

## Safe and Supportive Schools for Transgender and Gender Diverse Students

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) supports the civil, human, and educational rights of transgender and gender diverse (TGD) students. NASP further asserts that to optimize TGD students' academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and development potential, schools must be safe, secure, equitable, and inclusive environments for *all* students. NASP's longstanding commitment to policy that calls for nondiscrimination and the promotion of equal opportunity, fairness, justice, and respect for all persons is reflected not only in NASP's Professional Standards (NASP 2020b) but is reflected in its collection of position statements focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/gender diverse, queer (LGBTQ+), and other minoritized youth throughout the past 30 years (NASP, 1999).

NASP respects that gender identity (a person's internal sense of gender), gender expression (how one presents gender identity to others via hair, clothing, or makeup), and gender presentation (how one's gender expression is perceived by others) are natural components of human development and diversity. NASP also recognizes individuals' rights to declare their gender identity and to live authentically whether such is consistent with the sex and gender assignments at birth. NASP affirms individuals' agency to modify their gender expression as often as necessary for their personal well-being. NASP further supports youth's rights to seek information about gender development and identity, have open discussions, access educational curricula/practices inclusive of gender diverse identities, and explore or question their own gender identities. NASP further supports students' and staffs' ongoing self-exploration, education, and conversation around gender identity consistent with their inalienable human rights.

### ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES

School psychologists are guided by an ethical code that calls for beneficence, through which they respect the rights and dignity of all persons, and nonmaleficence, which requires that they do no harm. NASP's ethical standards require school psychologists to validate and affirm a young person's authentic lived experience, value their integrity, ensure their safety, and promote their well-being (NASP, 2020b). Research endorsing the use of conversion therapy conflicts with NASP's ethical standards. As consumers and reviewers of research affecting TGD youth, school psychologists maintain responsibility to ensure that empirically validated interventions and recommendations are the only ones which are published and disseminated, rather than those that harm TGD students. Therefore, it is imperative school psychologists think critically when reviewing research and resources to ensure the information presented is valid, reliable, and consistent with NASP's standards, particularly with the *Principles for Professional Ethics*, rather than assuming all disseminated research aligns with NASP's ethical standards (2020b).

NASP (2020b) acknowledges that diverse gender identities are not pathological and that efforts to change a person's gender identity are ineffective, discriminatory, harmful, and potentially lethal. TGD youth experience marginalization through increased rates of harassment, abuse, and peer victimization when compared to their cisgender peers, which can result in acute or chronic mental health concerns (Kosciw et al., 2020; Meyer, 2015). NASP's support of transgender and gender diverse youth is evident in the following NASP (2020b) ethical guidelines and principles:

- School psychologists work to ensure students can learn in an environment that is welcoming, safe, supportive, and equitable to all persons regardless of actual or perceived characteristics including: gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and any other personally identifying or distinguishing characteristics (NASP, 2020b, Guiding Principle I.3 Fairness, Equity, and Justice).
- "School psychologists are ethically obligated to speak up for the interests and rights of students and families even when it may be difficult to do so" (NASP, 2020b, Standard III.2.3, p. 50).

- School psychologists are ethically obligated to advocate for positive school policies and practices to protect the legal rights of students and parents (NASP, 2020b, Standard IV.1.2).
- School psychologists protect confidentiality and work to become culturally competent and affirming (NASP 2020b, Standard I.2). This includes the need to “respect the right of persons to choose for themselves whether to disclose their private thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors,” (NASP 2020b, p.7) particularly related to sharing their sexual orientation or gender identity. Disclosure could lead to potential harm of the individual, even with beneficent intent, and may be a violation of state or federal laws.

