

WELCOMING SCHOOLS

Leadership Strategies for Navigating Complex Moments

Tools to help you navigate
real-world scenarios that
schools are facing right now.



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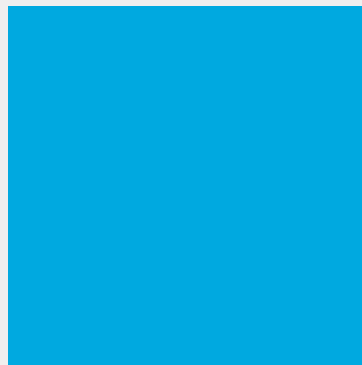
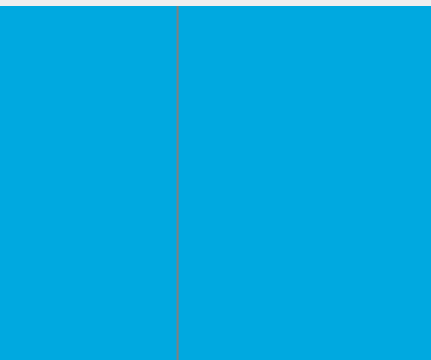
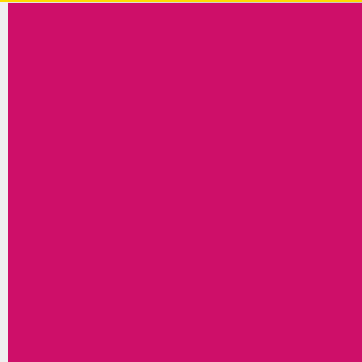


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A Message from HRC President, Kelley Robinson

Every day, schools are places where young people learn who they are, what they're capable of, and what kind of world they deserve. They look to their principals, district leaders, and school board members to set the tone for what is possible. And in a moment defined by political volatility and escalating efforts to target LGBTQ+ students, staff, and families, school leadership has never mattered more.

We are living in a time when fear is being leveraged as a political tool, and when the well-being of LGBTQ+ young people is too often used as a wedge to divide communities. Yet clarity in values, communication, and action is what builds trust. Consistency is what creates safety. In my work across the country, I have seen again and again that when leaders speak directly, stand firmly in their commitments, and model courage, entire communities follow.

The truth is simple: every child deserves a school where they are safe, respected, and supported. That includes LGBTQ+ students, whose right to learn free from discrimination is not optional, not political, and not up for debate. Your responsibility is clear. Discrimination in policy and practice is harmful. And no amount of noise, misinformation, or intimidation changes that fundamental truth.

I know the landscape has grown more complex. Leaders today are navigating external pressure campaigns, politically orchestrated disruptions, and attempts to undermine the inclusive practices that help students thrive. In this environment, silence is often misinterpreted as retreat. Ambiguity is felt as abandonment. And when institutions hesitate, the impact lands hardest on those who are already vulnerable.

That is why this guide exists — to help you lead with confidence, clarity, and compassion when the moment is difficult. Inside, you will find tools to help you navigate real-world scenarios that schools are facing right now: misinformation, targeted harassment of LGBTQ+ staff, public pressure around student



identity, and attempts to erode inclusive policies. You will see communication strategies designed to keep your community grounded in shared values: respect, belonging, and safety. These resources do not replace legal counsel, but they will help you stay anchored in your district's commitments while protecting students and staff.

As you move through these pages, my hope is that you feel fortified. Because while the challenges are real, so is your power. When school leaders stand firm, students feel it. Families feel it. LGBTQ+ young people, especially transgender and gender-expansive youth, see adults showing up for them without hesitation. And that matters. Deeply.

