

—Anthony Russo for Education Week

Inclusivity

EDITOR'S NOTE

Inclusivity strengthens schools. This Spotlight will help you identify inclusion gaps; assess if your schools' data systems are inclusive; evaluate what it takes to create a healthy school environment; learn how to support LGBTQ students; explore the benefits of including disabled students; discover how mental health supports empower students and educators; and begin building inclusive schools.

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—Courtesy of Jordan Anthony

Published February 19, 2020

Autistic School Board Member Pushes for Inclusion, Understanding

By Corey Mitchell

For most of her life, people questioned whether Nicki Vander Meulen belonged—in a traditional K-12 classroom, in law school or on the school board of one of Wisconsin's largest school districts.

When doctors diagnosed Vander Meulen with Asperger's syndrome, attention deficit disorder, and cerebral palsy as a child, her parents fought for her right to attend the neighborhood elementary school.

The school's principal thought she belonged in a school for the severely disabled. Her parents knew otherwise.

Despite a counselor who told her that she'd never graduate from college, Vander Meulen went on to graduate from high school with honors and earn undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Wisconsin—where her law school classmates questioned whether the university providing a notetaker for her constituted an unfair advantage.

Now, a board of education member for

Madison, Wis., schools and a juvenile defense attorney, Vander Meulen may be one of the few people in the nation on the autism spectrum serving in public office.

Vander Meulen spoke with Education Week about her life as a school board member with autism and her work as an advocate for children with disabilities. The interview was edited for length and clarity.

How did you decide to run for school board?

I kept seeing my juvenile clients being stopped and either cited or arrested for striking a [classroom] aide or other physical things that were directly related to disability. These are individuals who would not be found competent and were not found competent in the court of law. I realized the only way to protect these individuals was to get on [the school] board to make sure that the zero-tolerance policy [didn't] continue and to make sure that students with disabilities had rights that were enforced—not just on paper, but [in] practice.

How close are the nation's schools to ensuring that children across the country are being educated in the least restrictive environment?

We don't have the staffing levels. That's part of it. And we're still dealing with the belief that children [with disabilities] can't be educated with their peers. Studies have shown the absolute opposite. It (is) a combination of overcoming the stereotypes, making sure that we have the one-on-one aide, the special ed aide, the behavioral education aide, and oftentimes those are the first positions to get cut or limited when there's a budget problem. And that causes a lot of heartache and a lot of problems because you don't want a tiered education system.

You've talked about battling the misperception that students with disabilities can't learn alongside their peers. Why do you think that persists?

I think it persists because this isn't easy. This is not easy work in a society where you're focused on test scores. When you're focused on funding and funding is limited, you're going to focus on the most expensive [students to educate] because it affects your test scores and it affects your rankings. They're a child and they deserve [an education] no matter what. We need an actual nationwide commitment. These are all our kids and they all deserve an education.

How do you connect with your constituents?

I'm the only board member who visited all 50-plus schools in our district. I've met with parents, [parent teacher organizations] and the students themselves. I need to know how their lives work and I need to come to them. They don't need to come to me. We have this assumption, if you have a problem, you have to [go] to the board. No, the board [should] come to you. We're the public servant, not the other way around. I've actually [met] with large groups, constituents of very different backgrounds because I'm willing to go wherever they need me to go and meet. If I could do that without a driver's license ... I don't see why others can't.

Are accommodations and attention given to your needs as a school board member?

Yes, they are because I have a district that will provide the accommodations, but not

every [school] does. I want to bring it up to the forefront that this is a major issue, It's a civil rights issue, it's an equal rights issue. Sometimes the message doesn't get there.

(Editor's Note: In December 2019, the Hartford Courant wrote about Sarah Selvaggi Hernandez, a former Enfield, Conn., school board member with autism. She sued the school board, alleging she was discriminated against because of her disability.)

Would you encourage other people with disabilities to serve on their local school boards?