## NEEDS OF GENDER DIVERSE STUDENTS

TGD students may face barriers to equitable treatment at school. Cannava (2020) identified an extensive collection of TGD students’ needs. TGD students need physical and psychological safety in all settings, including home, family, and school for their psychosocial and academic development, and acceptance as their authentic selves by others (e.g., respecting and honoring pronouns as a proxy for gender identity validation). TGD students’ needs for physical and psychological safety can begin to be provided through supports such as:

- Administrative policies that explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (Kahn et al., 2018). In the absence of which, a school psychologist should still ethically support the student (NASP, 2020b);
- Access to a Gay Straight Alliance/Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) and support groups;
- Access to nearby, safe restrooms that correspond with his/her/their gender identity;
- Inclusive school curricula (across multiple subjects including sex education; Assunção, 2019; Walker, 2019);
- Role models both within the public eye and the school/community, because when school staff do not feel safe to live authentically, students will likely question their own safety and ability to be themselves in school (The Trevor Project, 2019);
- Access to affirming binders, shapewear, and clothing; affirming medical and mental health services in schools and communities;
- Access to safe and supportive housing, within their family’s home or elsewhere;
- Knowledge of coping skills for when TGD students feel dysphoric or when they face adversity;
- Pregnancy prevention and inclusive sex education; and
- Motivation to attend school or alternative programs which lead to graduation even in the presence of potentially debilitating discrimination.

These supports can promote physical and psychological school safety, which allows for educational and personal attainment, and they can be lifesaving supports. When TGD youth receive equitable services and resources from school, they are afforded the same rights, opportunities, and resources granted to their cisgender peers (Waterford, 2021). Doing so allows gender diverse youth to be seen, heard, affirmed, supported, validated, included, and valued as human beings. NASP also recognizes that TGD youth of color and those with disabilities may require additional supports to integrate what, at times, may feel like conflicting aspects of self (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, parental expectations, societal expectations, sexual orientation, gender identity, and internalized homophobia and transphobia) to experience self-fulfillment. As each youth exists within a unique ecological context, practice must be youth-centered, and school psychologists must partner with youth to ensure positive and culturally attuned educational experiences.

## ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

School psychologists are ethically obligated to foster safe and supportive schools for all students, specifically TGD students (NASP, 2020b). As such, the role of the school psychologist in supporting TGD students includes five functions: Inform, advocate, affirm, protect, and connect.

- **Inform.** Informing involves educating oneself and others about cultural humility. The first step in being able to educate others is developing an awareness of and addressing one’s own attitudes, biases, and professional shortcomings. School psychologists and educators can develop their understanding of gender diversity through

professional development or by simply connecting with gender diverse persons and immersing themselves in spaces dedicated to gender diverse and transgender persons. In these spaces, it is suggested to share intent for joining, such as wanting to learn to be an ally (or even just wanting to spend time with friends or associates who are gender diverse), share pronouns, and be respectful and consistent with the use of others' pronouns. Most importantly, cisgender persons must recognize they are guests who need to be welcomed to participate, because there are few spaces that are dedicated to transgender persons and these spaces should be sanctuaries. As educators, school psychologists can inform by leading professional development, professional learning, or inservice training; answering questions; or connecting colleagues to existing resources such as *Welcoming Schools* (The Human Rights Campaign, 2014), *Safe Space Kit* (GLSEN, 2019), or other organizations that teach inclusion and understanding (e.g., Gender Spectrum, Inclusive Schools Network) only after they themselves are knowledgeable. When providing professional development, school psychologists are encouraged to model their humble perspective as well as foster cultural humility and a willingness to connect with and value gender diverse youth. Finally, school psychologists should familiarize themselves and support educators' and school leaders' understanding of applicable laws (federal supersedes state/locality) that protect gender diverse students. School psychologists should be active partners in efforts to create safe and affirming school environments and actively advocate against any local, state, or federal policy proposal that would harm, marginalize, or discriminate against TGD youth.

