

Trans Youth at School

Y-GAP COMMUNITY BULLETIN

y•gap:

YOUTH•GENDER
ACTION PROJECT

Everyone has the right to a safe and healthy school environment. This Bulletin provides recommendations for school administration to help create welcoming and supportive schools for trans youth.

The Challenges Faced by Trans Students

The world is often an unsafe place for trans youth. Schools are no exception - but that can be changed. Trans students experience verbal and physical harassment, assault, teasing, social exclusion, and have their property stolen or damaged at rates higher than any other student group. And, the more frequent harassment trans youth experience, the lower their grades and educational aspirations (1). They also drop out of school at higher rates than other students because of feeling unsafe (2), (3). Some use drugs to cope with this stress, some contemplate suicide.

Trans youth of colour experience additional challenges because of the systemic racism they often encounter. These challenges can compound the stress of transition. Their experiences with racism and transphobia push them to the margins of the school.

"I'm afraid to come out as a trans guy at school - yeah, I wouldn't feel comfortable doing that."

Egale Canada's (2009) school climate survey revealed:



95% of trans students felt unsafe at school.

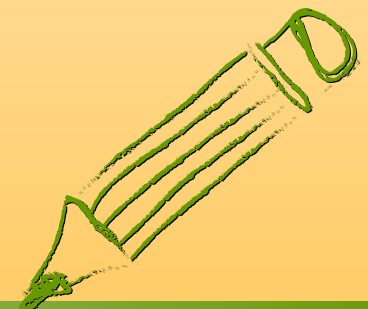


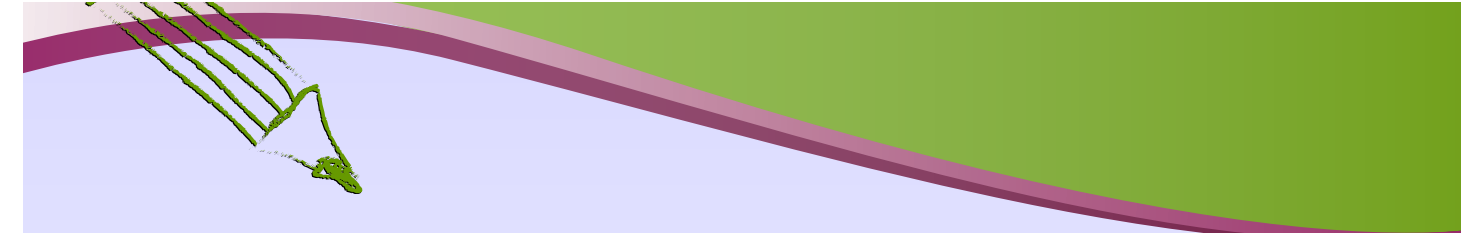
90% of trans students reported being verbally harassed because of their gender expression.



50% reported that staff never intervened when homophobic or transphobic comments were made.

The Youth-Gender Action Project (Y-GAP) study found that trans youth are not "out", transfer out, or drop out of school because of hostile environments and harassment. A few students reported being sent to religious and/or single-sex schools by their parents as a deliberate strategy to "correct" their gender-variance.





Most trans youth report being victims of chronic, severe bullying in school. Some trans youth have objects thrown at them, are beaten by other students, and receive death threats. Many are verbally abused and made fun of. Some describe themselves as friendless and “outcasts.” Some of the harassment occurs in the classroom, but can be “subtle” and “one-on-one” and escape teacher notice. The majority of harassment happens outside of teacher and staff view -- in hallways, washrooms, and outside on school grounds.

“But people who know me -- some of them said I am ugly, I’m weird and just bad things about me...the teacher was either too busy with other students or there was actually no teacher around.”