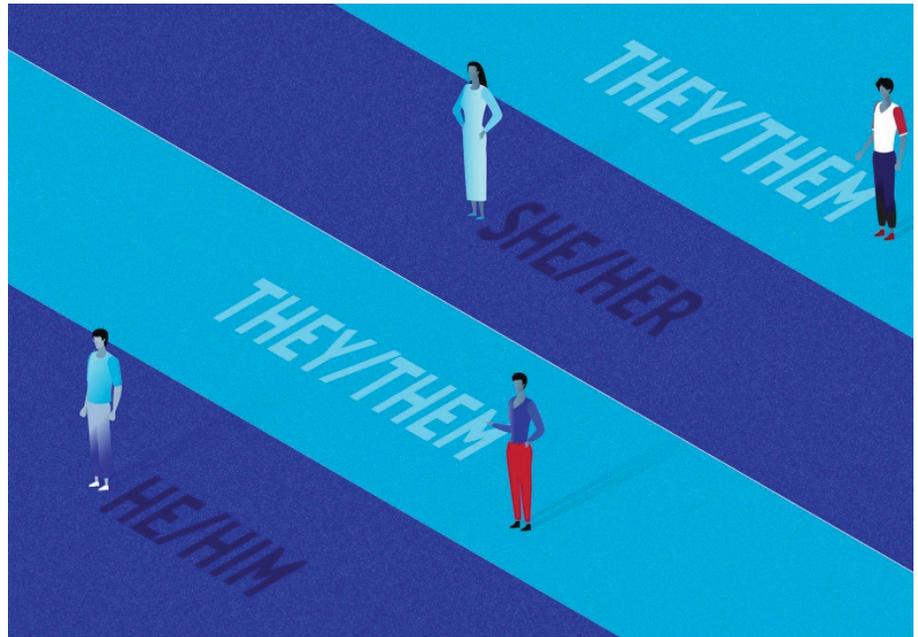
Absolutely, I find this incredibly enriching. In order to have a seat at the table you have to play a role politically, as well. These [are] major, major decisions on how resources are used and how children are educated. The only way you can fix the system is from the inside out. You need to hear unrepresented voices and oftentimes individuals with disabilities have little or no contact and that needs to change.

You've served on the school board since 2017. What's been the biggest surprise during that time?

How little the public knows about disability rights. They don't know so they don't understand, oftentimes, how they work or what accommodations are necessary. We're not getting an unfair advantage we're just leveling the playing field and making it equitable, but to a lot of people, this is a concept that now requires additional [education].

You helped draft the original version of Wisconsin's Public Act 125, which regulated the use of restraint and seclusion in state schools. Does the state's law need to be updated?

We are now tweaking that to make it a stronger law, requiring the Department of Public Instruction to be notified when these seclusion and restraint techniques are used and to ban the prone position completely. Kids can't learn if they're afraid to be hurt. They're afraid they're going to be physically segregated, separated, or physically controlled. I don't think I'd be able to go to school and not be in fear. These techniques, I understand [using it during an] emergency situation, that is one thing. Many schools use this a behavioral tool. That to me is not OK. ■



—iStock/Getty Images Plus

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Students Embrace a Wide Range of Gender Identities. Most School Data Systems Don't

Concerns about the consequences of adding more gender identification options loom over efforts to make software systems more inclusive.

By Benjamin Herold

Back in the fall of 2020, a few staff members from the Philadelphia public school system's central office brought a vexing problem to Sarah Galbally, the district's lobbyist in the state capital of Harrisburg.

They'd already advanced a local policy aimed at making transgender and gender nonconforming students feel more welcome at school. Those kids now had the right to be addressed by the name and pronouns that corresponded to their gender identity.

But the district's student information system, used to digitally track everything from attendance to grades to class assignments, still forced students to identify as either male or female. And the software couldn't be altered without first tweaking state guidelines for how schools report information into Pennsylvania's longitudinal data system—a

change that the Republican-controlled Pennsylvania legislature and many of the 499 other school districts in the state, which often serve smaller, more conservative rural communities, were unlikely to support.