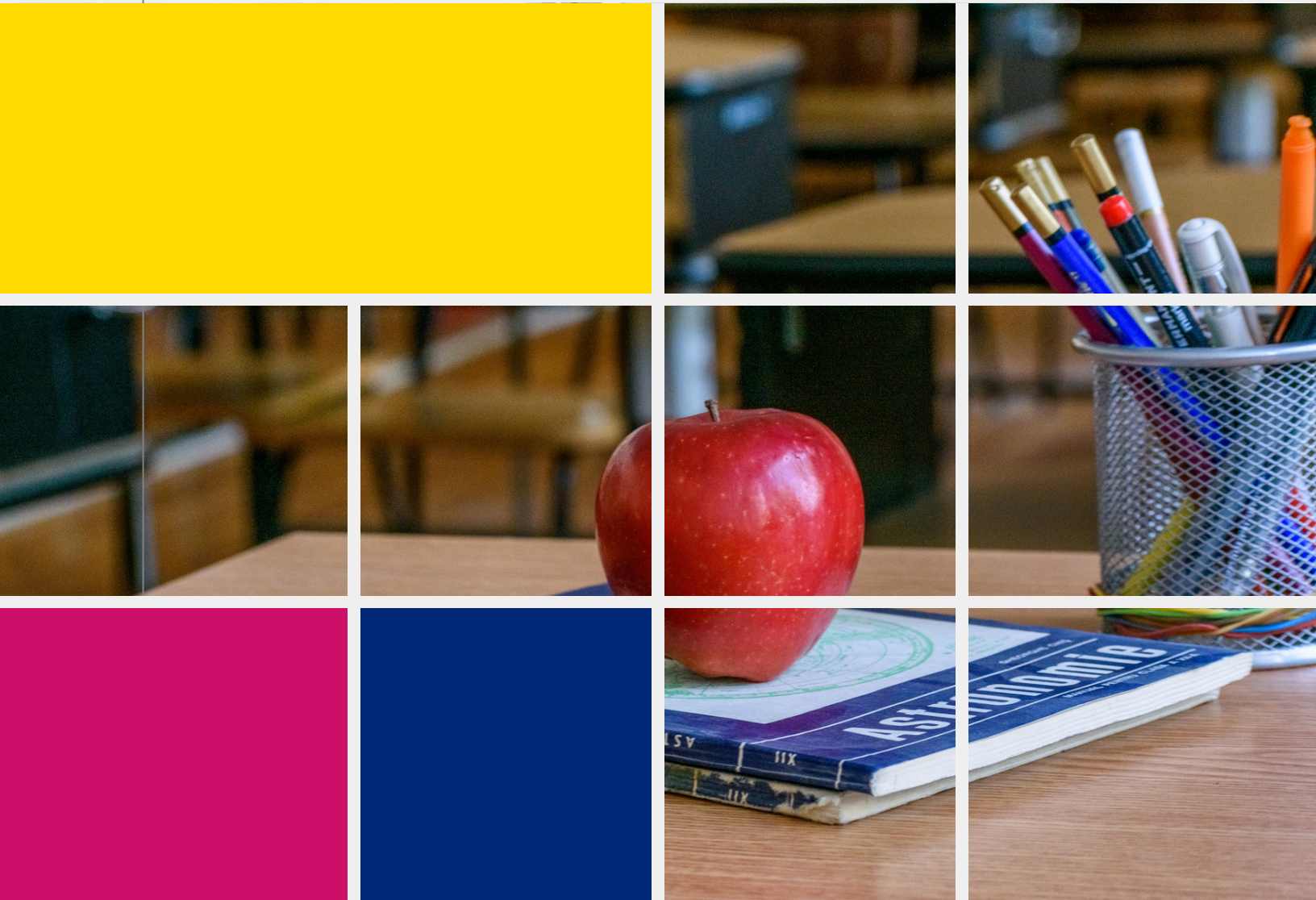
The Human Rights Campaign Foundation and Welcoming Schools stand with you in this work. We are here to ensure you have the support, training, and resources you need to build school environments where every student can imagine their future with possibility, not fear.

Thank you for your courage. Thank you for your clarity. And thank you for your unwavering commitment to ensuring that, no matter the political climate, LGBTQ+ students are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

Kelley Robinson (she/her/hers)

President,
Human Rights Campaign Foundation

Introduction



In school communities nationwide, there is a trend of mounting anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, policy reversals and threats to inclusive practices. Those pressures can make it challenging for school leaders to speak out when actions or rhetoric outside their hallways create unsafe environments, particularly for transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive students and families.

The Welcoming Schools program has prepared educators to respond to challenging questions in the classroom, centering best practices that establish positive learning environments. Now, perhaps more than ever, it is crucial for school administrators and leaders to be prepared to respond to societal disruptions that threaten welcoming and affirming environments for LGBTQ+ community members.