Compounding the harassment from peers is the fact that trans youth experience a lack of mentorship and teacher indifference (4). Trans students have difficulty talking to school staff about harassment. If students experience verbal harassment and intimidation rather than physical attacks, they may doubt there is much staff can do to effectively address it. Some students fear that staff will not take their complaints seriously or have peer violence escalate when they report it. Some trans students feel some teachers and principals tacitly approve of the violence and harassment when they don’t step in, ignore what is happening, or give bullies a “slap on the wrist” as a consequence (5).

“Part of why they [staff] were not supportive is because I didn’t tell them in the first place. So it’s partially my fault too, but I just found I didn’t really trust them.”

Trans youth feel isolated by the lack of relevant curricula and resources and/or misinformation that is circulated regarding their identities. Gendered school spaces and policies, such as single sex washrooms, change rooms, and uniforms can compound the social stress of school. Trans youth feel discouraged when their own initiatives and efforts to improve the school environment are met with indifference or resistance.

“I always felt excluded because nobody understood what being trans meant. My teacher was talking about transsexual or transgender people in social science class and then he told us that it was the same thing as hermaphrodite [sic]...If you’re gonna give the class information, then at least give them the right information. So I feel like nobody understands us, so I just feel very alienated. I was in a deep depression.”

What Schools Can Do to Support Trans Students

Don't wait until you "get" a trans student to create supportive policies and a welcoming environment. You already have trans students but do not know it yet. They simply may not be "out" because they perceive the environment to be unsafe and unwelcoming.

Trans youth often start to take their first steps towards expressing and embodying their true gender identity during their high school years or earlier (6). When trans youth begin experimenting with gender, they may face family rejection and homelessness. Because of the discrimination they face elsewhere in their lives, schools have the potential to be the most stable cornerstone in their lives.

"When you go to an all-gay alternative school, the learning experience was very positive. I got my confidence back. I got to do some of my writing that I'm very proud of."

Individual staff can play an important role in students feeling supported at school. This can involve supportive comments and actions in class, as well as being approachable to talk about gender and preferred name. Teachers should be on the look out for indications of distress in youth such as social isolation, being the target of peer-teasing or bullying, skipping classes, and a sudden drop in school performance.

Trans youth see principals as the most important person in setting the tone for the school culture, through being committed to diversity and adopting a "zero tolerance" approach to harassment. If teachers do not report incidents they see (which is only a fraction of what actually occurs), even a well-intentioned principal will not be fully aware of the extent of harassment that trans students experience (7).

"A really good thing happened. We did get a new principal who actually had a spine and he enforced lots of new rules that stopped bullying. There's a lot more supervision in the hallways and stuff."

Many trans youth move to urban centres to connect with the trans community and to access resources. Studying away from home can also mean a "fresh start" for trans youth in their chosen gender and/or be in a place to transition in a more supportive environment, without the social pressures and expectations of the communities where they grew up. On the other hand, such autonomy and anonymity in combination with the social stress of transitioning can leave trans youth vulnerable.

There are lots of things school staff can do to be supportive and to provide a more welcoming and safer environment for trans students. Most changes are easy to implement, simple, and require no new resources. It begins with creating awareness among staff and students and working from a vision of providing quality, inclusive learning environments for all students. We encourage you to post our Taking Action page.



Taking Action to Create Trans-Positive Schools

1. Research your school's equity statements and anti-violence policies. If there is nothing specific to trans students in existing material, propose that "gender identity" become an articulated ground for protection.
2. Develop a school protocol for consistent use of *preferred* name and pronouns that is easy for students to access. For example, under the Ontario Trillium school identification system, a student's "preferred or chosen name" can be used on class lists, timetables, etc.
3. Develop a school policy that ensures the right to use a washroom that best corresponds to the student's gender identity. If trans students do not feel safe using this washroom, ensure that they have access to a private washroom (e.g., staff washroom) if they choose.
4. Create a flexible or gender-neutral dress code to enable a student's right to dress in accordance with their gender identity.
5. Ensure that a student has the right to participate in gender-segregated sports and gym class activities in accordance with the student's gender identity.
6. Integrate trans-sensitivity and advocacy training into staff professional development curricula.
7. Train staff to identify and confront transphobia in the school.
8. Designate a staff person within the school, or school district, who can act in an extended advocacy role for trans students.
9. Accommodate locker room accessibility, which may include use of a private area (washroom, or Phys. Ed instructor's office), or a separate changing schedule (just before or after the other students have changed).
10. Have trans-related fiction and non-fiction books in the school library.
11. Integrate trans content into the school curriculum and into student sexual health education.
12. Support the development of a trans-inclusive GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) in the school.
13. Encourage and support scholarships and awards that recognize the unique strength and resilience that trans youth possess.