So Galbally decided to tread lightly. During the 2021 legislative session, she omitted Philadelphia's request for a nonbinary gender option from the written policy wish list circulated among other elected officials, instead communicating the district's desire directly to the office of Democratic Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf.

"We are aware of the political atmosphere in Harrisburg, so we really tried to use back channels on our own on this one," Galbally said in mid-December 2021, a week after the School District of Philadelphia announced that students could now identify as nonbinary in Infinite Campus, the student information system that the district uses.

With public schools now a battleground in raging culture wars over diversity,

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equity, and inclusion, similarly messy processes are playing out all across the country. In Washington, D.C., the U.S. Department of Education is currently seeking comment on a proposal that would allow those districts that collect data on nonbinary students to report such information to the federal government—a change that would represent a significant departure from current practice, in which the department requires students to be labeled either male or female.

But some states and software providers are unwilling to wait and have already started down their own paths. Infinite Campus, for example, now offers gender options beyond male and female to students in about 650 districts spread across 17 states, according to Julie Lane, the company's chief product officer.

One problem with the resulting patchwork is inconsistency. The gender options available to students range from “nonbinary” in places like California, Pennsylvania, and Virginia to “other” in Rhode Island to “transgender” or “prefer not to identify” in Utah.

Another is uncertainty. No one is comprehensively tracking all the different approaches to collecting data on students' gender. And given the backlashes over bathroom access for transgender students and school libraries offering books that explicitly challenge the idea that gender is limited to male or female, there's plenty of incentive for district leaders to avoid open public discussion about whether their technology systems affirm the full range of students' gender identities and sexual orientations.

Experts, however, warn that such factors may be preventing the nation's K-12 school system from hashing out a critical larger question: Do the benefits of collecting information on students who are nonbinary or transgender or queer or gender-fluid outweigh the potential risks?

“Good intentions are not enough,” said Paige Kowalski, the executive vice president of the Data Quality Campaign, a nonprofit that advocates for better data use by states and schools. “Every data element you collect can be misused by whoever has power and access to the information.”

Schools are making their own moves to be more gender-inclusive

Although a clear national picture is not yet available, there are some clues about where the K-12 sector is headed when it comes to collecting data on an expanded range of student gender identities.

In 2019, for example, popular ed-tech company Clever added a new gender option to its platform, which helps schools and software providers more easily share student information. Two years later, at least 1,000 of the districts using Clever now count at least one student who identifies their gender as “X,” meaning other or anything that is not strictly male or female, rather than “M” or “F.” At least eight student information systems that integrate with Clever are also on board with the change.

“I think having gender values in our systems that reflect students' identities is critical,” said Dan Carroll, Clever's co-founder and chief technology officer.

And PowerSchool, one of the most widely used student information systems in the world, already offers district users the option to customize fields related to gender and legal and preferred names, including providing gender-neutral options, according to a company spokesperson.

At the district level, meanwhile, the School District of Philadelphia's decision to add a nonbinary gender option to its student information system follows similar moves by public schools in places like Washington, D.C., Minneapolis, and Montgomery County, Md., as well as Indiana Connections Academy, a statewide online charter school.

The change was only possible because of the district's carefully calibrated push on state officials.

“They were certainly instrumental in getting us thinking about this,” said Julie Kane, the policy director for the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Kane said the department was hoping the federal government would institute the change first. When that didn't happen, Pennsylvania officials decided to tweak the “data dictionary” for their own statewide longitudinal data system, known as PIMS. The system's traditional gender field is still in place. It is still mandatory and still only allows for male or female options, consistent with state and federal law. But Pennsylvania officials also added a new field labeled “gender identity,” which is supposed to “reflect the student's personal conception if they are ‘nonbinary or not listed,’” according to the technical manual associated with the system. School systems can choose whether or not to use the new field. Due to federal reporting requirements, even those students who do select the nonbinary gender option will also have the gender they were assigned at birth reported to the state.

“

Good intentions are not enough. Every data element you collect can be misused by whoever has power and access to the information.”

