

# Improving Conditions for Learning for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Students

## A Strategic Framework

Jeffrey Poirier, Ph.D.  
Principal Researcher  
www.air.org



National Youth At-Risk Conference  
Savannah, Georgia  
March 2, 2015

Copyright © 2015 American Institutes for Research. All rights reserved.

## American Institutes for Research Health & Social Development Program

We promote youth and family well-being by strengthening systems so children, youth, and families—especially those in tough circumstances—can thrive. We work within and foster collaboration across systems—mental health/substance abuse, juvenile justice, child welfare, health and education—strengthening their capacity to use evidence-based strategies.

Using research and data, we plan, transform, and evaluate policies and practices and design new studies to measure impact and generate new knowledge. We engage stakeholders and consumers, enabling their voices to shape the policies and services that affect them.



2

## Objectives for Today

- Identify 3 challenges that LGBTQ students may experience
- Identify 10 standards and related best practices that you can apply in your work to promote physical safety, inclusion, and well-being for LGBTQ youth
- Identify three resources you can apply in your practice, including a strategic planning tool



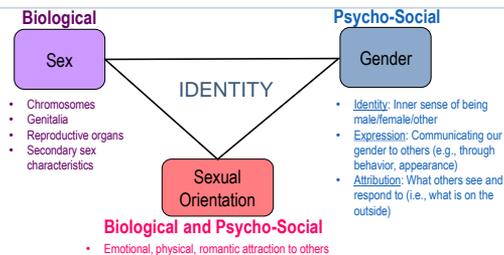
3

## First, Some Basics

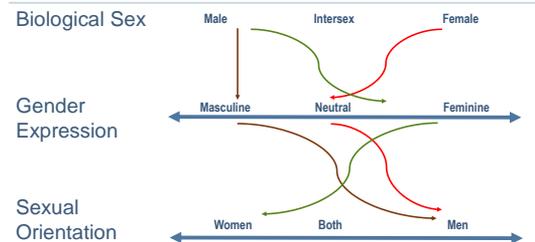


4

## Separate but Intersecting : Sex, Gender, and Sexual Orientation



## Rethinking Our Assumptions about Identity



6

## Your Perspectives

- When did you first have a “crush” on someone else?
- What does “sexual orientation” mean to you?
- What are your earliest memories of what it meant to be a boy or a girl?

## Conditions for Learning: Key Aspects of School Climate That Support Enhanced School Academic Outcomes

### Students Are Safe

- Physically safe
- Emotionally and socially safe
- Treated fairly and equitably
- Avoid risky behaviors
- School is safe and orderly

### Students Are Supported

- Meaningful connection to adults
- Strong bonds to school
- Positive peer relationships
- Effective and available support

### Students Are Challenged

- High expectations
- Strong personal motivation
- School is connected to life goals
- Rigorous academic opportunities

### Students Are Socially Capable

- Emotionally intelligent and culturally competent
- Responsible and persistent
- Cooperative team players
- Contribute to school community

## School Experiences Contributing to a Healthy School Climate and Academic Achievement

Protection

- Connection
- Physical safety
- Positive relationships with adults and peers
- Caring interactions
- Academic challenges
- Academic support
- Academic engagement
- Positive role modeling
- Social emotional learning
- Positive behavioral supports
- Access to needed services and supports

## National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) 2011 Position Statement

- NASP supports that all youth have equal opportunities to participate in and benefit from educational and mental health services within schools regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Harassment, lack of equal support, and other discriminatory practices toward LGBTQ youth violates their rights to receive equal educational opportunities

Available online at:  
[http://www.nasponline.org/about\\_nasp/positionpapers/LGBTQ\\_Youth.pdf](http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/positionpapers/LGBTQ_Youth.pdf)

## Experiences of LGBTQ Young People

Some Basics from the Research

## Social Influences on Youth Well-Being



Experiences such as chronic stress associated with...

- Peer rejection
- Bias and stigma
- Disparities in quality of care
- Violence, including abuse and assault
- Loss of connection to culture/community
- Rejection from (or loss of) family and other adults

Lead to risky behaviors and negative outcomes such as...

