

Best Practices Pamphlet

Being an *Ally* simply means that **you are prepared** to provide support and guidance to LGBTQ+ students. Here are some of the Best Practices we have identified. Feel free to add your own along the way!

KNOW YOUR STUDENTS' RIGHTS

Creating more inclusive policies begins with an understanding of students' basic rights, as determined by the law and by educational best practices. These rights serve as the backbone of good policymaking and equip school leaders with a legal and moral defense against backlash.

❖ **Students have a right to express their gender as they wish—regardless of their sex assigned at birth.** While students must follow basic dress codes—e.g., no profanity on T-shirts—they cannot be forced to align with gender-specific guidelines. The same is true of hair length, makeup, prom attire, jewelry, footwear, etc. Gender-specific guidelines based on a student's assigned sex violate a student's rights to freedom of expression. As long as one student can wear an outfit without breaking rules, so can another.

❖ **Students have a right to be free from discrimination or harassment based on religious views.** LGBTQ+ students have equal rights to their peers, including the right to freedom from religious persecution. This means students can't be denied equal access to safety and opportunity due to someone else's religious beliefs.

❖ **Students have a right to express LGBTQ+ pride.** If your school's dress code allows students to wear T-shirts with slogans or pictures, it's unlawful for your school to ask a student to take off their shirt just because it endorses LGBTQ pride or makes a statement about their LGBTQ identity.

❖ **Students have a right to form Gay-Straight or Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs).** If your school permits other student clubs, it should allow students to form and publicize a GSA.

❖ **Students have a right to access facilities and opportunities that match their gender identity.** This includes bathrooms, locker rooms and gender-specific activities.

❖ **Students have a right to be free of harassment and to have harassment treated seriously.** We must treat harassment or bullying that targets LGBTQ+ students with the same seriousness we would use in a case of harassment against any other child. Ignoring harassment and bullying is a violation of Title IX.

❖ **LGBTQ+ students have a right to be "out."** Educators can always ask students to stop disruptive speech—in the classroom during a lecture, for instance. But schools cannot tell a student not to talk about their sexual orientation or gender identity while at school.

❖ **LGBTQ+ students have a right not to be "outed."** Even if people within the school know about a student's sexual orientation or gender identity, educators cannot disclose a student's private information without consent. Outing LGBTQ+ students violates their constitutional rights and has led to tragic and fatal consequences.

Schools that successfully acknowledge these rights in their policies take important steps toward providing an environment where LGBTQ+ students can succeed, feel supported and have access to the same opportunities as their peers.

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SECTION I: ENHANCING CULTURE

Creating an Inclusive Environment With Words

Creating an LGBTQ+ inclusive culture begins with a readiness to answer questions or facilitate appropriate conversation around LGBTQ+ issues. In order to facilitate sensitive, productive conversations with students—in class or one-on-one—consider these steps.

EXAMINE YOUR BELIEFS

One of the most important steps in creating an inclusive environment is understanding your own beliefs surrounding the LGBTQ+ community. Take some time to reflect on your beliefs and attitudes to ensure your capacity to professionally and ethically serve LGBTQ+ students.

BE WILLING TO LEARN ESSENTIAL TERMS

Today's LGBTQ+ community, more than ever, has a large vocabulary with which they can articulate their identities. That vocabulary may be unfamiliar, but understanding these words can open doors for educators to become more effective allies to LGBTQ+ students. This means, for example, knowing the difference between **biological sex**, **gender identity** and **gender expression**; between **cisgender** and **transgender**; and between **asexual** and **pansexual**. It also means being comfortable using common LGBTQ+ identifiers, and understanding how and with whom to use them appropriately.

MODEL INCLUSIVE PRONOUN USE

Gender's fluidity is expressed in the many pronouns students use across the gender spectrum. Allied educators understand the necessity of asking their students what pronouns they use—and respecting their decisions.

A study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* found that [*when the parents, teachers and peers around them use their chosen names, trans youth experience a lower risk for depression and suicidal ideation.*](#)

You can affirm transgender and nonbinary students by taking these steps:

- ❖ **Be aware of unique campus resources**, such as documentation for name changes and opportunities for community building (i.e. clubs, support groups).
- ❖ **Avoid assumptions about the sexual orientation of transgender students.** Understand that a person's sexual orientation relates to who someone is attracted to and a person's gender identity relates to how the person understands their gender. Transgender students may not identify as LGBTQ+.
- ❖ **Use the singular "they."** Make space within language for nonbinary genders that do not fit the strictures of "he" and "she." Adopting use of the singular "they" disrupts the binary and affirms the fluidity of gender and the legitimacy of all gender identities.
- ❖ **Decentralize cisgender identity by stating your own pronouns.** Explicitly share your pronouns with name tags, in an email signature or on a pin. This normalizes the process rather than making it a big deal. Students will notice and take your lead.
- ❖ **Conduct pronoun check-ins.** Collective pronoun check-ins help students learn peers' pronouns without forcing nonbinary students to come out repeatedly. You may say, "To make sure we're referring to each other accurately, let's go around so everyone can share their name and pronoun." This process can help transgender and nonbinary students feel seen, not singled out.