PAIGE KOWALSKI

Executive vice president,
Data Quality Campaign

No new legislation or regulations were required to alter the data dictionary. Kane described the change as “within the administrative authority of the department.” She defended the process behind it.

“This was not a secret,” Kane said. “Did we have meetings where we sat people down and said, ‘This is what we're going to do’? No. However, we do have a data advisory group that is representative. We also have an equity and inclusion task force that we discussed this with, and we put our manuals out for comment.”

The Pennsylvania education department won't know how many districts choose to take advantage of the new option until data collection for the 2021-22 school year is complete.

Already, though, the changes have made ripples in Philadelphia. About 50 of the district's 115,000 students requested to be identified as nonbinary within a week of the option being provided, district officials said. Parental permission was not required to make the switch, causing consternation among some conservative news outlets. Students are advised on the implications of identifying as nonbinary, information that will now show up on their report cards and other official documents.

The hope is that those children will feel more seen, respected, and cared for when they're using the software systems in their schools, said Rachel Holzman, the deputy chief for the Philadelphia district's Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities.

“Every kid has a right to own who they are, be comfortable with the name and gender they're choosing, and be referred to by their chosen pronouns,” she said.

“

It is bad practice if data are lumped together during analysis in ways that ignore or obscure how students wished to record themselves.”

KEVIN GUYAN

Research fellow, University of Glasgow, Scotland; and the author of *Queer Data: Using Gender, Sex, and Sexuality Data for Action*

Among the groups in agreement is GLSEN, a national nonprofit that advocates for more affirming learning environments for LGBTQ+ students and has long called for more inclusive data systems in the K-12 sector. Solid majorities of transgender and nonbinary students report feeling unsafe in school, said Aaron Ridings, the group's director of public policy. Collecting more and better information on their experiences will help educators and policymakers craft more effective policies, programs, and supports.

“What we've learned over the past 30 years is that when a school is safer and more inclusive for a Black trans or nonbinary girl, it is safer and more inclusive for all young people,” Ridings said.

Culture wars, logistical challenges, and unintended consequences are all concerns

Spokespersons for the Republican heads of the education committees in the Pennsylvania Senate and House of Representatives did not respond to requests for comment.

But given the fights over gender identity in schools around the state and country, it seems likely that efforts to change school data systems to include nonbinary options will meet resistance.

And even some observers who generally support more inclusive data collection practices urge caution.

One set of concerns involves logistics.

Despite federal laws that have been on the books for nearly two decades, more than a dozen states still don't report student performance data separately for male and female students, said Kowalski of the Data Quality Campaign. That raises questions about their willingness and ability to handle a broader range of gender identities.

Complicating matters, no consensus has yet emerged on what a fully inclusive list of gender identities—which hypothetically might include a deep well of options, from androgyne to omnigender—should include.

“Data quality can suffer when too few gender response options are provided, as well as too many response options,” said Kevin Guyan, a research fellow at the University of Glasgow in Scotland and the author of *Queer Data: Using Gender, Sex, and Sexuality Data for Action*. He recommended that students themselves be involved in the design of the systems that collect data about them.

Then there are the thorny questions about whether and how information on students' gender identities will be used.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education, for example, doesn't yet have any plans to analyze or publicly report whatever information on nonbinary students it receives from districts. That could end up undermining the desire to be more inclusive.

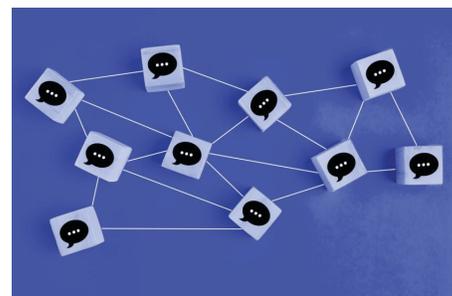
“It is bad practice if data are lumped together during analysis in ways that ignore or obscure how students wished to record themselves,” Guyan said.

And while proponents hope that districts and state education agencies might someday use data that captures a broader range of students' gender identities to shine a light on problems such as bullying and chronic absenteeism among nonbinary students, there's also a very real fear that such information could someday be misused.

