# Creating LGBTQ+ Inclusive Schools

(Sections of this handout were taken from *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ+ Advocate*)

This handout was created for K-12 teachers, staff, and administrators who want to create safe and inclusive schools for all students, staff, and parents. It offers information on why LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, plus so much more!) inclusion in schools is important, best practices for ally action, best practices for ally advocacy, and resources for educators and school staff.
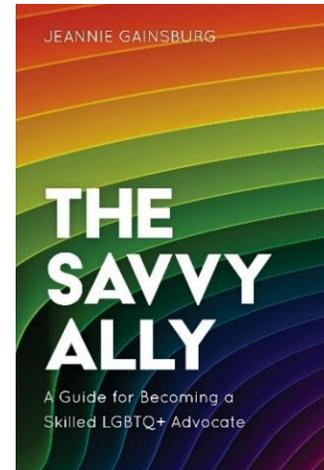
## Silence: A Loud and Clear Message

Straight and cisgender (i.e., non-transgender) people see themselves represented constantly in school curricula. There is no doubt in any student's mind that straight and cisgender people have invented cool stuff, created awesome art, built tall buildings, and won Pulitzer Prizes. A student working their way through an average K-12 school system might get the impression that no LGBTQ+ person had ever done anything of consequence or contributed anything to our society. According to a 2019 GLSEN* survey, only one out of five students report seeing LGBTQ+ people and families represented in their school's curriculum in a positive way. Four states now mandate the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people and families in their K-12 curricula, but another six states actually forbid teachers from representing LGBTQ+ people in a positive way. Schools' silence about LGBTQ+ people and families sends a loud and clear message that being LGBTQ+ is problematic. Positive representation of LGBTQ+ people and families in our schools reduces stigmas, creates safer environments, and increases healthy social interactions among students, parents, and school staff.

## Relax! It's Not about Sex

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools is the misunderstanding that conversations will be about sex. The fear is that if a teacher reads a story about two princes falling in love, the teacher will need to be prepared to answer questions about sex. Let's implement the wonderful "switch it" technique here. When a teacher reads a story about a prince and a princess falling in love, does the teacher need to be prepared to answer questions about sex? Probably not. But in either case, if questions about sex arise, the teacher will give an age-appropriate response about love and families. Being out as an LGBTQ+ student, parent, or school staff member is not about the bedroom. It's about living freely and authentically.

* GLSEN is an organization working to create safer and more LGBTQ+ inclusive K-12 schools.

# Five Best Practices for Ally Action

Many children have a sense of whom they are attracted to by the age of 12 or 13 and many have a stable sense of their gender identity by age 5. LGBTQ+ children are likely to be watching and listening for signs that their teachers, school counselors, and other school staff are LGBTQ+ supportive. Below are some best-practice tips for creating inclusive schools with your language, behaviors, and activities.

1) **Include LGBTQ+ people and families in everyday curriculum.** Children and adolescents should see themselves and their families represented in school curriculum. Don't save conversations about LGBTQ+ identities for health class. Normalize being LGBTQ+ by choosing books and films with diverse characters, representing different kinds of families in mathematical word problems, highlighting LGBTQ+ civil rights leaders in history class, talking about LGBTQ+ athletes in physical education, and discussing natural biological variation in science class.

2) **Ungender language and activities.** Don't assume gender when you talk with students, staff, and parents. Use *parents and guardians* or just *adults* instead of *mom and dad*, *students* instead of *boys and girls*, and *friends*, *folks*, *scholars*, or *team* instead of *guys*. Update forms to include gender-neutral language. Instead of lining up by boys and girls, get creative. Have some fun with sock color, birth months, or favorite seasons. If you use endearments like *love* or *sweetheart*, make sure you're using the same ones for all the students, regardless of gender.

3) **Don't tolerate put downs.** Even though saying, "That's so gay" isn't always meant in a mean way, it is still a put down and an opportunity for a teacher or staff member to step in and educate. Let students know why their language is not okay. Encourage them to come up with more creative, less hurtful comments. Try the "switch it" technique here and think about how you teach students not to use racial slurs or make body-shaming comments. Use those same techniques to educate about LGBTQ+ slurs and jokes.

