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Supporting LGBTQ+ Students During and After School Closures

How to educate for safe schools — with professional development, community building, and more

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While antidiscrimination laws in Massachusetts now include gender identity, and four states require LGBTQ+ history in the curriculum, there is still work to be done, especially in times like these that leave LGBTQ+ students even more vulnerable. In routine times, LGBTQ+ students are 3.5 times more likely to skip school (https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/GLSEN-2017-National-School-Climate-Survey-NSCS-Full-Report.pdf) because they feel unsafe and 3.9 times more likely to consider suicide. COVID-19 has exacerbated feelings of isolation (https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html) as they may be living in an unsupportive home environment.

Educator and writer Kimm Topping (https://kyriq.com/about-2/kimm/) has helped the state of Massachusetts implement guidance (http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/lgbtq/GenderIdentity.html) on how educators can better understand gender identity. Topping is a consultant for the Safe Schools Program (http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/lgbtq/) (a collaboration between the Department of Education and the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth), helping connect LGBTQ+ students with inclusive communities and supports, even in a time when those supports may not be as readily accessible.

How can education provide inclusive, holistic support for LGBTQ+ students, both in the current climate and in the future? Topping provides the following recommendations.

For Now:

- **Create virtual Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) spaces when possible and check on LGBTQ+ students who may be living with unsafe family members.** In creating these virtual spaces, Topping recommends that educators ensure that students have privacy and confidentiality to help protect students who may not be able to express their gender identity freely in their home environment or community.
- **Educators can use this time (if possible) to pursue professional development and collaborate with colleagues to create plans for social and emotional supports.** "Though we're all away from school right now, there will be a lot of accrued cyberbullying, abuse at home, and other challenging issues that will emerge as we step back into classrooms," Topping says.

Going Forward:

- **Intersectional professional development:** While professional development and raising awareness among faculty members has always been key to ensuring the success of the work, Topping recognizes there is a real need for professional development that explores the complexity of gender's intersection with other identities students may hold. "What can happen is that training about LGBTQ youth can be very focused on white students. I often hear students of color say they feel left out of queer spaces in school. We need to be aware that we are including all students in this work," they say.
  - **Connects people with stories:** Professional development is most effective when it features the stories and voices of those impacted by school policies and practices. "Yes, we need policies and laws, but we also need to have empathy and to understand why we're breaking down the gender binary. It's about getting people to connect and being patient," Topping says.
  - **Highlights roles of other school professionals and the larger community:** While teachers and school leaders are instrumental, other community members — like physical education instructors, afterschool program leaders, school nurses, and families — also need to be engaged. "Conversations around gender tend to happen in spaces like a gym or a nurse's office, so it's important they're informed too," Topping says. "Getting families on board is also key since that's where the struggles happen — students don't feel safe at home and that carries over into the school day."

- **Expose and change gendered practices:** Everyone can be more mindful about the way they engage students. Whether digital or in-person, avoid having students line up boy-girl or separate into groups based on gender. This is especially key for early childhood educators since gender identity develops between the ages of 2 and 4. Educators can play an important role in helping all children feel included in learning spaces.
- **Expand curriculum to incorporate LGBTQ+ experiences:** Research shows that children need to see themselves reflected in what they're learning in order to be engaged. While four states now require LGBTQ+ history in curriculum, these narratives are largely invisible in classrooms. This is especially important in sex education and health curriculums as instruction is often delivered through a heterosexual lens.

Key Takeaways:

- Professional development on supporting LGBTQ+ youth needs to be a community effort and involve not just those working in the schools; bring families into the conversation.

- Make sure classroom practices and curriculum are sensitive and responsive to the needs of LGBTQ+ youth.

- Support GSAs. Find conferences or regional meetups that might allow students to broaden their networks of support.

Additional Resources

Massachusetts Committee on LGBTQ youth provides resources to support students during COVID-19 (https://d

GLSEN provides curriculum guides and classroom resources for teachers (https://www.glsen.org/)

The Trevor Project and Teaching Tolerance on supporting students during social distancing (https://www.toler lgbtq-students-during-social-distancing? utm_source=Teach EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_ 64dd652c00-83123727)
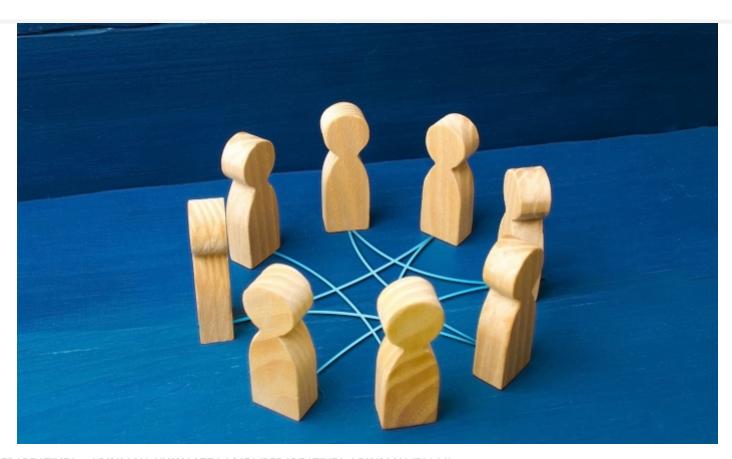
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