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❖ **Begin the year with a student survey that asks students about pronoun use in different situations.** This helps value students' identities while also protecting their privacy. To ensure their own safety, students may use one pronoun with friends and teachers and another with family members. Ask something like: What are your pronouns? Are there situations where you would want me to use different pronouns?

Practice responding to instances of misgendering (referring to a student by the wrong pronoun). Try out these simple suggestions. Students will take note and are likely to follow your thoughtful example.

If you misgender a student:

- ❖ **Apologize briefly,** correct yourself and move on. Note your error without calling attention to it.
- ❖ **Do not over-apologize.** This co-opts a moment that should be about the student, and re-centers it around your own guilt.

If you overhear a co-worker or student misgender someone:

- ❖ **Correct in the moment.** For example:
"The other day I saw Jess and he was saying..."
"Oh right. They were saying?"
- ❖ **Model the correct pronoun afterwards.**
"Yes, I remember Jess saying that. They were just telling me..."
- ❖ **Address it directly.**
"Yes, I definitely remember that. And Jess uses they/them pronouns. Just wanted to let you know."

FACILITATE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT IDENTITY WITH CARE

When topics of personal identity come up, the conversation may be unpredictable. Properly facilitating those conversations means getting comfortable with discomfort; it means being aware of your own biases and conditioned

beliefs; and it means relying on a consistent model of civil discussion so you can handle emotional responses thoughtfully.

If you have concerns about your comfort level with facilitating these conversations, reach out to the GSA committee on campus for support and/or utilize the internet to research additional resources.

SET GROUND RULES

Creating a classroom contract or displaying an office decree from the beginning gives your students a structure that can help prevent inappropriate comments or interruptions when you introduce LGBTQ+ perspectives. Here are tips for making sure those ground rules foster an LGBTQ+ inclusive environment:

- ❖ **Create a positive physical environment.** Display LGBTQ+ supportive images such as El Camino's LGBTQ+ ally sticker, LGBTQ+ flags and rainbows, or hate-free/safe zone stickers to send a clear message that LGBTQ+ people are welcome.
- ❖ **If possible, create community agreements** with student input to inspire personal investment and relevance to students' lives.
- ❖ **Open the community agreements process with discussion prompts,** such as "What rules would help you have a productive, respectful conversation?" or "When someone disagrees with you, how can you stay engaged in that conversation while still being respectful of the other person?"
- ❖ If you suspect that LGBTQ+ perspectives will be new territory for some students, **begin the discussion with a statement about the importance of being open to ideas that may be unfamiliar.**
- ❖ **Make sure ideas of identity and difference are discussed explicitly.** Make it clear that any derogatory, dismissive or purposely hurtful remark directed at any of a person's identities or differences are never OK.

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- ❖ **Post these community agreements in a visible location and refer back to them often.**

LEAD DISCUSSIONS WITH COURAGE AND CARE

Broaching topics surrounding the LGBTQ+ community may lead to discomfort, disagreement and/or even dehumanizing words from students. Use these tips as a starting point when navigating tough conversations:

- ❖ **Never let a homophobic remark go uninterrupted.** Prepare for the possibility that students will have strong reactions and make hostile or hateful comments. Intervene. Refer back to your classroom contract/office decree and explain why certain terms or phrases are inappropriate, and how they can be hurtful to the LGBTQ+ community.
- ❖ **Prepare for the possibility that religion will arise as a topic.** Do not send the message that a student's religion does not matter, or that they are not welcome to discuss this aspect of their identity. Rather, remind them that they cannot use their religion to justify the harassment of another student or a violation of your classroom contract.
- ❖ **Never present LGBTQ+ identities as up for debate.** A classroom debate on whether sexual orientation or gender identity is innate, by definition, violates a community agreement not to attack someone's identities.

RESPOND TO COMMON MYTHS WITH FACTS

Misconceptions about LGBTQ+ identities and communities may present roadblocks to creating an inclusive culture. If students derail discussion or fellow educators push back against inclusive practices by reinforcing these myths, be ready to intervene with facts.