Utilize this guide to prepare proactive responses to the undermining of LGBTQ school inclusion. The case studies and scenarios provided offer communication approaches that minimize harm and unapologetically celebrate the universal values of respect, belonging, and safety. The events in this guide are based on events that have occurred recently in school communities. The specific names and identifying information of these events have been altered to respect confidentiality. In each scenario, you will explore general advice, *not legal advice*, helpful for school leadership:

What Happened: A brief description of a K-12 school-based case study

Considerations: Key risks associated with the situation that may influence an approach

District Response: Framing for school leaders to respond with sample language

Responses to Avoid: Be aware of the common missteps to avoid

Please note that these suggestions are not definitive and do not dictate the best response for your school, district, or school board. **These scenarios are based on districts with affirming policies in place, although local and state laws will vary.** When facing anti-LGBTQ impacts, consult with your school and district leadership or even connect with your school board attorney.

This guide is provided for informational and educational purposes only. It does not constitute legal advice and should not be relied upon as such. School districts and leaders should consult with qualified legal counsel regarding their specific circumstances.



Case Study 1: Local Political Pressure Against Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Your school district has an Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion with four full-time staff members leading professional development and student support services for historically marginalized communities. Your school is situated in an area considered a political swing district. However, your state has clear LGBTQ+ non-discrimination laws. Your district school board approved diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives for the first time in 2021. A state senator, who represents roughly half of your school district region, sends an official letter to your school district superintendent.

"It has recently come to my attention that _____ School District is in violation of the Executive Order 'Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schools' signed January 29th, 2025. This order prohibits the harmful practice of DEI in our classrooms and schools.

The school district's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is clearly operating illegally under federal law and must be immediately closed. I look forward to your taking this action and bringing the school district into compliance. Failure to do so will likely result in a loss of federal funding that our children need.

Please let me know when these actions have taken place to protect our district from potential litigation and disruption to the education of our students. I hope that eliminating the district's DEI program will allow educators to focus on teaching core subjects such as reading, writing, and math."

The state senator circulates this letter online, building traction among some families who plan to speak in support of the letter at the next school board meeting.



Considerations and Context

Politicization of Students

There are growing trends for politicians to weaponize LGBTQ students to gain political points. One increasingly common strategy is to politicize the experience of students and breach local school board oversight by using threats or intimidation to further support a political agenda.

Local Governance of Schools

The United States has a rich tradition of locally governed school boards guiding our community's education systems. Other elected officials, including state legislators, have no role to play in the daily operations of school districts. Threats and intimidation from external actors may be politically motivated, but they do not override the authority of local boards or superintendents to implement policy.

Legal Context

While state legislatures may pass laws that affect schools, letters from individual elected officials carry no binding legal weight. They may cause disruption, confusion, or fear in the community, but they do not change existing nondiscrimination protections or negate district policies. Leaders need to affirm compliance with state law and district authority rather than treating such letters as directives.

Community Impact

Even without legal standing, letters like these can harm school communities by sowing doubt about the legitimacy of DEI work. Families, staff, and students from historically marginalized groups may feel unsafe or devalued if school leaders appear to distance themselves from DEI initiatives. Clear, values-driven communication is critical to maintaining trust and belonging.



District Response and Sample Language

Decisions about district programming and staffing are governed by the duly elected school board, not by individual legislators. As such, the request to close or rebrand the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion will not be honored.

The district should communicate clearly and firmly:

- The school board governs the district, not individual legislators.
- The district is in compliance with state nondiscrimination laws and its own approved policies.
- The Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion will continue providing essential services and programming for students, staff, and families.

"Our school leadership has been made aware of a letter circulated by state Senator_____ on social media challenging the validity of our Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Our school district is governed solely by the duly elected school board members. We will not allow any elected officials, whether from local, state, or federal jurisdictions, to attempt to interfere with the responsibilities of our school board members. Our Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion will continue to provide the essential services and programming that allow our schools to achieve our goals for all current and upcoming school years.

There are no current state or federal laws that prohibit the broad concepts of diversity, equity, or inclusion. Our schools have seen measurable progress and achievement gains for populations of students and families receiving support through our Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. I am incredibly proud of our staff who show up every day to engage with challenging but necessary work to improve our schools' culture and learning environments. The Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion plays a vital role in ensuring our schools are places that allow the beautiful diversity in our communities to feel seen, supported, and valued. We will continue to unapologetically follow educational best practices."



Responses to Avoid

“Our schools are in compliance with the _____ act passed by the legislature last year. We do not provide students with instruction on LGBTQ+ topics and encourage parents to speak with their kids about respect and tolerance at home.”

Regardless of state legislation, schools are still responsible for maintaining learning environments that do not cause physical or emotional harm to students. Respect is not a value that can only be taught at home.