- **Advocate.** “At its core, advocacy is about getting others to understand an issue from your perspective and then take appropriate action” (NASP, 2019, p. 7). Advocacy is particularly critical in serving marginalized or oppressed communities, such as gender diverse youth. Through advocacy school psychologists can impact systems change in schools to uphold laws, ethics, and rights such as ensuring the consistent use of students' self-identified names and pronouns. Advocacy can take place at the micro level (e.g., advocating for individual students; groups of students; or for changes in school policy/procedures/climate, district policy, and regulations) and at the macro level (advocating at county, state, or federal levels). The school psychologist's role as advocate may be challenged by school or district administration when it reveals inadequacies, but this role can also lead to the greatest proactive change. The *NASP Policy Playbook* (2019) includes step-by-step guidance, key messages, and asks in advocating for minoritized populations, issues that affect youth, and increased representation of diversity in the field. There are times where existing state law or school policy may be in direct conflict with ethical standards, which state that “school psychologists consider the interests and rights of children and youth to be their highest priority in decision-making and act as advocates for all students. These assumptions necessitate that school psychologists speak up for the needs and rights of students even when it may be difficult to do so” (NASP, 2020b, p. 2).
- **Affirm.** “School psychologists work to ensure the protection of the educational rights, opportunities, and well-being of all children, especially those whose voices have been muted, identities obscured, or needs ignored” (NASP, 2019, p. 53). School psychologists protect youth civil and human rights by affirming, valuing, and validating the diversity of their cultural and individual differences. School psychologists must affirm, value, and validate gender diverse youth's lived experience. This includes the need to:
  - Maintain confidentiality of the student's birth sex, gender identity, and gender expression by keeping identifying records separate and limiting unnecessary disclosure, doing so only with the explicit assent of the student. This also entails using discretion in disclosing identity or gender status in psychological reports when not relevant or necessary to explain educational or mental/behavioral health challenges (NASP, 2020b, Standards I.2.1 and I.2.5).
  - Have policies in place for managing experiences of bullying, micro- and macroaggressions, exclusion, and marginalization. This involves keeping victims safe by developing a plan where they are distanced from the perpetrator, ensuring safe persons and spaces TGD students can go to for unconditional positive regard and support, and having consequences for the wrongdoer. These consequences should not be based on exclusionary discipline policies but restorative interventions which promote social-emotional learning and repair of relationships (NASP, 2020a).
  - Respect a person's right to disclose or not disclose their identity, orientation, or any other personal attributes. This can include discussion of how to come out safely, development of gender support plans that include details of confidentiality and disclosure as well as safety, or safety plans with questions like “If coming out goes poorly, what can you do to cope? If you get kicked out, where can you go?”
  - Hold space and allow the student to come out at their own pace.
  - Understand federal/state/local laws that affect gender diverse individuals. Help youth to understand what protections and rights are available to them while also being forthcoming about the limitations of such. The law

is intended to protect one's safety, but it often only applies retroactively after harm is done, when abuses or violations are challenged.