- Substance abuse
- Risky sexual behavior
- Running away and homelessness
- Self-harm as well as suicide attempts/completion
- Entry into child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems
- School failure or poor school outcomes (e.g., absenteeism)
- Poorer psychological well-being (e.g., anxiety, depression, lower self-esteem)

## 2013 GLSEN National School Climate Survey

- GLSEN survey of 7,898 students aged 13-21 found:
  - **71%** reported hearing “that’s so gay” in their schools and 65% other anti-gay remarks often or frequently; most (91%) felt distressed by this
  - **52%** heard anti-gay remarks from school staff
  - **56%** heard negative remarks about gender expression (not acting “masculine enough” or “feminine enough”) **33%** reported hearing negative remarks about transgender people
  - **56%** felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation; **39%** because of their gender expression

## 2013 GLSEN National School Climate Survey

- **30%** missed an entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable
  - **11%** missed four or more days in the past month
- Students experiencing higher levels of victimization had worse educational outcomes and poorer psychological well-being:
  - Students experiencing victimization because of their sexual orientation were **more than three times** as likely to have missed school in the past month than those who experienced lower levels (**61% vs. 17%**)
  - Had lower GPAs (**2.8 vs. 3.3**)
  - Had higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem
- Findings are similar for students with higher levels of victimization because of gender expression

## 2013 GLSEN National School Climate Survey

- Most (**57%**) respondents who were harassed or assaulted in school did not report the incident to school staff, most commonly because they doubted that effective intervention would occur or the situation could become worse if reported
- Of students who reported incidents to school staff, almost two thirds (**62%**) indicated that **staff did nothing in response**
- **18%** were restricted from forming or promoting a gay-straight alliance

## Family Acceptance Project Findings

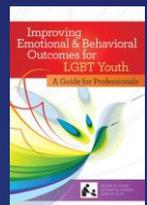
- Compared to youth experiencing no family rejection or only a little rejection because of their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, youth experiencing high levels of family rejection are more likely to:
  - Have attempted suicide? **8 times**
  - Report high levels of depression? **6 times**
  - Use illegal drugs? **3 times**
  - Be at risk for STDs? **3 times**

## Improving LGBT Youth Outcomes

- Positive Outcomes
  - Increased resilience
  - Reductions in bias and stigma
  - Peer support and healthy connections
  - Improved school attendance and outcomes
  - Lower recidivism (or no system involvement)
  - Decreased homelessness and likelihood of running away
  - Increased support from families, other adults, and community
  - Fewer health, mental health, and substance abuse challenges
- Decreased Stress and Improved Policy, Services, and Social Supports



## Standards and Practices to Foster Safe, Supportive, and Affirming Schools



## About the Standards

- Based on recommended/best practices
- Are applicable to all child-, youth-, and family-serving systems (e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice, schools)
- Grounded in four guiding principles:
  - Fostering shared responsibility and commitment across service systems
  - Creating an inclusive organizational culture
  - Implementing a family-centered approach
  - Promoting positive youth development

## Standards for Supporting LGBTQ Students

1. Organizational/individual assessment and continuous quality improvement
2. Nondiscrimination policies
3. Staff knowledge
4. Forms, data collection, information sharing
5. Safe, supportive school environments
6. Practices that affirm identity
7. Healthy, supportive peer connections
8. Family connections
9. Access to affirming services and supports
10. Community outreach

## Strategic Planning Tool

- ✓ Write your school's or district's mission statement
- ✓ Write a vision statement for LGBTQ young people
- ✓ Identify local strengths/challenges

Standards	Priority	Goals	Strategies/Action Steps	Who should be involved?	Measures of Success
<b>EXAMPLE</b> Standard 1: Self-Assessment and Ongoing Continuous Quality Improvement Efforts	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand agency's strengths, needs, and areas of improvement for providing supportive services for LGBT youth and their families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop or find an evaluation tool</li> <li>• Implement survey/tool with staff and children/youth accessing agency services</li> </ul>	Planning: Executive Director, Program Director Survey: All staff and children/youth receiving agency services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data on organizational capacity and needs are available leading to implementation of new practices.</li> </ul>
Standard 1: Self-Assessment and Ongoing Continuous Quality Improvement Efforts					
Standard 2: Nondiscrimination Policies					

## Who Is Responsible for Safe, Supportive Schools?

**EVERYONE**

## Standard 1: Assessment and Continuous Quality Improvement Efforts

- ✓ Conduct a needs assessment or readiness survey to understand capacity of school staff to provide culturally and linguistically competent services and supports to LGBTQ youth and their families
- ✓ This assessment/survey should aim to determine staff strengths and needs related to their knowledge and skills
- ✓ Don't stop with the assessment...

