGBTQ+ inclusion and equity.
- **Supportive leadership:** Administrators and board members who publicly affirm DEI values and LGBTQ+ students.
- **Visible inclusion:** Rainbow Safe Space stickers, inclusive books, curriculum materials, and recognition of LGBTQ+ awareness days/months.
- **Investment in DEI:** Recent increases in funding for inclusive programs, mental health resources, or DEI offices.
- **Doubling down under pressure:** District leadership continues publicly supporting inclusion even when facing outside attacks.
- **Grant support:** Districts receiving grants to expand inclusive practices.
- **Welcoming Schools participation:** The district engages with HRC's Welcoming Schools program and implements its training and resources for its educators.





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Red Flags: Signs of Concern

- **Restrictive policies:** Rules referencing 'biological sex' to limit bathroom access, sports participation, or other 'gendered' activities.
- **Censorship efforts:** Book bans, curriculum censorship, or attempts to silence discussions of race, gender, equity, and history.
- **Hostile rhetoric:** School board members invoking 'parental rights' as justification for removing privacy protections, silencing voices, or targeting LGBTQ+ students.
- **Community backlash without leadership support:** Inclusive policies under attack without a strong response from district leadership.
- **Legal issues:** Lawsuits or settlements over discrimination, harassment, or book bans.
- **Cuts to DEI/mental health programs:** Reduction in funding for inclusion or other student support services.
- **Organized opposition:** Groups such as Moms for Liberty are actively campaigning to roll back inclusive policies and remove books from schools. Be on the lookout — in many districts, opposition groups have successfully helped elect school board candidates aligned with their agenda.
- **Political climate:** Local or state political shifts resulting in attacks on inclusive programs.

No district will always excel in every area, but patterns can help tell an important story. A single red flag may raise questions, while repeated warning signs could suggest deeper problems. Consistent green flags, on the other hand, show a district's commitment to inclusion.





SECTION SIX:

Taking Action

If your district doesn't yet meet the standard students deserve, you are not powerless.

School boards are designed to serve the community, and that means **every parent, student, and community member** has a voice in shaping the policies, practices, and priorities of their schools.

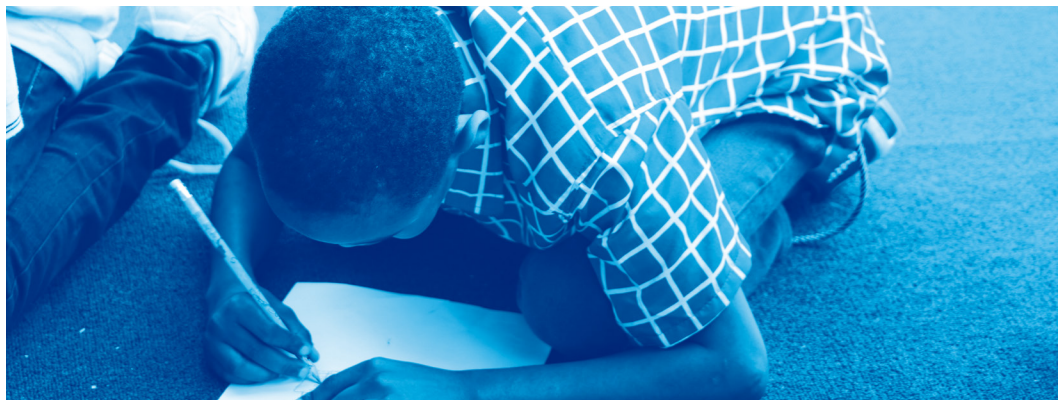
Change often starts with a small group of people willing to ask questions, speak up, and stay engaged. Whether it's ensuring nondiscrimination protections, pushing back against censorship efforts, or building more welcoming schools, **your voice matters.**

To dive deeper into how school boards work and how you can take action on the school board level, explore our **School Boards Matter Guide**.

When families and community members get involved, schools become stronger, safer, and more inclusive for **every student.**

Finally, if you believe your school has made strides in terms of fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ students and families, we encourage you to share the **Welcoming Schools Seal of Excellence program** with your school administrators. Built upon the evidence-based and nationally recognized Welcoming Schools Approach, the Seal of Excellence program has proven to increase educator confidence in addressing and preventing bias-based bullying, improve classroom engagement and academic performance amongst students, and foster a climate and culture based on respect, inclusion, and upstander behavior.

Help your school begin its journey towards the Seal of Excellence today by connecting with us at welcomingschools.org.





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