“Our schools are aware of the executive orders and are working to rebrand our Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as the Office of Access and Belonging. We are confident that we will continue to comply with all state and federal laws.”

Changing the name of DEI initiatives without changing the work communicates weakness and sends a harmful message that the district is retreating from its commitment to equity. “In name only” changes can cause historically marginalized students and families to feel abandoned and can embolden political attacks.

“We appreciate the input of Sen. ____, and our legal team is looking into the issues that surfaced. At this time, we have no immediate plans to adjust the staffing and programming present in our schools.”

This response mistakenly legitimizes the senator’s intervention and suggests that there may be legal merit to the claim. Saying “our legal team is looking into it” signals uncertainty and opens the door to further challenges. Saying “at this time” implies that staffing or programming changes could be made in the future, which undermines staff confidence and community trust.



Case Study 2: Navigating Parent Pushback Against LGBTQ+ Educators

A second-grade teacher in one of your elementary schools is a nonbinary person who uses the gender-inclusive honorific “Mx.” similar to “Mr.,” “Ms.,” or “Mrs.” They have been open about their identity with all school community members since they began teaching in the school district four years ago.

In response to an incident of gender-based bullying in their classroom, the teacher selected the book *Jacob’s New Dress* to help students discuss gender stereotypes in clothing, hair, and activities. The message that was communicated to students in the classroom was:

“Here at our school, students of all genders can express themselves in any way that makes them feel comfortable. One of the ways we show respect is by being kind to each other, especially when someone expresses themselves differently than how we express ourselves.”

Later that week, the parent of a student complained to the principal that the book was not part of the second-grade curriculum. The parent demanded that the child be removed from the teacher’s class and that the teacher be disciplined for “pushing an agenda.” The parent also began encouraging other families to request class reassignment away from this teacher.

Considerations and Context

School Climate

How school leaders respond in moments like this shapes the overall environment for students, staff, and families. When LGBTQ+ educators are targeted, students watch closely to see whether the adults in their school are treated with fairness and dignity. A climate of belonging depends on visible support for LGBTQ+ staff as much as it does for LGBTQ+ students. Consistency between values of safety, inclusion, and the district’s actions reinforces trust across the school community.



Misinformation and Stereotypes

The harmful trope that LGBTQ+ people are unsafe for children is deeply rooted in fear, misinformation, and prejudice. These stereotypes have been used for decades to silence and stigmatize LGBTQ+ educators. Leaders must be prepared to confront these narratives directly and affirm that LGBTQ+ staff are valued professionals. Clear communication dispels misinformation and prevents harmful rhetoric from taking hold in the community.

Public Scrutiny

LGBTQ+ related content in schools often attracts local or even national attention. Requests to remove a student from a transgender or nonbinary teacher's classroom are particularly likely to spark controversy. School leaders should anticipate potential media coverage and ensure that their responses are consistent, legally sound, and grounded in nondiscrimination policy. This preparation protects both the individual educator and the integrity of the district.

Scapegoating of Staff

Transgender and nonbinary educators are often singled out by their school leadership or district, and sometimes even by local opposition groups. These actions increase the risk of harassment to these educators and sometimes violate local and federal employment protections. Educators need the same level of support that students receive from district policies and practices. Every educator deserves to work and teach in an environment with respect and integrity.



District Response and Sample Language

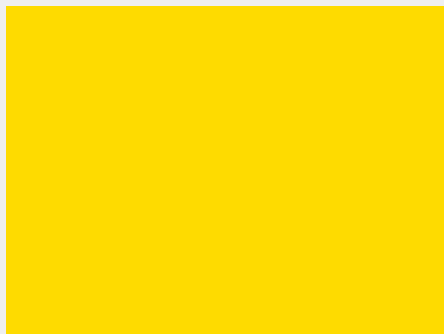
The school cannot grant this parent's request. Removing a child from a class because of the teacher's gender identity would be discriminatory and violate the district's nondiscrimination policy as well as federal employment protections. Parents do not have the right to select or veto a teacher assignment based on personal characteristics such as gender identity.

The school should communicate clearly and firmly:

- All teachers in the district are qualified professionals.
- Staff are expected to model respect, kindness, and inclusion in their classrooms.
- Requests for reassignment on the basis of a teacher's protected identity characteristic will not be honored.