## Use the Assessment Data to Guide and Monitor Improvement Efforts...

- ✓ Monitor the effectiveness of school implementation of services, supports, policies and procedures
- ✓ Evaluate school progress toward its goals
- ✓ Obtain feedback to institute appropriate changes to meet your goals on an ongoing basis
- ✓ Infuse this process into other school improvement efforts

## Sample Questions to Guide this Process

- How has the school promoted and infused competence in serving and supporting LGBTQ students and their families?
- What are the school's outcomes for LGBTQ students?
- What challenges has the school encountered in meeting the needs of LGBTQ students and their families?
- What action steps are necessary to address the issues identified?

## Standard 2: Establish and Enforce Inclusive Nondiscrimination Policies/Practices

- ✓ Enumerate sexual orientation and gender identity/expression
- ✓ Preclude contracting with service providers who discriminate or do not have policy protections
- ✓ Inform students and staff about formal grievance procedures
- ✓ Align process for addressing concerns with other school disciplinary procedures

## Standard 3: Develop Staff Knowledge and Skills

- ✓ Understand
  - Differences between sex, sexual orientation, and gender; also, sexual and gender identity terms
  - Myths, bias, and stereotypes—and how to address them
  - Coming out process; how to support a young person in understanding their LGBT identity
  - Experiences of LGBTQ young people and their families
  - How to create an inclusive curriculum and classroom/school culture, including safe spaces
  - Approaches to working with families of LGBTQ youth
  - Local agency and community resources
  - Significance of allies like you!

## Coming Out

- The process of accepting one's own sexuality, gender identity, or status as an intersex person—and the process of disclosing this to others.
- Is an ongoing process
- Is multidimensional: coming out to family, to peers, at school, at work, in one's community
- Is unique/not the same for every person

## Transgender (trans)

- An umbrella term for someone whose gender identity or expression doesn't fit social or cultural expectations for gender expression based on the person's assigned sex at birth
- This term should only be used with people who self-identify with the term
- A transgender person "transitions" to express gender identity through various changes (e.g., clothes)
- Some related terms: gender diverse, gender nonconforming, gender variant
- "Gender dysphoria" rather than "gender identity disorder" is now used in mental health diagnoses

## Heteronormativity

- The assumption — in individuals, systems, or organizations (e.g., schools) — that everyone is heterosexual, and that heterosexuality is normal and superior to other sexual identities (e.g., gay, lesbian)

## Internalized Stigma

- A sense of shame or self-hatred because of one's attraction/identity

## Ally

- Person with a genuine, strong concern for the well-being of LGBT people
- Someone who confronts heterosexism, biphobia, transphobia, and heterosexual privilege in themselves and others—and believes these are social justice issues
- All school staff can be allies!

## Some Terms to Avoid (see tip sheet)

- Lifestyle
- Choice
- Sexual preference
- Homosexual
- Queer (although increasingly used by youth in an affirming way)
- Transgendered
- Transvestite
- Transsexual (although some older adults may use this, it is not an umbrella term for transgender individuals)

## Assess, Reflect on, and Respond to Your Attitudes, Too...

- Repulsion:** LGBTQ people are strange and aversive.
- Pity:** LGBTQ people are somehow born that way and it is pitiful.
- Tolerance:** Life for LGBTQ people is hard; anti-gay attitudes just make things worse.
- Acceptance:** Lesbian and gay identity is a fact of life that should neither be punished nor celebrated.
- Support:** The rights of LGBTQ people should be protected and safeguarded.
- Admiration:** Being LGBTQ in our society takes strength.
- Appreciation:** There is value in diversity. Anti-LGBTQ attitudes should be confronted.
- Nurturance:** LGBTQ people are an indispensable part of society.

## Standard 4: Use Inclusive Forms and Data Collection Processes

- ✓ Consent forms and screening procedures
  - Gender neutral language? Pronouns and name used?
- ✓ Confidentiality in data collection and information sharing
  - Never intentionally "out" a young person unless required by law (e.g., safety or health risk to self or others)



## Standard 5: Promote a Safe, Supportive and Culturally Competent Environment

- ✓ Create a safe space/zone in your school spaces...
  - Affirm all forms of diversity—and do not tolerate anti-LGBT bias/harassment
  - Ensure all staff can talk about sexual orientation and gender identity and address LGBTQ bias in a respectful way
  - Do not confuse sexual orientation with sexual behaviors
  - Display symbols and materials that positively represent the LGBTQ community
  - Do not refer to sexual orientation or gender identity/expression as “just a phase”

## Safe Space Symbols



## Discussion

- Which of these standards would you most like your organization where you work to address? How so and how come?