Some of these recommendations were adapted from Callender (see footnote 8).

The Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy comes into effect February 2010, requiring all school staff to report serious student incidents, such as bullying, to the principal, and staff to address inappropriate and disrespectful behaviour among students.

"Our schools must be places free of discrimination and bullying where all students feel welcome, safe and respected. We remain committed to the goals of increasing student achievement, of closing gaps between students who are achieving and those who are not, and of increasing confidence in our publicly funded education system."

(Education Minister, Kathleen Wynne)

Footnotes

1. Greytak, E.A., Kosciw, J.G., & Diaz, E.M. (2009). *Harsh realities: The experiences of transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN.
2. Sausa, L.A. (2004). *HIV prevention and educational needs of trans youth*. Unpublished dissertation. University of Pennsylvania.
3. Wyss, S. E. (2004). "This was my hell": The violence experienced by gender non-conforming youth in US high schools.' *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 17, 709-730.
4. Gutierrez, N. (2004). Resisting fragmentation, living whole: Four female transgender students of color speak about school. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 16, 69-79.
5. Egale Canada. (March 2009). *Egale Canada first national climate survey on homophobia in Canadian schools: Phase 1 Report*. Toronto: Egale.
6. Greytak, E.A., Kosciw, J.G., & Diaz, E.M. (2009). *Harsh realities: The experiences of transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN.
7. GLSEN and Harris Interactive (2008). *The principal's perspective: School safety, bullying and harassment, A survey of public school principals*. New York: GLSEN.
8. Callender, D.R. (2005). *When Matt became Jade: An experience in working with a youth who made a gender transition change in a high school environment*. Toronto: Delisle Youth Services. Available: www.delisleyouth.org/service/wmbjmanuscript.

Resources

Human Sexuality Program; Steven Solomon, TDSB/Triangle Program social worker Individual, Family and Group support for LGBT students, teachers, parents and families; anti-homophobia classroom workshops, kindergarten to grade 12

Tel: 416-985-3749,
Email: steven.solomon@tdsb.on.ca

The Triangle Program of Oasis Alternative S.S.—a safe, harassment-free, equity-based environment where Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) youth can learn and earn academic credits.

Tel: (416) 393-8443,
<http://schools.tdsb.on.ca/triangle>.

Lambda Legal and the National Youth Advocacy Coalition (2008). *Bending the mold: An action kit for transgender youth*. "Designed to help you make your school a safer place."

Available: http://data.lambdalegal.org/publications/downloads/btm_bending-the-mold.pdf

Sources

The contents of this bulletin were drawn from the literature and findings from *The Youth-Gender Action Project (Y-GAP)*, a community-based action-research partnership project between Dalhousie University and Central Toronto Youth Services.

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Y-GAP

The Y-GAP project is committed to understanding and improving the lives of trans youth living in Toronto and across Ontario. Y-GAP researchers interviewed twenty-one youth about their challenges and triumphs. The research highlighted how particular experiences are integral in shaping, for better or for worse, the emotional and physical health and safety of trans youth. These factors included the level of family support, their ability to access responsive health care, and their success in being able to find safe school environments. Trans youth at School is part of the Y-GAP Community Bulletin Series.

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