During World War II, for example, federal officials used U.S. Census information to send Japanese-Americans to internment camps. More recently, immigration advocates raised alarms about federal agencies possibly seeking to use data on migrant children and English-language learners to target undocumented immigrants for deportation.

The reality, said Kowalski of the Data Quality Campaign, is that data can almost always be used to cut multiple ways.

“Information is power,” she said. “If you control information, you have a way to control the story that's being told about what's happening in our schools and communities.” ■



—ca.gkansa/nr/iStock/Getty

Published November 2, 2021

6 Ways to Communicate Better With Parents of Students With Learning Differences

By Marina Whiteleather

For students who learn or think differently, a strong network of support is key. That network includes two critical players: teachers and parents. During the pandemic, it's been harder than ever to bridge the communication gap between families and schools, especially during remote learning.

How can these two groups develop better strategies and avenues for effective communication? That's the central question we invited our Twitter followers to answer during a Twitter chat last month. We tapped Michelle Lassiter, an Editorial Research and Expert Relations Associate for Understood, a nonprofit that is dedicated to helping those who learn and think differently, to co-host the online discussion and provide her expert insights and resources.

Parents and educators joined together, sharing what they saw as some of the biggest obstacles to facilitating these discussions and presented some solutions. Teachers cited their struggles getting parents involved in the learning process for their kids, while parents shared their confusion over when to initiate these conversations and their fear of being judged as a parent.

When it comes to teaching students with learning differences, everyone's experience is unique. But there are some tips that can help

both parents and educators come together to advocate for these students.

Here are 6 key lessons learned about facilitating better communication, as told by the chat participants:

1. Treat parents as partners in the process.

“Be intentional about inviting parents to communicate and play an active role in a child’s education. This helps increase parents’ involvement and confidence in the process.”

— Michelle Lassiter

2. Focus on what the student has been doing well.

Highlighting the progress a student has been making before diving into their problem areas is a great way to show parents that you’re invested in their child’s academic growth, experts said.

“Start with strengths.”

— Tracy Mayhue

3. Authenticity matters.

“Be genuine. If you’re a teacher, allow parents to get to know you. If you’re a parent, bring your true self to the table. If we want to communicate with one another, we need to show each other who we are and make each other feel comfortable.”

— Michelle Lassiter

4. Learn from each other and play into your strengths.

“There has to be a lot of patience on both sides. A parent should learn from an experienced teacher, and a teacher from a parent who knows their child best. The door should be opened for the student.”

— Olivera Stanković

5. Be flexible and adapt to meet each student where they are.

Communication styles and methods can differ between families. Some might respond well to email, while others might prefer phone calls or text instead. Adjust your approach to best fit each family’s needs.

“We have to find a way for parents to engage in those conversations in their ways, not ours.”

— Carmen Kenton

6. Share examples from your own life to connect.

“I always give an example from my life. I insert a short anecdote with my children so that the parent can see that I am also an ordinary person, that I also have a problem, that not everything is very easy for me in life.”

— Olivera Stanković ■



Mashea Ashton, principal and founder of Digital Pioneers Academy in Washington, D.C., interacts with colleagues remotely from her Virginia home.

Published October 13, 2020

The Essential Traits of a Positive School Climate

By Arianna Prothero

The single most important job of the principal is creating a school environment where students feel safe, supported, engaged, and accepted, according to many child development and school leadership experts.

The reason?

Children who are afraid of bullying or fights have less bandwidth for learning. Negative emotions, such as feeling alienated or misunderstood, make it harder for the brain to process information and to learn.

On the flip side, brain development flourishes when children feel emotionally and physically safe, when they know they have adults who care about them, and when they are challenged in their learning.

It’s no wonder, then, that research has found that a positive school climate can improve students’ academic achievement, attendance, engagement, and behavior, as well as teacher satisfaction and retention.

While this may all seem like a no-brainer—of course students learn better when they feel safe and seen—the practice of creating

and sustaining a positive school climate can be extremely difficult. School climate involves everyone connected to the school—students, teachers, support staff, administrators and parents—and almost all aspects of their experiences in school—from how teachers address students to whether the school building is kept clean.

