

Advocating for LGBTQ+ Students with Disabilities

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Summary

Much of education research in recent years has focused on how the bullying and victimization of LGBTQ+ students and youth with disabilities (YWD) can lead to increased challenges and limited opportunities later in life. However, few studies have focused on how bullying and victimization affects students who both have disabilities and identify as LGBTQ+ or on how specific practices could improve both their experiences in school and their success later in life. YWD face the same challenges when it comes to puberty, social identity, and planning for adult roles as their non-disabled peers, but they are more likely to struggle with developing their identity and thinking about their future, particularly if they identify as LGBTQ+, which is why educators and parents must work together to advocate for changes that promote an inclusive, safe, and just environment for all students. In this article, we offer guidance using evidence-based promising practices (EBPPs) to improve educational settings for LGBTQ+ YWD that is informed by our work at the state, local, and classroom levels.

Intended Audience: K-12 Educators and Parents

Keywords: advocacy, curriculum, disability, LGBTQ+, sexuality

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Adolescents typically face challenges when it comes to puberty, social identity, and planning for adulthood. Youth with disabilities (YWD), however, are more likely to struggle than their peers without disabilities (Ferri & Connor, 2010), as these relatively routine developmental challenges may become major obstacles that can lead to low self-esteem, low self-definition, and a limited vision of their future (Ferri & Connor, 2010; Kortering, Braziel, & McClannon, 2010). Their confusion is confounded by a society that promotes stereotypes of heterosexual or asexual identities, leaving YWD sexuality largely unaddressed (Burr, 2015; [das Nair & Butler, 2012](#); East & Orchard, 2014) and difficult to understand as they transition into adulthood ([Sinclair, Unruh, Lindstrom, & Scanlon, 2015](#)).

The confusion that YWD face is further confounded for those who also identify as LGBTQ+. While positive school experiences have grown for LGBTQ+ youth through initiatives (e.g., [Gay Straight Alliance](#), [It Gets Better Project](#), and [The Trevor Project](#)), students with the dual identity of LGBTQ+ YWD struggle to feel accepted and comfortable among their LGBTQ+ or any other peers (Morgan, Mancl, Kaffar, & Ferreira, 2011). So, while LGBTQ+ YWD may have similar academic needs as their YWD peers (Dykes & Thomas, 2015), they have unique unmet social-emotional needs that can leave them feeling socially isolated (Arrieta & Palladino, 2014). These unmet needs are why educators and families must advocate for LGBTQ+ YWD—honoring their stated needs without judgment—so they can lead full and inclusive lives in safe and just environments.

Given the complexity of living and learning with intersectional identities, we have found in our work that for true improvement to happen, capacity must be built at the federal, state, school, and classroom levels, as well as in the home, and must begin with asking students what they need to feel safe, honored, and included. We offer the following guidance to improve educational settings for LGBTQ+ YWD from over 20 years of work as a technical assistance provider, teacher, principal, and parent of an LGBTQ+ child with a disability.

State and Local Policies and Planning

Policy change and action planning are core aspects of advocacy and can significantly increase outcomes for all YWD (Kohler, Gothberg, Fowler, & Coyle, 2016; Test, 2016; Test et al., 2009). Examples of supportive policies at the state and local levels are: (a) anti-bullying

policies, (b) age-appropriate, comprehensive, anti-oppressive curriculum that includes sexuality education, and (c) anti-discriminatory recruitment and hiring practices that prioritize hiring diverse staff, including LGBTQ+ and persons with disabilities. Anti-bullying and harassment policies are especially critical for ensuring safe school environments. The [National School Climate Survey](#) found that nearly 60% of LGBTQ+ students, a disproportionate number, felt unsafe at school, with almost 100% hearing anti-LGBTQ+ remarks at school (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). Inclusive policies are necessary to help combat these realities.

Sex education policies differ from state to state (see National Conference of State Legislatures's [State Policies on Sex Education in Schools](#)). Two states, however, have taken a stand for LGBTQ+ and disability inclusive education. California adopted [Seth's Law](#) in response to a 13-year-old student taking his life. Each district is now required to adopt a policy that prohibits discrimination, harassment, intimidation, and bullying with the law mandating intervention ([CA Education Code Section 234.1\(b\)\(1\)](#)). Additionally, California curriculum honors the contributions of LGBTQ+ people in all areas of study (see [California Safe Schools](#)). New Jersey mandates that all school districts include instruction and curriculum materials that teach students about the political, economic, and social contributions of LGBTQ+ people and individuals with disabilities (Scragg, 2019). These state-level policies are important because access to inclusive curriculum correlates with higher engagement rates and lower dropout rates for both students who identify as LGBTQ+ and YWD (see [The School Completion Toolkit](#)).