- Prevent deadnaming (use of a legal name no longer used or identified with) and address those who misgender (use someone's incorrect pronouns) immediately and discreetly. Assist such persons in giving an appropriate apology, as well as in forming a plan for behavior change.
- Use the student's affirmed name and pronoun in all written correspondence, whenever possible. When law or policy prevents such, in addition to advocating for changes, be transparent with students while also striving to provide work-arounds (e.g., providing two copies of a report, preparing students before exposing them to potentially dysphoric or triggering information such as their legal name, offering to alter existing reports).
- Appreciate youth's lived experience and the value of their own story.
- **Protect.** School psychologists recognize the increased suicidality experienced by TGD youth, with more than half reporting having significantly considered suicide within the past year and 21% having attempted it (The Trevor Project, 2020). This underscores the importance of fostering protective factors to mediate risk factors, adopting a suicide prevention policy as outlined in the *Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention: Model Language, Commentary, and Resources* (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, American School Counselor Association, NASP, & The Trevor Project, 2021) and using suicide risk assessments to not just identify the likelihood of risk but also to take steps to prevent such.
  - Assess for safety. TGD youth are at an increased risk for self-harm and suicidal ideation. Care must be taken to ensure a student's safety while not increasing endangerment through premature disclosure of gender identity or sexual orientation or use of oppressive language or practices.
  - Complete a risk assessment to determine the degree of lethality and imminent risk. When working with TGD youth, clinical expertise is essential, and it may require involving a colleague who is more well-versed in working with this population. The priority is to stabilize a young person. When they are no longer in imminent danger, the work can begin to help the young person locate affirming resources, develop healthy coping skills, and identify supportive people. There may be situations when a young person has thoughts of suicide but no plan, intent, or means. In these cases, practitioners must make a determination regarding notification (the intent of which is to keep young people safe when schools are no longer acting in loco parentis) and whether such a communication is likely to increase risk of harm or suicide for youth living in unsupportive homes.
  - Create a safety plan to ensure youth know how to maintain safety which may include managing gender dysphoria (e.g., varying levels of discomfort related to the mismatch between sex characteristics and gender identity). It is critical that young people and their caregivers, mentors, and other trusted adults understand how to utilize the safety plan and when to seek professional help. Caregivers, mentors, and other trusted adults will benefit from psychoeducation about identifying risk factors and using affirming language. Of note, caregivers can be involved with safety planning and the subsequent psychoeducation process without knowing about a young person's LGBTQ+ identity, especially if it would increase risk of harm.
- **Connect.** Connecting gender diverse youth means expanding their network to include resources that offer information, support, friendship, and mentorship. Promoting connection for gender diverse youth can remind them they are not alone, different, or flawed; they are a member of a resilient, strong community. By connecting youth with gender diverse staff, their school's GSA, community organizations, crisis networks, national gender diverse organizations, and additional supports (e.g., affirming medical/mental health providers or tutors), youth are empowered to explore a network that validates, affirms, and actively includes them. While the creation and provision of safe spaces in school (and encouraging such in one's home and community) is necessary, it is by far insufficient, and the goal should be to create entire environments that are completely safe, as reported by those who once felt unsafe.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Protect the ability of school psychologists, other school mental health professionals, and educators to maintain confidentiality when working with gender diverse students. Oppose any law or policy that would require disclosure of a student's gender identity or sexual orientation without their explicit and informed consent.

- Oppose efforts that would require school personnel to only refer to TGD students by the biological sex listed on their birth certificate or violate professional ethics in disclosing sensitive and protected information regarding gender identity.
- Support access to gender affirming care and reject efforts that would allow health providers to deny services to gender diverse students, prohibit school psychologists and other mental health professionals from discussing or providing information to students who may be questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, or punish parents for seeking out needed gender affirming care for their children.
- Promote ongoing professional development for educators, families, and community members about how to best support TGD youth.
- Ensure school curricula is inclusive of LGBTQ+ persons and oppose any effort to ban discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools.
- Ensure all antibullying, harassment, and discrimination policies explicitly prohibit discrimination and harassment on the basis of real or perceived gender identity or gender expression, which aligns with the Supreme Court’s interpretation of Title IX.
- Require collection and reporting of disaggregated data on rates of bullying, harassment, discrimination, suspension, expulsion, and other punitive discipline practices among TGD students.
- Allow students to use facilities, including bathrooms and locker rooms, consistent with their gender identity while allowing TGD youth voice and choice in their use.
- Allow for inclusive participation on sports teams and other sex segregated activities that correspond with their gender identity. This includes opposing the use of invasive medical examinations to confirm or challenge one’s gender identity and rejecting efforts to define “sex” as one’s biological sex as a way of limiting participation by TGD students.
- Create clear processes that allow student records to reflect the student’s affirmed gender identity and, if applicable, their chosen name without requiring legal documentation of changes.
- Ensure any documents, surveys, and data collection methods that collect demographic information include the options “male,” “female,” “transgender,” “nonbinary,” “agender,” and “choose not to disclose.” Whenever possible allow for selection of multiple categories.
- Support efforts to abolish the use of conversion/reparative therapy with minors.