"Our school district celebrates educators, administrators, staff, students, parents, and caregivers, including those who are LGBTQ+. Transgender and nonbinary staff are not controversial. Our teachers read books in the classroom every day to convey to students that their identities are valued and important. They also read books that model how to treat their classmates with respect and kindness. We encourage families to extend that same kindness and respect to their children's educators. We will not honor requests by any parent to prevent their child from being taught by a teacher who holds a protected identity under our nondiscrimination policy."

"Our district implements curriculum and supplemental materials that enrich learning in the classroom. Educators teach across lines of difference, including cultures and identities represented in our community. Students are expected to treat their peers and teachers with respect and kindness. All children and families are expected to practice the community expectations that keep our school safe for everyone."



Responses to Avoid

“We understand your concerns and will work with you to provide an opt-out so your child doesn’t have to remain in this classroom.”

One of the most frequent mistakes school leaders make in these situations is offering or even suggesting “opt-outs.” Allowing parents to withdraw their children from the class of a transgender or nonbinary teacher frames the teacher’s identity as optional or controversial, which is discriminatory and unlawful.

“We respect that some families have different beliefs about gender identity, and we want to honor those beliefs while also supporting our staff.”

Another common misstep is using the language of “respect” in ways that validate discriminatory viewpoints. Respect is sometimes invoked to suggest that privately held beliefs that deny or reject the existence of LGBTQ+ people deserve acknowledgment. However, just as schools would not “respect” a belief that segregation by race should return, they must not dignify beliefs that criminalize or erase LGBTQ+ identities. Leaders must be clear that nondiscrimination policies set the standard for behavior, not individual prejudice.



Case Study 3: Freedom of Speech vs. Substantial Disruption to Learning

Your district is located in a state with restrictive laws that prohibit LGBTQ+ curricular content, prevent transgender students from accessing facilities or sports aligned with their gender identity, and bar educators from addressing students by names or pronouns different from those assigned at birth. These limitations were established through statewide legislation several years ago. These laws, passed several years ago, have been inconsistently implemented, resulting in confusion and uneven application of policy across school districts in the state.

At one of your high schools, students in an AP Government class repeatedly used anti-LGBTQ+ speech and made derogatory comments about the family of a student with two moms. Despite multiple warnings earlier in the semester, the behavior persisted. The students involved received out-of-school suspensions consistent with the district's anti-bullying policy.

The disciplinary decision sparked backlash in the community. Critics claim the students' freedom of speech was violated. Outside legal groups sent threatening letters to district leadership, and state-level elected officials publicly condemned the handling of the incident. The situation has now escalated beyond a classroom management issue into a politically charged debate about the limits of free speech in schools.

Considerations and Context

Limits of Free Speech in Schools

The U.S. Supreme Court has established that schools may restrict student speech if it causes a substantial disruption to learning or infringes on the rights of other students. Derogatory, discriminatory, or harassing speech is inherently disruptive because it undermines the safety and dignity of targeted students. Schools are not required to permit speech that creates a hostile environment.



Variability Across States

What is considered best practice in inclusive states, such as Minnesota, is often restricted by law in states like Florida or Texas. Even under restrictive conditions, educators remain responsible for preventing harm to students and ensuring access to safe learning environments. State laws limiting curriculum or pronoun use do not exempt schools from their obligations to address bullying, harassment, and discriminatory conduct.

FERPA and Privacy

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects details of student disciplinary actions and student or family identities. Communications should not disclose the names of students involved or confirm specifics about disciplinary cases. Referring back to FERPA allows administrators to stay within the law while affirming their commitment to safe schools.

Community Perceptions and Expectations

In politically charged environments, messages about student discipline can quickly be misinterpreted. Responses must avoid language that appears to excuse harassment or treat it as a legitimate expression. Clear, firm communication that centers on learning, safety, and respect is essential.

District Response and Sample Language

When responding to allegations that student discipline violates free speech, leaders should ground their communication in three principles: schools may limit speech that disrupts learning, all students have the right to a safe and supportive environment, and staff will enforce the code of conduct consistently.

The district should communicate clearly and firmly:

- Schools may limit student speech when it substantially disrupts learning or harms others.
- Discriminatory and derogatory language directed at students or their families is a disruption to learning and will not be tolerated.
- FERPA prevents staff from commenting on individual disciplinary cases, but families can trust that the code of conduct is being applied consistently.
- The district's priority is protecting student access to learning environments free from bullying and harassment.

District Response and Sample Language Cont.

