

Strategies to protect transgender students in the us educational system

[Sociology](#), [Gender Studies](#)



In regards to how the US educational system can better support and protect its transgender students and create more gender-inclusive school environments, it is clear that a lack of knowledge, inconsistent policies and outdated CIS-standards of gender-normality continue to put the safety of this marginalized and misunderstood group of children at risk. Researchers define transgender children as having, “ a brain of one sex and a body of the opposite sex.” (Edwards, 2010) These students face a unique set of challenges, emotionally, physically and socially. Their journey through self-identification, coming out and transitioning, privately and publicly, to their families, at their schools, with their medical professionals, and in their everyday lives can be a tremendously difficult one to navigate. In addition to coping with shunning, bullying and assault, they must face the obstacles around what bathrooms they are and are not allowed to use (challenging themselves to ‘ just hold it’ out of fear of a possibly negative altercation). Other issues arise around participation in sports, use of locker rooms, school dress codes, harassment, gender and sexual identity curriculum, appropriate pronoun usage and name/sex designation on school records, as well as, if/when to introduce hormone blockers. (Bowers and Lopez, 2012)

Transgender youth report being harassed and assaulted at school at alarming rates. This level of harassment and violence leads to both immediate and long-term adverse outcomes for the students, including disproportionately high rates of suicide, homelessness, and illness.” (Grant et al., 2010) Schools should be a protective environment where children learn to respect and collaborate with others different from themselves. The inconsistency amongst inclusion policies, much less the

complete failure of having *no policy* in place *at all* , is a detriment to the transgender youth in our educational system.

Unique Needs and Challenges

Transgender children have unique challenges and needs, including medical and psychosocial. Often those needs go unmet to a variety of factors, such as: lack of family and social support, lack of medical knowledge and lack of insurance coverage. The few who have the support of their family, their pediatrician and are covered by insurance plans that do not exclude their condition, are left with a system that has great variability in the timing and quality of the care provided. Research from several countries around the globe show significant increases in the number of children who identify as transgender and seek to address their situations medically. Increasingly, hormone blockers, used to delay the onset of puberty, are being prescribed as an option for treatment. gionardi

Radixexplains that for these young children, who desire that their physical bodies match their mental identities, hormone blockers have become an option to delay puberty. By delaying puberty, doctors can stop the body from producing estrogen or testosterone and beginning to show secondary-sex characteristics (starting menses, breast development, facial hair growth, height, etc.) This allows the transgender children time to grow and develop before having to decide whether to begin hormone treatment later in life. This ability, for a trans girl to stop facial hair from developing and her voice deepening, or for a trans boy to stop breasts from developing or starting a menses, offers them an opportunity to grow up a bit more before making any

other major decisions regarding their gender dysphoria. The blockers are tolerated well, and the effects are completely reversible. As soon as the child stops taking the blockers, unless hormone therapy is introduced, their bodies will begin puberty as it would have normally. (Radix, 2014) This gives children, families and medical professions time to suspend any further decisions until the child is a bit older and hormone therapy becomes an option. “ The Endocrine Society and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health have issued guidelines for the care of transgender children and adolescents and have recommended the use of gonadotropin-releasing hormone analogues to reduce the distress associated with puberty and allow time for the adolescents to explore their gender identity further.” (Radix, 2014)

Inconsistent Policies

In addition to the challenges around *coming out* to family and friends, coping with the harassment and bullying of peers, fighting to change medical and school records and deciding if/when to introduce hormone-blockers, transgender children in the U. S. Educational System also face a lack of consistent policies and protections regarding their right to use the bathrooms consistent with their gender identity. Transgender advocates would explain that gender identity is a human right and an innate part of the composition of who a person is at their very core, similar to one’s religion, and should provide them legal protection from discrimination and access to the same protections and rights provided to cis-gendered members of our society. Opponents would argue that not requiring that students to use the

bathroom consistent with their *birth* gender helps predators and makes bathrooms unsafe for women and girls. (Journell, 2017) This seem inconsistent with trends that show violence against women is down, whereas, violence and homicides of transwomen has steadily increased. (Powell, et al, 2016) Forcing trans students to use bathrooms that are inconsistent with their self-identity and outward expression of gender creates hostile and unsafe environments for the trans students. (Journell, 2017) Additionally, this seems ignore the element that predators do not *seek permission* before entering environments wherein to victimize others.