What, then, are the hallmarks of a healthy school climate and what can principals do to nurture and sustain one?

Here are four widely agreed upon components of a healthy school environment, why they matter, and how principals can improve them.

Strong relationships are the foundation.

Do students find it easy to talk to teachers in their school? Do they feel there is a teacher who would notice their absence?

Positive and stable relationships among staff, students, and caregivers undergird a school’s climate. It’s vital that children feel they are known and supported in school. And while this may sound obvious, it is something that many schools struggle with.

“We have found that a lot of people don’t understand what that means, it’s not about social relationships,” says Elaine Allensworth, the director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research which has extensively studied principals’ roles in shaping school climate. “Students want to know that their teachers are going to help them succeed in school.”

Strong relationships not only help students feel safe and accepted in their school, they also help students build resilience to cope with adverse childhood experiences.

There are innumerable strategies for building relationships. Teachers can greet each student as they enter the classroom. They can conduct daily check-in exercises where they ask students how they are feeling. Principals in elementary schools can “loop” classrooms keeping teachers with the same group of students for multiple years. At the middle and high school levels, they can create an advisory system where teachers work with a small, consistent group of students weekly or daily to build a sense of community.

Students aren’t the only ones who benefit from investing in relationships. Stronger connections between teachers and students makes teachers feel like their work is more effective and closer relationships among teachers helps them feel more supported. Caregivers are more comfortable asking the school for help for their child if they feel they have strong relationships with their children’s teachers and principal.

Principals can forge deeper relationships with parents by actively seeking their input on how school is working for their children—either by asking teachers to reach out to parents for informal chats or distributing surveys to families to fill out.

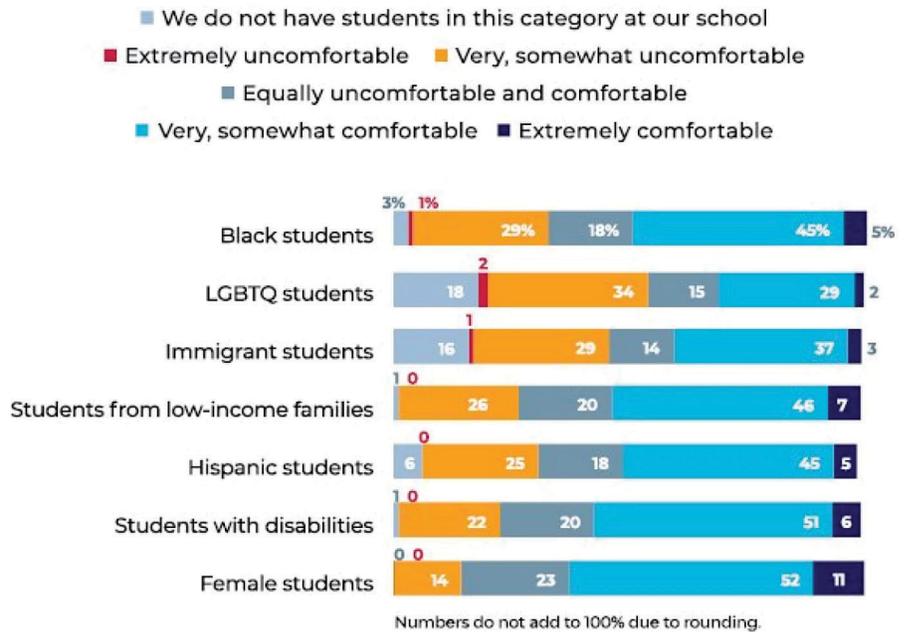
Principals can help foster positive connections among teachers—whether in person or remotely—by setting a few minutes aside during staff meetings for exercises that build relationships. One simple idea: a gratitude circle where staff members are given time to reflect on small things their coworkers have done for them recently and to directly thank one another for the favor or kindness.

High academic expectations, yes, but also strong supports.