"The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act prevents us from directly commenting on all student disciplinary actions provided by our schools. Our building administrators will continue to take actions to ensure all students have access to learning environments where they can benefit fully from the high-quality education our teachers provide every day. Student speech that disrupts or prevents another student's access to education will be limited by school staff members in accordance with our student code of conduct."

"We are aware of a growing discussion around freedom of expression in our schools. To clarify expectations, we want to reiterate that there is a time and place for how we communicate and share opinions in our school communities. Any speech meant to denigrate, dehumanize, dox, or target an individual community member will not be tolerated in our shared spaces. The expression of opinions and beliefs can and will be limited by staff if it creates an unsafe or disruptive learning environment in our schools."

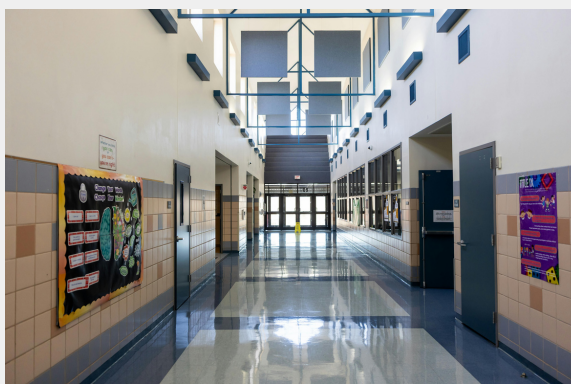
Responses to Avoid

"Students have a right to express their opinions in the classroom. We are looking into clarifying our district's policies regarding free speech and their constitutionally protected rights."

This response fails to provide clear expectations for community members regarding how they interact with each other in shared instruction, activities, and school spaces. A statement like this could be seen as encouraging bullying behavior or singling out the community that was already targeted.

"Our schools are in compliance with the _____ act passed by the legislature last year. We do not provide students with instruction on LGBTQ+ topics and encourage parents to speak with their kids about respect and tolerance at home."

Regardless of state legislation, schools are still responsible for maintaining learning environments that do not cause physical or emotional harm to students. Respect is not a value that can only be taught at home.



Case Study 4: Navigating Media Outing of a Transgender Student-Athlete

Your high school softball team is preparing for the state tournament after a strong season, entering with the leading record in your section. The program has a reputation for excellence and has become a source of pride for the school community.

One week before the tournament, a local news outlet known for publishing anti-LGBTQ and anti-DEI content posts a story online outing one of your varsity players as a transgender girl. Until the story appeared, her transgender status was only known to close friends and not widely discussed among teammates or families. She has been a consistent member of the team for three years, fully compliant with state athletic league guidelines, and is now starting at second base as a senior.

The online article spreads quickly. Parents of athletes from opposing teams begin circulating the story and calling for your school's disqualification. One team in the section threatens to boycott the tournament altogether. Within days, your athletic director, principal, and assistant principals receive a flood of hate mail and phone calls, many of them containing anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and threats to their jobs.

The controversy escalates as larger news outlets pick up the story and seek comments from district leadership. What began as a local outing of a student has now grown into a highly visible, politically charged conflict involving privacy concerns, community tensions, and safety risks for both the student and school staff.



Considerations and Context

The participation of transgender students on sports teams receives a disproportionate amount of attention, considering the relatively few athletes competing in high schools across the country. This scenario surfaces several very important school policy considerations concerning trans athletes.

Confidentiality

Information related to a student's gender identity is protected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Transgender students, even when they are publicly outed, are protected from staff violating student privacy by sharing confidential medical data or personal identifying information.

Policies Guiding Athletic Participation

Individual schools rarely set the guidelines for athletic participation in a state's high school athletic leagues and/or conferences. This places school leaders in a difficult position where they receive community pushback without being able to directly change the policies being challenged.

Outside Influence and Safety Concern

This scenario highlights a growing trend wherein outside organizations insert themselves into local communities specifically to search for examples of transgender girls competing and winning in sports. These organizations often post photos and videos of minor children, share identifying information like their birth certificates and home addresses, and engage in other dehumanizing language attempting to portray trans athletes as a predatory safety risk.

Stakeholder Engagement and Sportsmanship

Any statement made must clearly outline behavioral expectations for spectators and student-athletes attending and competing in upcoming events. These expectations should be framed in simple terms of safety and fairness for your student-athletes.