## SUMMARY

School psychologists must advocate for and in support of transgender and gender diverse youth’s civil, human, and educational rights. Recognition of and education about gender diversity is imperative at all levels of public education. Safe and supportive schools benefit all students, staff, and families, but they also have the potential to be lifesaving for TGD young people who may otherwise face adversity, harassment, discrimination, neglect, and abuse from peers, primary caregivers, and other adults. School psychologists recognize the benefit in affirming an individual even when it may seem impossible or improbable to change an entire system. School psychologists can meet with students and their families to help all parties develop mutual understanding; however, protecting the individual student’s safety and well-being remains the priority. When mutual understanding is not possible in the moment, school psychologists can help to find areas of agreement that can result in small steps toward acceptance. School psychologists can inform, advocate, protect, and connect through counseling students, consultation with primary caregivers and teachers, and professional development for schools. School psychologists can and should make a difference in the lives of transgender and gender diverse youth.

Additional research and a comprehensive resource list for parents and other primary caregivers, school psychologists, school staff, and youth is available on the NASP LGBTQ+ resources page to assist in empowering others in the specialized knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to meet the needs of gender diverse students and their families.

## REFERENCES

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists, & The Trevor Project. (2019). *Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention: Model Language, Commentary, and Resources* (2nd ed.). American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.
- Assunção, M. (2019, August 15). Maryland to require schools to teach LGBTQ history. *New York Daily News*. <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/ny-maryland-lgbtq-history-schools-disability-rights-20190815-4bqoe2vfe5gsnpta3xa5siyaq-story.html>.
- Cannava, A. (2020). *Beyond the Rainbow: School-based mental health supports for LGBTQ+ youth* [PowerPoint slides].
- GLSEN. (2019). *Safe Space Kit: A Guide to Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Students in Your School*. <https://www.glsen.org/activity/glsen-safe-space-kit-solidarity-lgbtq-youth>
- Human Rights Campaign Foundation. (2014). *Welcoming schools*. <https://welcomingschools.org/>
- Kahn, E., Johnson, A., Lee, M., & Miranda, L. (2018). *2018 LGBTQ youth report*. Human Rights Campaign Foundation. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/2018-lgbtq-youth-report>
- Kosciw, J. G., Clark, C. M., Truong, N. L., & Zongrone, A. D. (2020). *The 2019 national school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools*. GLSEN. <https://www.glsen.org/research/2019-national-school-climate-survey>
- Meyer, I. H. (2015). Resilience in the study of minority stress and health of sexual and gender minorities. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 2(3), 209–213. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000132>
- National Association of School Psychologists. (1999). *Safe and supportive schools for students who identify as LGBTQ+* [Position Statement].
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2019). *Policy playbook*. [https://www.nasponline.org/Documents/Research%20and%20Policy/Advocacy%20Resources/NASP%20Policy%20Playbook\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.nasponline.org/Documents/Research%20and%20Policy/Advocacy%20Resources/NASP%20Policy%20Playbook_FINAL.pdf)
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2020a). *Federal public policy and legislative platform for the 116th Congress (2019–2021)* [Policy platform].
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2020b). *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists*.
- The Trevor Project. (2020). *National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health 2020*. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Trevor-Project-National-Survey-Results-2020.pdf>
- The Trevor Project. (2019, May 30). *Research brief: fostering the mental health of LGBT youth*. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/2019/05/30/research-brief-fostering-the-mental-health-of-lgbtq-youth>
- Walker, H. (2019, August 16). Here's every state that requires schools to teach LGBTQ+ history. *Out*. <https://www.out.com/news/2019/8/16/heres-every-state-requires-schools-teach-lgbtq-history>
- Waterford. (2021, February 25). *Why understanding equity vs equality in schools can help you create an inclusive classroom*. <https://www.waterford.org/education/equity-vs-equality-in-education/>

Acknowledgment of position statement writing group members: Amy Cannava (Chair), Jill Davidson, Sarah Kiperman, Carrie Lorig, G. Thomas Schanding Jr., Breanne Stewart.

Please cite this document as:

National Association of School Psychologists. (2022). *Safe and Supportive Schools for Transgender and Gender Diverse Students*. [Position Statement].