RESPOND TO CURRENT EVENTS AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Keep an eye out for current events or news articles that can be used for staff, faculty and classroom discussion. As allies and educators, we use teachable moments to build student

capacity for empathy and understanding across lines of difference. Remember: political events or legislation that limit the rights of LGBTQ+ people may leave LGBTQ+ students and their allies feeling disappointed and threatened.

Here are some suggestions for responding to current events in a way that lets LGBTQ+ students know they have space to be who they are in your classroom or office.

- ❖ **Encourage discussion instead of silence.** Unwillingness to engage in conversation about the lives of LGBTQ+ people validates the belief that such experiences should be whispered about. Use political events as opportunities to encourage LGBTQ+ students to speak their truth and as opportunities for all students to understand the consequences of court decisions and legislation. The question "What does this mean for me and the people I know?" deserves a thoughtful, nonpartisan response.
- ❖ **Bring LGBTQ+ role models and public figures into your classroom and campus.** Take time to learn and teach about strong LGBTQ+ public officials in contemporary history, such as Mark Takano, Deborah Batts and Tammy Baldwin.
- ❖ **Take inventory of the stories and messages you share while discussing current events.** Craft a positive narrative of inclusion. Many students will look to their social context for their sense of approval and belonging. As staff & faculty, everything you say carries weight and influence. Even if you unintentionally model negative or biased messages, students may conclude: *My identity is abnormal. I do not matter here.*

ENGAGE WITH MULTIDIMENSIONALITY IN MIND

Adopting a multidimensional approach means understanding that everyone has multiple identities—some visible and some invisible—and acknowledging that these identities are intertwined and result in experiencing varied

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forms of oppression. Make sure your student engagement does not present a narrow or one-sided story about the LGBTQ+ experience by leaving out certain aspects of multifaceted identities and groups.

❖ **Contemplate your personal professional philosophy.** Ask yourself questions such as:

- “Does my curriculum include a diverse array of stories and combinations of identities?”
- “Am I allowing for a multiplicity of narratives about what it’s like to be LGBTQ+?”
- “Am I highlighting the experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color?”

❖ **Talk about anti-LGBTQ+ bias, racism and other forms of oppression with students.** Ask

open ended questions, allowing students to share their thoughts and personalize their feelings and experiences.

❖ **Affirm complex identities.** All students benefit from learning environments in which they are seen as a whole person, and where their various identities, experiences, abilities and needs are taken into account. Not only is it critical to recognize and affirm all parts of their identity, but to also give credence to the internal resilience and resources they possess.

❖ **Develop discussion groups with other staff and faculty** where you can talk about questions of diversity, challenges regarding bias, and strategies for engagement.

SECTION II: INSTRUCTION

Integrating LGBTQ+ Voices into the Curriculum

It may seem like a minor adjustment for a professor to mention a LGBTQ+ figure in history, or analyze a LGBTQ+ character in a canonical work of literature. But affirming an LGBTQ+ student’s existence helps them feel more connected to their education and academic community. Help forge that connection with these classroom practices.

ASSESS YOUR TEXTS

Faculty send a powerful message with the resources they choose. Students undoubtedly perceive highlighted texts as representations of what is valued and celebrated in our culture. Omission sends an equally loud message. Including the voices of LGBTQ+ people supports students’ abilities to affirm their identities and cultivates empathy for those experiences that differ from their own.

In selecting your texts and books we encouraged faculty to consider the following questions:

- ❖ What voices does this text include?

- ❖ Does the text include stereotypes or misrepresentations of people? How are those stereotypes or misrepresentations treated?
- ❖ Does the text accurately reflect lived experiences and cultures?
- ❖ Are certain people or groups glaringly absent or given an insubstantial role?
- ❖ Are certain questions or issues related to the topic left out/glossed over?
- ❖ Does this text promote a healthy self-concept?
- ❖ Does this text foster intergroup understanding?
- ❖ How might this text motivate, engage or enable my students?

If you find that none of your current texts include the perspectives of LGBTQ+ people, look for options that are relevant to your students’ lives and that pair well with other texts your students will encounter.

