



# Welcoming Schools

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN FOUNDATION

## Be Prepared for LGBTQ Questions & Concerns

When you try to be inclusive of lesbian, gay, and transgender people and topics, questions and concerns may arise in conversations with parents, guardians, administrators or school boards.

While conversations about race, ethnicity, class and religion remain difficult for many people, our society generally shares the value of respect — or at least tolerance — for people who are of a different religious, racial, cultural or ethnic background than our own. We can largely agree that certain race-based or religious-based slurs are unacceptable, and we expect educators and all school related personnel to intervene when they see or hear harassment or name-calling based on characteristics associated with these categories.

However, anti-gay attitudes are often tolerated. Many students still “get away” with using gay or gender based slurs that can be very hurtful. Because LGBTQ people and topics are often not included in teacher education programs, it may be that educators have less knowledge or comfort intervening with students about these topics. For the parents and caregivers in your school community, the idea of talking with students about LGBTQ topics may raise many questions.

It is always helpful to emphasize your values instead of dwelling on fears. Move the conversation from focusing on the myths and stereotypes about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and families, to emphasizing what this work is really about — supporting all students and developing a safe school climate where students can focus on their learning.

If conversations are framed by myths or stereotypes, the dialogue is more likely to linger on negativity or fear, rather than focusing on positive aspects of welcoming schools. Listen carefully to the concerns. This will help you find points of agreement. For example, we all share values of family and respect. What follows are some examples of specific language that might be helpful.

### We Are Talking About Family

Families of all kinds are essential to students' well-being. When any parents or guardians are discussed, whether they are heterosexual, gay, adoptive, kinship, single or married, educators are simply discussing family.

- + Roberto is talking about his family when he talks about visiting his grandparents with his two moms and younger brother, just as Sasha is talking about her family when she describes her vacation with her mommy, daddy and sister.
- + Showing a book that has two dads cooking dinner for their child shows two parents caring for their son.
- + Seeing a film with children talking about the many kinds of families that they are growing up in, shows many ways that caring adults are raising children.

The resources from Welcoming Schools help students see love and concern for children as the common threads that run through caring families.

### We Are Talking About Respect

In elementary school, the word “gay” is used widely as a put-down; often to mean that something is stupid. Students use the phrase “That’s so gay” long before they know what the word “gay” means. Anti-LGBTQ or gender-related put-downs are among the most commonly heard slurs in school environments.<sup>1</sup> When educators address the use of the word “gay,” they are not introducing either the topic or the vocabulary.

When name-calling and put-downs are discussed it is important for educators to explicitly talk about the kinds of words and phrases that students are using. Words like gay or queer are words that hurt their classmates and friends. Students also say, “You look like a boy!” or “Sissy!” In these discussions on mean name-calling and bullying it is respect that is being discussed.

## Schools Strive to Increase Understanding and Connections Across Diversity or Difference

Schools are places where many diverse people come together — many kinds of families, many races, many ethnicities and many faiths. Students and communities are best served when their members learn to get along with one another, understand one another and respect one another. Part of learning for students is to see and appreciate the diversity that exists in their classroom, their school, and the wider community. While there are differences, people also share much in common.

As our world and our interactions with people grow increasingly diverse, students benefit from developing the skills to live and work with many different kinds of people.

## Children with Same-Sex Parents Are a Racially, Culturally, and Geographically Diverse Group

Across America in suburban, rural and urban schools there are children with LGBTQ parents, grandparents or guardians.

- + Households headed by same-sex couples are reported in virtually every U.S. county according to the U.S. Census.<sup>2</sup>
- + In rural states, such as Wyoming and Alaska, and in southern states households headed by same-sex couples are more likely to have children than same-sex households in other states.<sup>3</sup>
- + Hispanic and African-American same-sex couples are about twice as likely to be raising children as white non-Hispanic same-sex couples.<sup>4</sup>

## It is Important for all Children to be a part of Discussions of Families, all kinds of Name-Calling and Current events

As our world becomes increasingly diverse, students will meet people — classmates, teammates, friends — with many kinds of families. Some will have parents, grandparents, guardians or other relatives who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Some will have classmates who are transgender, gender expansive, or gay.

It is inevitable that discussions will and already do come up about what it means to be LGBTQ. In today's environment the words "gay," "lesbian," or "transgender"

come up in the context of current events. Students hear them in the news, see them on TV or the Internet, and in many aspects of their lives. It can only be expected that when they come to school conversations and questions may arise in the classroom or in the hallways.

When students are not allowed to discuss LGBTQ-related topics, it heightens the mystery and potentially divisiveness of the topic. All students benefit from discussions about family diversity, stopping put-downs and bullying — including gay and gender-based slurs — and exploring their curiosity and questions about current events.

In many states there are specific regulations for parental notification when the school curriculum addresses sexuality. However, when educators discuss family diversity, it is family — children's families — that is being discussed. They are talking about understanding the importance of family and love for all children.

When educators discuss why a boy may want to wear a dress or why a student now goes by Michael instead of Michaela, educators are looking at the understanding of other students, kindness toward others, and preventing harassment. These kinds of discussions are important for all students.

## Communication is Essential for Building Trust Between School and Home

It is important for parents/guardians to know what is going on in their child's classroom — whether it is about academics, such as the math unit they are covering, or about discussions of different kinds of families or hurtful LGBTQ-related or any other name-calling.

Some parents may feel more comfortable talking about their child's math lesson than talking about families with two moms or dads or about what "gay," "lesbian" or "transgender" means. Most parents do not know very much or anything at all about gender identity and social transitioning in children. Parents may not know how to approach these topics with their children. They may feel caught off-guard when a child asks, "What does gay mean?" or "How come Michael wears skirts to school sometimes?" Knowing how these conversations happen at school can be helpful.

Schools have successfully held evening forums that discuss families or that talk about how to handle hurtful teasing and bullying. Parents and guardians can be provided information and resources on gender identity in

children. Information for and communication with families is essential to building trust between school and home.

## Family Respect Includes Respect for Religious Beliefs

Public schools include people with many different religious beliefs. The role of schools is not to get everyone to agree but to foster a climate where there is respect for the diversity of beliefs and families within a community. Respect is built by acknowledging the diversity in the community, promoting opportunities for community dialogue and allowing the diversity of families to be visible within the school. Most people can agree that it is appropriate for schools to teach kindness and mutual respect for others' beliefs.

## Schools are a Place for Informed and Open Discussion

Information and discussion will not make anyone gay or straight. As students grow older, some will identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Most LGBTQ people grew up in households headed by heterosexual parents. On the other hand, knowing or learning about gay people might make someone less likely to insult or threaten someone they think is gay. Or, it might help someone not allow a friend to be ostracized for having an LGBTQ parent.

<sup>1</sup> Harris Interactive & GLSEN, "From Teasing to Torment: School Climate in America, A Survey of Students and Teachers," 2005 (retrieved April 5, 2007), (p. 7). Available at: <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/1859.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Movement Advancement Project, Family Equality Council & Center for American Progress, "LGBT Families: Facts at a Glance," October 2011 (p. 2). Available at: <http://www.lgbtmap.org/lgbt-families-facts-at-a-glance>

<sup>3</sup> Movement Advancement Project (2012) Percent of Same-Sex Couples Raising Children. Available at: [http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/same\\_sex\\_couples\\_raising\\_children](http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/same_sex_couples_raising_children)

<sup>4</sup> Gates, Gary J. (2012) Same-sex Couples in Census 2010: Race and Ethnicity. The Williams Institute. Available at: <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/census-lgbt-demographics-studies/same-sex-couples-census-2010-race-ethnicity/>