Oftentimes, even education leaders with the best intentions don't know how to design, plan, and implement strategies to address the needs of LGBTQ+ YWD (Kohler & Coyle, 2012; Kohler & Gothberg, 2016). Breitrose (2018) offers [The Community Toolbox](#)

to assist planning for advocacy efforts. Practices to implement can be found in the [Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0](#) (Kohler et al., 2016), [Sexuality in Transition Planning](#) (Stevenson, 2015), and [Evidence-Based Practices across the Lifespan](#) (Gothberg, Stegenga, & Cate, 2016).

Figure 1. An overview of *The Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0*.

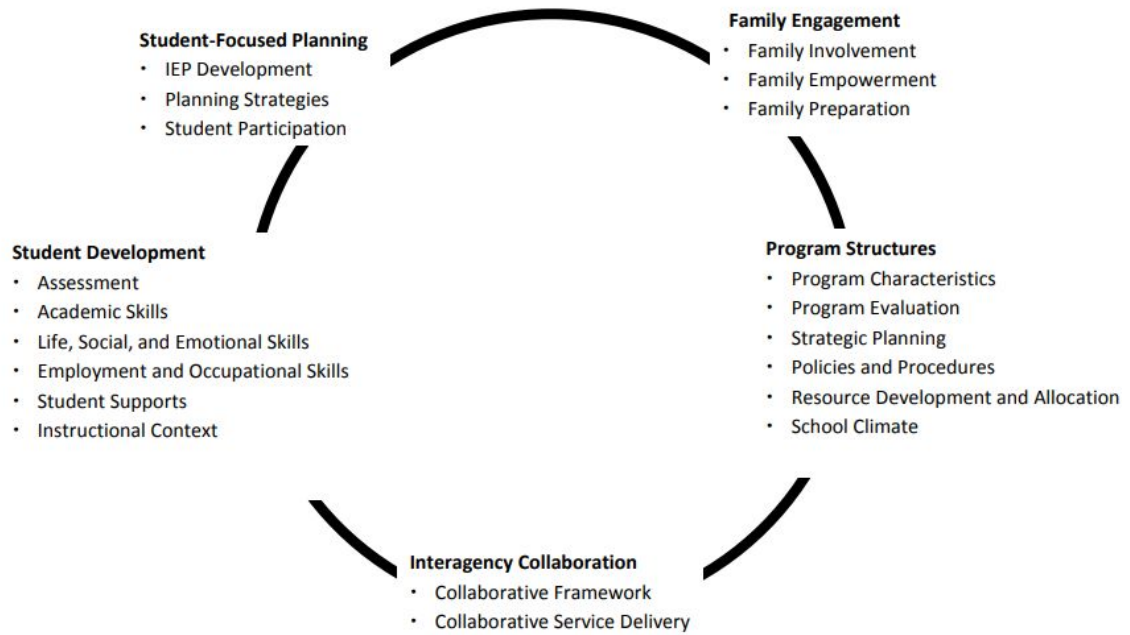


Figure 2. School climate practices as seen in *The Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0*.

School Climate
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• School climate supports a sense of trust and fairness• School has a clearly defined set of expectations, procedures for teaching expectations, and procedures for encouraging expected and school-appropriate behavior• Programs implemented to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills• Students are provided a personalized learning environment and instructional process• School climate is welcoming to students, families, staff, and other stakeholders• School climate provides a safe and nurturing environment for students and adults to feel connected to the school (safe from physical or emotional harm, respect for diversity, fair and supportive practices)• Environment is culturally responsive to students, families, staff, and other stakeholders• Students' sense of engagement and belonging in school is monitored• Staff and students interact outside the classroom• Adult advocates are assigned to students identified as at risk of dropping out

Welcoming and Inclusive Schools

At the school level, we can help build a welcoming and inclusive climate for all students by including books and resources highlighting LGBTQ+ people with disabilities. This curriculum should focus on experiences and accomplishments throughout the school curriculum, so their portrayals aren't limited to their sexual identity or disability. This helps students feel a sense of membership and belonging in their school and community (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017). Inclusive curriculum also promotes social justice, and validates and promotes acceptance of their experiences when they see themselves reflected in texts they read (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015).

While resources are available for elementary school (e.g., [FlynntheCat1](#), 2012; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018; [Welcoming Schools](#), 2019), middle school (e.g., Stepaniuk, 2017), high school (e.g., Razi, 2017) and postsecondary (e.g., Cat & Cress, 2012; Schur & French, n.d.) students, more are needed. With resources in hand, educators must consider the best way to provide sex education curriculum to LGBTQ+ YWD, given that sex education often excludes disabilities. Several resources can assist with embedding sex education holistically, specifically, and authentically (e.g., [AMAZE](#), 2019; [GenderSpectrum](#), 2019; Stangle, 2019).