## Standard 6: Implement Practices that Support and Affirm Identity

Creating an informed, inclusive environment school should be a community-wide effort:

- ✓ Effectively address stigma and bias
- ✓ Allow students to express their gender identity openly
- ✓ Refer to students using their preferred pronouns and names (rather than legal names)
- ✓ Use inclusive language (e.g., “good morning everyone”)
- ✓ Never “out” someone unless required by law (e.g., threatening harm to themselves)

## Support Youth Who Are Gender Diverse



## Support Youth Who Are Gender Diverse



## Standard 5: Promote a Safe, Supportive and Culturally Competent Environment

- ✓ Encourage students to participate in identifying policies, procedures, and practices to improve safety and support in the school
- ✓ Be aware of challenges LGBTQ youth experience, but do not assume they are at risk—talk with them!
- ✓ Address misinformation too

## Fostering a Safe, Supportive School Environment

- Use gender neutral expectations for students
- Establish a social culture that values diversity in all forms by fostering this social competence among students by proactively developing it
- Infuse gender and romantic/sexual identity diversity into school curricula in age-appropriate ways; providing learning opportunities for parents too
- Avoid gender-segregated activities (e.g., physical education, students lining up)
- Ensure school libraries have LGBTQ resources and Internet filters do not prevent finding relevant information

## Fostering a Safe, Supportive School Environment

- If you have a gender variant student in your school, put together a team including appropriate mental health providers to create plans and approaches on a case-by-case basis
- Respect students' right to be "out" about particular aspects of their gender and sexuality identity, as well as their rights to privacy
- Apply behavioral expectations fairly for all students, regardless of one's values/opinions about sexual orientation and gender identity/expression
- Reinforce students who are upstanders

## Tips for Addressing Bias Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

- Be an upstander in your school practice
- Teach students how to be allies to address harassment/bullying:
  - Talking with/befriending targeted student
  - Confiding in an adult
  - Talking with student showing problem behavior
  - Creating a distraction to help stop harassment
  - Speaking up in the moment
- Engage families

\*from Welcoming Schools Project, HRC

## Engage Teachable Moments

- Has anyone called you a name that made you feel bad? How did that make you feel?
- Why did you think it was okay to make fun of the way someone looks?
- Do you know what the word (offensive term) means?

\*from Welcoming Schools Project, HRC

## Sample Gender Identity Policy from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

All students are entitled to have access to restrooms, locker rooms and changing facilities that are sanitary, safe, and adequate, so they can comfortably and fully engage in their school program and activities. ... Each situation needs to be reviewed and addressed based on the particular circumstances of the student and the school facilities. In all cases, the principal should be clear with the student (and parent) that the student may access the restroom, locker room, and changing facility that corresponds to the student's gender identity. ... Transgender students who are uncomfortable using a sex-segregated restroom should be provided with a safe and adequate alternative, such as a single "unisex" restroom or the nurse's restroom. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/ssce/GenderIdentity.pdf>

## Sample Transgender Student Guidelines from the New York City Department of Education

School personnel should not disclose information that may reveal a student's transgender status. Under the Family Education Rights Privacy Act (FERPA), only those school employees with a legitimate educational need should have access to a student's records or the information contained within those records. Disclosing confidential student information to other employees, students, parents, or other third parties may violate privacy laws, including but not limited to FERPA. Transgender students have the ability, as do all students, to discuss and express their gender identity and expression openly and decide when, with whom, and how much of their private information to share with others.

## Sample Transgender Student Guidelines from the New York City Department of Education

- Schools should work closely with the student and family in devising an appropriate plan regarding the confidentiality of the student's transgender status that works for both the student and the school. Privacy considerations may also vary with the age of the student.
- In some cases, transgender students may feel more supported and safe if other students are aware that they are transgender. In these cases, school staff should work closely with the student, families and other staff members on a plan to inform and educate the student's peers. It may also be appropriate to engage external resources to assist with educational efforts.