TEACH LGBTQ+ HISTORY

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Integrating LGBTQ+ history into existing units—as opposed to doing stand-alone units—serves to normalize it, rather than presenting it as an add-on to “real” history. Here are four ways to do this in your classroom:

- ❖ **Capitalize on historical eras during which LGBTQ+ figures played a prominent role.** These include: the suffrage and women’s rights movements of the 1800s; the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age; the Frontier West; and the civil rights and social movements of the 1960s.
- ❖ **Look at LGBTQ+ movements within the context of different social movements:** the black civil rights movement, the women’s movement, or Latinx labor and civil rights activism, for example.
- ❖ **Cover LGBTQ rights history by beginning with the 19th and 20th centuries,** then teaching about Daughters of Bilitis, the Mattachine Society, Stonewall and the gay rights movement of the 1970s, HIV/AIDS, and marriage equality.
- ❖ **Ask students to contrast the LGBTQ rights movement with other movements,** such as those of African Americans, women, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, disability rights advocates, Japanese Americans, etc. Compare the goals, strategies and support for each movement, as well as their historical efficacy in promoting civil rights.

WHAT DO I DO IF...

A STUDENT COMES OUT TO ME?

It’s natural to want to respond appropriately if an LGBTQ+ student comes out or discloses the orientation of a family member. Just remember this guiding principle: **Focus on the student, not yourself.** Here are some general suggestions to help you act as an affirming ally when the situation occurs.

DO

TEACH THE GAPS AND SILENCES

It is no accident that so few historical records preserve the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. History does not remember what it does not value. This is particularly true of individuals who experience multiple oppressions, such as enslaved LGBTQ+ persons.

To teach the gaps and silences is to acknowledge the places LGBTQ+ people likely existed, and to acknowledge the reasons why there is little to no record of them.

When there’s a lack of LGBTQ+ representation, teach the context:

- ❖ For the given era, **explain the laws, culture, power structures and societal values** that may account for the erasure of LGBTQ+ people.
- ❖ **Explain why LGBTQ+ people would not have used modern-day identifiers** such as “gay” or “transgender” and how this makes it easy for historians to ignore LGBTQ+ identity.
- ❖ When possible, **point out the exceptions.** For an LGBTQ+ student who has been made to believe that their identity is an aberration or a 20th century invention, evidence to the contrary is validating. From cave paintings to Ancient Egypt to indigenous American cultures and beyond, LGBTQ+ people have lived and even been celebrated.

- ❖ **Listen.** Listening is one of the most powerful, healing resources educators can offer; it’s also simple and requires no pre-prepared effort. For many LGBTQ+ students, the most damaging or painful part of living in the closet is not feeling seen, respected, heard or understood. Having someone to talk to throughout the coming out process may be all the support the student needs to thrive

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authentically at school. Asking clarifying or open-ended questions such as “do you feel safe on campus?” will also reassure the student that they have your attention and your ongoing concern.

❖ **Make yourself available without being a rescuer.** The student is likely to benefit from knowing they have your support, but they may not be in the midst of a crisis or desiring substantial help. Offer up your support in an open-ended manner, by asking if/how you can help, without insisting or pushing them to take any particular action.

❖ **Respect confidentiality.** Inform the student that you will not share the information with others unless their safety would require you to do so. Allow the student to come out to others in their own way and in their own time.

❖ **Keep biases in check.** Coming out is a critical moment for our students, many of whom are still navigating their identities in the world. The student may remember your conversation for a long time to come. Do not use the time to warn them of how their identity will influence their life or to push cultural norms around sexuality or gender.

❖ **Know the resources.** Assess why the student is coming to you—if they trust you and want to involve you in their coming out process, listening may be most appropriate. But if the student is anxious or in crisis, be ready to provide a referral to a counselor, hotline, GSA or an LGBTQ+ community center—if the student is interested.

❖ **Take inventory of your response.** Remember, the student who just came out to you is the same person they were ten minutes ago. If you find yourself seeing them differently,

notice this and process your own reaction without allowing it to color your actions or response. Make your unwavering support evident without making the news into a big deal.

❖ **Follow the student’s lead on language.** Use their terms. For instance, if a student uses the word “queer” do not tell them to use “homosexual.” Refrain from using any slurs or potentially hurtful slang.

❖ **Thank them.** Coming out can be a scary process, and the student has chosen to share this with you. Thank the student for sharing that part of themselves with you.

DO NOT

❖ Tell the student it could be a phase.

❖ Tell them you “don’t care” about who they are and how they identify.

❖ Ask if they’ve been sexually assaulted.

❖ Inquire about past heterosexual experiences.

❖ Tell the student the information would best be kept to themselves.

❖ Tell them to wait to come out until they are sure.

❖ Inform the student they are choosing a more difficult path.

❖ Respond with silence, with blankness or by dismissing what the student has said.

❖ Question their certainty.

❖ Tell this information to their family, friends or coworkers. Unless the student has told you something that requires you to act as a mandatory reporter, honor their privacy at all times.

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Sources

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2. https://www.lambdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/bkl_national-recommended-best-practices-for-lgbt-homeless-youth_0.pdf
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