4) **Ask *everyone* how you should refer to them.** Gather information from students, parents, and other school staff members about how you should properly address them and refer to them. Consider offering your information first. For example, "Hi. I'm Beatrice Johnson. Please call me Bea. My pronouns are *she*, *her*, and *hers.*"

5) **Visibly indicate your support.** Showing visible support for the LGBTQ+ communities saves lives. Create a safer and more welcoming school by wearing a rainbow button or hanging a rainbow sign that says, "All students and families welcome here." Add your pronouns to your desk nameplate, door sign, webpage and/or email signature. Create a display for Pride Month in June or LGBT History Month in October.

# Five Best Practices for Ally Advocacy

1) **Advocate for professional development.** Let your administration know that mandatory LGBTQ+ awareness and inclusion trainings should be included in your school's diversity efforts. Offer optional workshops and educational panels for parents who want to support their LGBTQ+ children or learn more about the LGBTQ+ communities.

2) **Support ungendered spaces and policies.** Educate others on the importance of ungendered facilities and policies. Give gendered, single-stall restrooms an upgrade with a new all-gender restroom sign. When buildings are being renovated, advocate for the creation of ungendered facilities. Create locker rooms that have private changing areas and showers. This is likely to make many students happy! How many middle-school kids are comfortable putting their naked bodies on display for their peers? Allow students to use gendered restrooms and locker rooms that align with their gender identity. Advocate for ungendered dress codes and ungendered graduation gown colors.

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**Pop Quiz**

Who should use an all-gender restroom?

    A. Transgender individuals
    B. Transgender, questioning, and transitioning individuals
    C. Anyone

Answer: C

Many people think of all-gender restrooms as "transgender bathrooms." Some transgender individuals will use all-gender restrooms and others won't. All-gender restrooms are there for *anyone* to use. What this means is, if a cisgender student feels uncomfortable using the same restroom as a transgender student, then the cisgender student can go and use the single-stall, all-gender restroom and have their privacy. Ta-da! Single-stall, all-gender restrooms are also incredibly helpful for students and staff in wheelchairs, who may need more space and time.

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3) **Be active with your school's GSA.** GSAs are school-based clubs that support LGBTQ+ students. GSA can stand for gay-straight alliance or gender and sexuality alliance. Studies have shown that homophobic remarks and acts of violence significantly decrease and students' feelings of safety significantly increase when schools have an active GSA. Support students who are trying to create a GSA at your school. If your school already has a GSA, show up to their events, support their fundraisers, and ask them how you can help.

4) **Encourage your school to participate in national LGBTQ+ events.** Check out the Day of Silence in April, No Name-Calling Week in January, and Ally Week in September. The GLSEN website has great information on how to get started. (https://www.glsen.org/programs)

5) **Take action for inclusive policies.** Find out your school's anti-bullying, transgender support, and LGBTQ+ inclusion curriculum policies. Advocate for change if these policies are restrictive or outdated. If they are already inclusive, get the word out! Encourage administrators to post these polices in high-traffic areas, send periodic emails to all staff and parents reminding them of the school's inclusive policies, and add statements of inclusion to hiring manuals and policy handbooks. The GLSEN website also has great info about advocating for inclusive school policies. (https://www.glsen.org/policy)

# Resources

Gainsburg, Jeannie. *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ+ Advocate*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, March 2020.

Gender Spectrum: Information on LGBTQ+ identities and creating inclusive environments and support for children and teens at: www.genderspectrum.org

GLSEN: Resources for teachers, school staff, administrators, and GSA advisors at: www.glsen.org

Sadowski, Michael. *Safe Is Not Enough: Better Schools for LGBTQ Students.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2016.

Savvy Ally Action: Workshops on creating LGBTQ+ inclusive schools, free handouts, and videos at: www.savvyallyaction.com

Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance): Classroom resources and workshops for educators at: www.learningforjustice.org
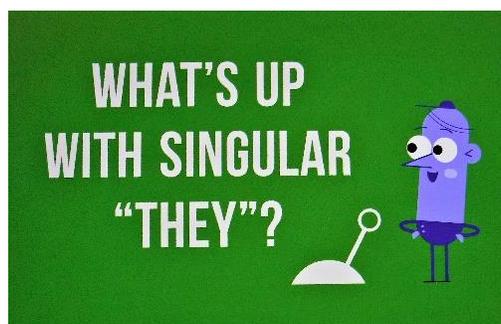


Savvy Ally Action's 3-minute video "What's Up with Singular *They*?"

www.savvyallyaction.com
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