## For Students Who Are Questioning Their Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity

- Be an ally by listening, being genuine, supporting them, talking with them (e.g., asking questions) in a respectful way
- Respect the process and timeline that is most appropriate for them
- Connect them with resources (e.g., written information, Trevor Project)
- Never bring up religion, use inappropriate language, or pressure them to tell others
- Remember that it can be dangerous for young people to come out in unsafe situations

## Standard 7: Promote Healthy Peer Connections

- ✓ Foster:
  - Opportunities for LGBTQ students to meet and support one another
  - Mutual support
  - Personal development
- ✓ Provide opportunities to access affirming recreational activities (e.g., afterschool services)
- ✓ Facilitate implementation and sustainability of gay-straight alliances and similar clubs in your schools (sponsor? participate?)

## Standard 8: Strengthen Family Connections

- ✓ Increase family knowledge about needs, interests, and perspectives of LGBTQ youth and identity
- ✓ Help families understand how supportive and rejecting behaviors can harm their child
- ✓ Focus on harm reduction (not on changing values)
- ✓ Provide families with respectful language to talk about sexual orientation and gender identity

## Standard 8: Strengthen Family Connections

- ✓ Decrease rejecting behavior; promote nonjudgmental attitudes and behaviors that demonstrate respect and concern
- ✓ Encourage families to allow their children to participate in all family activities
- ✓ Infuse these topics into parent organization events
- ✓ Consider events focused on these topics (e.g., how to talk about gender in an age appropriate way for younger grades; importance of supporting LGBTQ young people, and how to do this in older grades)

## Standard 9: Promote Access to Affirming Services

- ✓ Create collaborative partnerships and coordinate supports to increase the array of and access to services needed to meet specific needs of students:
  - Primary care
  - Mental health and counseling
  - Family outreach
  - Housing
- ✓ Identify and distribute resource lists and community contacts for LGBTQ-affirming services and information
- ✓ Access national resources, such as the Trevor Project lifeline (866.488.7386), Trevorchat, Trevorspace, Ask Trevor

## National Organizations to Support You

- Advocates for Youth: <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org>
- Findyouthinfo.gov: <http://findyouthinfo.gov/youth-topics/lgbtq-youth>
- Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN): [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)
- Gender Spectrum: [www.genderspectrum.org](http://www.genderspectrum.org)
- GSA Network: [www.gsanetwork.org](http://www.gsanetwork.org)
- Safe Schools Coalition: [www.safeschoolscoalition.org](http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org)
- TA Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health: <http://tapartnership.org/COP/CLC/lgbtqi2s.php>
- The Trevor Project: [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)
- Welcoming Schools Project at the Human Rights Campaign Foundation: [www.welcomingschools.org](http://www.welcomingschools.org)

## Biweekly LGBTQ Youth Updates

- Three easy steps....
  1. Address an email to [LISTSERV@LISTSERV.AIR.ORG](mailto:LISTSERV@LISTSERV.AIR.ORG) with a **blank** subject line
  2. In the body of the email, write **SUBSCRIBE LGBTQ\_Youth**
  3. Send the email

## Standard 10: Community Outreach

- ✓ Engage students in conducting community outreach and promoting awareness of issues such as bullying, self and social acceptance, identity formation, depression, and suicide
- ✓ Collaborate and foster relationships with other organizations supporting these students (e.g., youth and family organizations)

## Discussion

- Which of these standards would you most like your workplace to address? How so and how come?



## Moving Forward



- Identify an area of interest to gather more information...
- Identify one piece of information or practice to share with a colleague...
- ✓ Reflect on what you have written on the tool – based on this information, identify 1 or 2 strategies that you think:
  - Align with your mission
  - Will be most useful to accomplishing your vision
  - Build on strengths and (or) respond to challenges



## American Institutes for Research

Established in 1946, with headquarters in Washington, D.C., American Institutes for Research (AIR) is an independent, nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally.

As one of the largest behavioral and social science research organizations in the world, AIR is committed to empowering communities and institutions with innovative solutions to the most critical challenges in education, health, workforce, and international development.

Jeffrey Poirier  
202-329-5440  
jpoirier@air.org

1000 Thomas Jefferson Street NW  
Washington, DC 20007  
General Information: 202-403-5000  
TTY: 887-334-3499  
www.air.org