The strongest predictor for positive outcomes for LGBTQ+ YWD is having supportive educators in their lives (Richmond, 2012). Modeling inclusive language and addressing LGBTQ+ YWD students by their chosen pronouns is one way to show respect for their identity. In addition, [a report by the U.S. Department of Education \(2016\)](#) found that policies that encourage safe, inclusive, and authentic learning from adults who reflect the diversity of students

are more likely to influence environments where all students thrive. Unfortunately, discrimination and fear still exist, as seen in the harassment and eventual [firing of Brett Bigham, the 2104 Oregon Teacher of the Year](#), after he came out at a public event (Maxwell, 2016). So bear in mind, the recruitment, hiring, and *respectful* inclusion of a diverse staff are an explicit display of a school's values, one that speaks volumes to students who are struggling with their own sexual identity.

Principal and Teacher Preparation

Educators tell us they feel underprepared to support either LGBTQ+ students or YWD, and that preparation programs may inadvertently perpetuate discrimination and homophobia by ignoring LGBTQ+ topics and concerns (Gorsky, Davis, & Reiter, 2011). There is also a lack of training in principal preparation programs related to LGBTQ+ advocacy, including social justice programs (O'Malley & Capper, 2015). So, while teachers and principals are in a unique position to dampen the effects of negative school environments, they are rarely provided the support and strategies needed to do so (Gorsky et al., 2011). Therefore, professional development is needed that specifically addresses LGBTQ+ YWD, especially in the general education setting. This could provide educators with (a) knowledge of self, beliefs, and bias, with an awareness of how they shape their students' experiences and (b) knowledge about the LGBTQ+ YWD community. Professional development should start with understanding the preferred language used to identify the group, and extend to how to creating a safe and inclusive culture.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) offers free anti-bias teaching resources, such as [A Classroom of Difference](#), which focuses on inclusion and school climate by addressing issues of bias and bullying at the student, family, and educator levels. Key lesson plans include [Caitlyn Jenner and The Power of Coming Out](#) (ADL, 2015) and [The Sound of Silence in Football: Derrick Coleman](#) (ADL, 2014). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) also provides free resources for activism, including the [Transgender Youth Know Your Rights](#) card that addresses respect, pronouns, restrooms, and more (ACLU, 2014). Lee Airton also offers resources including (a) [They Is My Pronoun](#) (2016) and (b) *Gender: Your Guide* (2018).

Empowering Students at School

Self-determination/self-advocacy is one of the 14 evidence-based predictors of post-school success (Gothberg, Stegenga, & Cate, 2017; Test et al., 2009) and factors into students' postsecondary success (Field & Parker, 2017). Empowering LGBTQ+ YWD with the skills needed to navigate in and outside of school successfully will help create a pathway to success throughout their lives. The school's approach to inclusive policies, culture, curriculum, and language will influence their success. Just as policies are implemented to support gender neutral bathrooms and [GSAs](#), policies are needed to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of all students regarding their sexual orientation or gender. It is also important that there are safeguards for this information so that it is not shared without the student's permission. One example is Michigan's

State Board of Education [*Statement and Guidance on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments for LGBTQ+ Students*](#), which addresses the behaviors of teachers, counselors, nurses, and all others with access to student records.

Empowering Families at Home

Families are often the best advocates for their children (Trusty & Brown, 2005), so family acceptance is critical for all youth, and LGBTQ+ youth, in particular. Family acceptance is also one of the strongest predictors of their mental and physical well-being outcomes (McCormick & Baldrige, 2019). So, families need to know where their child is developmentally and provide the necessary resources at the appropriate time (Wilke & Wilke, 2010). They need to gain an understanding of state laws and school policies that affect their LGBTQ+ and/or YWD (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019) and advocate for them when necessary. When families fail to accept or advocate for their child, the confidence and support of an advocate at school becomes critically important.

Our educational system and our nation are best served by being representative of the vast diversity of the American people ([American Federation of Teachers](#), 2013), so all youth feel safe and welcome. Yet, many LGBTQ+ staff and students still experience the negative impacts associated with homophobia, discrimination, and perceived or actual threats to their physical safety (American Federation of Teachers, 2013). If the lives of our LGBTQ+ YWD are to improve, policy makers, educators and families need to work together as partners in this fight for equity—and the conversation should include the voices of these uniquely vulnerable students—because, in America, every young person regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or ability should have an opportunity to a free appropriate public education and to prepare for a future of their choosing.

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