Another aspect of the school environment, that is problematic for trans youth, is the lack of consistent policy/protections around their participation in school sports. Due to anxiety over uniform and locker room issues, lack of school support and fears of increased bullying, some trans student choose to no longer participate in school sports alongside their friends, becoming further isolated. In other cases, it is the school policy (or lack thereof) that determines whether trans students are/are not allowed to enroll in the sport team of their choice and enjoy the, “ Physical, educational, and socio-emotional benefits provided,” through participation, “ Not to mention the opportunity to assert and be validated in the expression,” of their own personal identity. BUVARIS. This lack of consistency amongst inclusion policies in US schools leaves many transgender youth, especially transgender athletes, unprotected and excluded. The range of policy examples include schools with no inclusion policy (that leave such decisions up to that interpretation of coaches), to schools that have minimal inclusion

policies (that attempt to apply adult standards used by larger organizations, such as, sex reassignment surgery), and finally, the exemplary schools that have the most inclusive policies, such as in Washington State. “ In 2007, the Washington Interscholastic Athletic Association, which governs high school sports in the state of Washington, enacted a policy allowing students to participate in sports “ in a manner that is consistent with their gender identity, irrespective of the gender listed on a student’s records.” (Buvaris, 2012) Without consistent and thorough gender-inclusive policies in place that protect trans students and allows them to integrate their identity and feel safe and welcome in their school community, their safety remains at risk. As educators, it is our responsibility to take a macro approach to ensuring the emotional and physical safety of the children in our school communities. We can do this by becoming more aware and accepting of their needs and challenges, making school-wide efforts to provide safe environments and reach out to traditionally marginalized groups. Educators must set examples that combating bigotry and seek to change the binary gender standards of the past. JOURNELL

CIS-Standards of Gender Normality

Some conservatives believe that these children are too young to know whether they are transgender or not, and that allowing students to use the bathrooms with which they self-identify would lead to greater occurrences of voyeurism and sexual assault in the schools. They hold hetero-normative, cis-standards and advocate for traditional gender-roles. They support the move made by Donald Trump and his administration to strip previous

Transgender Protections that were put in place during the Obama administration. “ Civil rights officers in the Department of Justice and the Department of Education issued a joint letter saying the administration was rescinding the policy, which had required schools to allow students who identify as transgender to use the restrooms, locker rooms and similar facilities of their choice—or face loss of federal funds.” (Anderson, R. T., 2019) They believe that the progressive viewpoint is an attempt to normalize what they view as abnormal.

On the contrary, the progressive side advocates for a more gender inclusive perspective that evolves to meet the needs and demands of current students, families and societal changes. They believe that our binary educational system fails gender-expansive students and say their opponents are advocating for a group that is not being victimized while ignoring the true victims. They believe that the conservative perspective is internalized heterosexism that perpetuates the divisive, discriminative, superiority-based themes of our past, and obstructs the inevitable progress being made towards a more diverse and inclusive future. A future that positions our children to change the balance of power. As more and more transgender children are accepted by their families, allowed to openly self-identify, publicly transition and, in some cases, begin using hormone blockers, our educators must attempt to better understand their unique challenges and learn more effective ways to address them. Being a transgender individual is an innate part of the composition of who a person is at their very core, like one’s religion; and should provide them legal protection from discrimination

and access to the same protections and rights provided to cis-gendered members of our society.

Strategies and Suggestions

“ Educators have little control of how controversial identity issues are framed by politicians and within society; however, teachers and other school leaders can work to make classrooms and schools places in which evidence is given credence over unsubstantiated fears.” (Journell, 2017) A recent research study, MAGUIRE, looked at strategies used within schools to reduce harassment, and the protective role of school personnel and their responses. The study found that harassment of trans students was not only pervasive but originated from peers *and school personnel* alike. It then examined risk factors, as well as, protective factors within the school environment; suggesting potential strategies that include: “ intervention by school personnel when harassment occurs, presence of policies prohibiting discrimination and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity or presentation, presence of a gay-straight Alliance or other LGBTQ student group, availability of information regarding LGBTQ issues at school, and inclusion of LGBTQ issues in the school curricula.” Maguire Additionally, continued-education is needed, in order to provide educators and school leaders with tools for how to tackle the hard topic of “ transitioning gender”. They need help with how to handle inappropriate student jokes, address parent complaints, use appropriate gender specific language (including which pronouns to use) and clarifying the differences between being gay, cross-dressing, and transitioning genders. Edwards

“ Children are indoctrinated before they can even enter the classroom door by being told to line up either in the ‘ boy line’ or the ‘ girl line’.” (Funk, S., & Funk, J., 2017) A school environment that denies students the ability to be their authentic selves and practice social skills that prepare them to participate as active members of a diverse society is doing more harm than good. The US educational system needs consistent and thorough gender-inclusive policies in place that protect and support transgender students and allows them to integrate their identity and feel safe and welcome in their school community. Ultimately, as the debate over transgender rights continues to be played out in our nation’s schools and political arenas, it is the children whose lives remain at risk.

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