Do teachers feel that it is part of their job to prepare students to succeed in college? Does the school encourage students to take challenging classes no matter their race, ethnicity, or cultural background?

Another hallmark of a healthy school climate is one where educators have high academic expectations for all students.

How comfortable do you believe the following groups of students feel at your school?



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center, 2020

Educators assist students in setting meaningful academic goals for themselves and promote a strong academic culture where post-secondary education is a goal.

But it’s not enough for teachers to, say, constantly talk to students about going to college or following their dreams. Schools must also provide students with the tools they need to meet the expectations they are raising for students.

High expectations without support just sets students up for failure, undermining their confidence, says Allensworth.

Principals must carve out space in the school schedule to give students the extra time and help they need, said Jack Baldermann, the principal of Westmont High School in Illinois. For example, “we have a period every Wednesday at the end of the day ... where students and teachers can work on their assessment information and fine-tune where they are strong and where they can get stronger,” he said.

Additionally, that support should be given automatically. Principals should create support systems where students must opt-out of help rather than opt-in, said Allensworth.

Whether a student struggling academically gets the additional support they need shouldn’t depend on a student feeling comfort-

able enough to ask for help or a teacher taking it upon themselves to follow up with a student.

Consistency in expectations for behavior and discipline for misbehavior.

Do adults reward students for positive behavior? Are school rules applied equally to all students? Do students see discipline as fair?

A safe and orderly environment is another key aspect of a good school climate, and rules and discipline are tools that principals and teachers use to make that happen. But schools must have clear expectations for behavior, teach students how to meet those expectations, and acknowledge when students are doing so.

In a school with a healthy climate, principals, teachers, and staff focus on prevention. When discipline is used, it’s attuned to preserving relationships and respecting students’ dignity.

Discipline, when doled out, should be appropriate to students’ developmental stage and proportional to their behavior, taking care to ensure there are procedures for students with disabilities, and that all students are disciplined following established rules.

Students should be taken out of class only

as a last resort, and if they are removed, they should be placed in an alternative setting that provides them with academic instruction.

There are many strategies for improving school discipline such as using restorative justice practices and positive behavioral interventions and supports.

But whatever strategy a school is using to address misbehavior, it is of utmost importance that rules be consistently enforced among all students regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and disability state, said Francis Huang, an associate professor in the college of education at the University of Missouri and an expert on school climate.

When rules aren't applied equitably, students don't see them as fair, he said. "If they don't think they're fair, it may challenge students to test those rules."

To make sure rules are being applied consistently, principals can start by reviewing the discipline data to look for trends as well as the procedures for discipline referrals.

A next step is to directly ask students, teachers, and parents—either in person or through anonymous surveys—whether they feel school rules are applied equitably and discipline is fair.

Any changes to discipline policies can become a major source of friction between principals and teachers, so it's important principals clearly communicate new expectations to staff and provide them with adequate training on how to implement new discipline programs.

Regular collection of feedback, followed by adjustments.

Once the school starts a new program, does leadership follow up to make sure that it's working?

Underneath the robust relationships, high but supported academic expectations, and thoughtful discipline, school leaders who are successful at setting and sustaining a healthy school climate are consistently gathering feedback on how the school community is experiencing school life.

This is primarily done by surveying students, staff, and parents a few times a year, asking the kinds of questions posed throughout this article.

Combined with data on discipline, attendance, test scores, and even small focus groups, principals can get a quantitative and qualitative read on the health of the school's environment and how to improve it.