Note on Participation of Trans Girls in Athletics

It is commonplace for conversations and discussions around transgender athletes to predominantly focus on the participation of transgender girls. Community members may want to discuss scientific studies or share “research” they have found online. In almost all cases, these conversations are extremely unhelpful and usually unproductive because any conclusions drawn will not impact the larger policies governing the participation of trans youth. Instead, they often dehumanize athletes and encourage inappropriate discussions about specific children’s bodies and healthcare decisions.

There isn’t a compelling reason for any school administrator to engage in a back-and-forth conversation regarding the science behind the participation of transgender girls in high school athletics. Staff should simply state:

“Girls, both cisgender and transgender, have competed in 10+ states with inclusive athletics policies for the last 10 years. In that time period, with hundreds of thousands of girls competing, there have been no systemic concerns or issues with fairness or safety.”



District Response and Sample Language

Decisions about athletic participation are governed by the state interscholastic league and carried out at the local level. The district must not acknowledge or confirm any individual student's gender identity, as doing so would violate FERPA protections. While outside actors may attempt to shift the focus to a single athlete, the district's responsibility is to protect students, uphold nondiscrimination policies, and ensure that competitions are safe and respectful.

The district should communicate clearly and firmly:

- The privacy of all students is protected under FERPA. The district will not confirm or disclose any individual student's gender identity.
- All athletes on the team are competing in full compliance with state interscholastic guidelines.
- Participation in athletics is a long-standing practice that benefits all students, including cisgender and transgender athletes, without incident for more than a decade.
- Disruptive or discriminatory behavior at school events will not be tolerated and will result in removal and a ban from future district activities.
- The district values inclusion, fairness, and student safety as guiding principles for all extracurricular activities.

"Our school and community are honored that our student-athletes have the opportunity to compete in an inclusive and welcoming environment. All of our athletes participate in accordance with district and state-level guidelines, and we are fortunate that these guidelines allow students to compete on the teams that match their gender—a long-standing practice that has taken place without incident for the past 10 years. We will not answer any specific questions about the gender of any of our athletes when asked by community members because we honor the privacy of all of our high school students."

"Information retained by school staff regarding an individual student's identifying characteristics is confidential and protected under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. I'm not going to allow any of our adult community members to create a hostile learning and competitive environment for our school's minor children. Anyone disrupting our upcoming events with the use of discriminatory language towards the LGBTQ+ community, or individuals targeting specific athletes because of their real or perceived gender, will be removed from the premises and banned from all future events across the school district."

Responses to Avoid

"Students have a right to express their opinions in the classroom. We are looking into clarifying our district's policies regarding free speech and their constitutionally protected rights."

This response fails to provide clear expectations for community members regarding how they interact with each other in shared instruction, activities, and school spaces. A statement like this could be seen as encouraging bullying behavior or singling out the community that was already targeted.

"Our schools are in compliance with the _____ act passed by the legislature last year. We do not provide students with instruction on LGBTQ+ topics and encourage parents to speak with their kids about respect and tolerance at home."

Regardless of state legislation, schools are still responsible for maintaining learning environments that do not cause physical or emotional harm to students. Respect is not a value that can only be taught at home.

Final Thoughts

Consistent and predictable messaging is crucial for establishing safe learning environments and positive school cultures. As you reflect on the content covered in this guidance, the following reflection activities will help determine next steps for your administrative teams:

- *How will your building-level administrators have their responses standardized if a disruptive event occurs concerning LGBTQ+ community members or members of another historically marginalized population?*
- *Has your district's communications staff received the same inclusion trainings as your school administrators?*
- *Are your district's communications staff aware of the unintended consequences or impacts of common communications errors?*
- *Are classroom teachers and educators prepared to offer responses to parents/caregivers who come to them directly with similar concerns following incidents in the school community?*

Welcoming Schools offers professional development designed to equip your staff with the skills and confidence to ensure all students are in a safe and respectful learning environment. Visit www.welcomingschools.org for more information and a library of free resources for school staff.

As school leaders, it is imperative to have the courage and commitment so every LGBTQ+ student feels safe and supported in school, no matter the challenge. Our hope is that this guide strengthens your capacity to navigate difficult moments with clarity, empathy and a steadfast commitment to creating schools where every student can thrive.

As state and federal guidance related to supporting LGBTQ+ students continues to evolve, it is essential to base decisions on accurate and current legal information. When questions arise about student rights, Title IX, privacy, or district policies, consult your school district's legal counsel to ensure your actions remain compliant and protective of students and staff.



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