Not having data is like trying to fly a plane without any instruments, said Huang. Without data, principals can't know what adjustments need to be made to stay aloft or how far

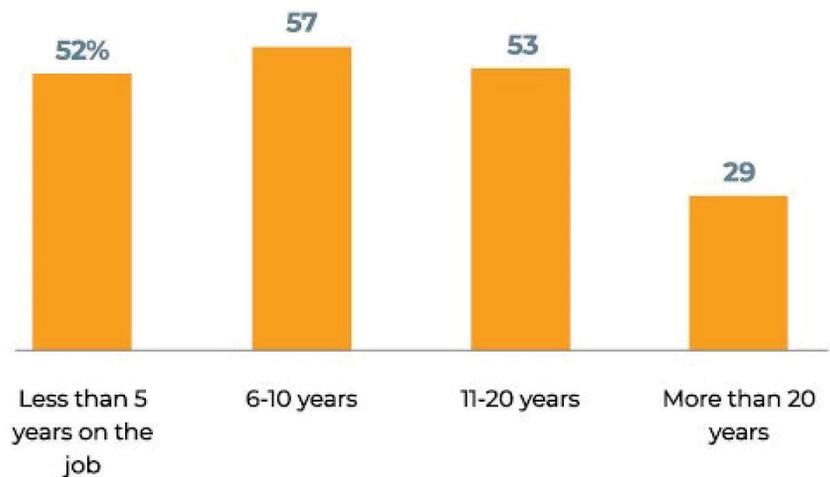
To what extent, if any, has the professional development you have received as a K-12 educator addressed the following topics?



Numbers do not add to 100% due to rounding.

SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center, 2020

Have you ever engaged in assessments of your ability to shift cultural perspective and appropriately adapt behavior to cultural differences and commonalities?



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center, 2020

they are from their destination or goals.

Data illuminates weaknesses that need shoring up and provides feedback on whether a new intervention is working and improving school climate.

Data is also important for supporting equitable outcomes because it can help unearth inequities among student groups, such as whether students of a particular race are getting suspended at higher rates or report feeling less supported by the adults in their school.

It's important to remember that not all students will experience their school the same way and that individual students' perceptions of their school's environment and culture matter to their learning.

Share the data widely—incorporate it into staff meetings, parent meetings, share it in newsletters and townhalls—to broaden its impact and communicate the importance of building and keeping a positive school climate.

Other components of school climate:

There isn't total consensus on all the components that add up to a healthy school climate and culture.

While some definitions focus on the social and academic aspects of school climate, the concept can also include physical features such as how clean the building is and whether the lights and heating work properly, which creates a welcoming environment and demonstrates to students that school leaders care about their comfort. Procedural considerations such as having emergency plans in place, which factor into feelings of safety, can also fall into the school climate bucket, as can community-building extracurriculars such as clubs and events.

But the bottom line, school leadership experts say, is that principals must decide what the definition of a positive climate is for their school—one that is relevant to their community and based on research—before they can take steps to strengthen it. ■

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—Swikar Patel

Nellie Aspel has ensured that the Cleveland County school district is responsive to the social-emotional needs of students and staff.

Published February 19, 2020

Building a Culture of Inclusion For All Students

By Christina A. Samuels

Nellie Aspel's career path—and her passion—came to her when she was younger than some of the children she now serves.

To keep her bright student occupied, Aspel's 2nd grade teacher allowed her to help in a classroom for children with disabilities, held in an isolated part of her school building.

"I've never even seen those kids on the playground before. Why are they off by themselves?" Aspel, 62, remembered asking her grandfather. He replied that they were lucky to even be at school at all.

In retrospect, he didn't intend to be harsh, Aspel said. School exclusion was simply a fact for many students with disabilities in the 1960s. Nevertheless, "that had an impact on me," Aspel said. "I do feel like I had a sense of that didn't make sense—they're kids like me."

The guiding light of special education is

inclusion: ensuring that students with disabilities are provided opportunities to participate in school life to the fullest extent possible.

But for Aspel, who oversees special education for the 14,100-student Cleveland County, N.C. school district, embracing students deemed difficult to teach extends beyond the population of students who have a disability label. Many students in the county need help even if they aren't officially identified with disabilities, particularly children who struggle with mental health.

"If you can provide mental health supports, it's going to just impact everything," said Aspel, officially the executive director of exceptional children. "Sometimes we have to stop and teach social-emotional learning skills, before we can provide those academic skills."

And that support extends to educators as well. Aspel also ensures that school staff are equipped to meet a student's needs, or to steer them to a professional provider who can offer deeper assistance.

Aspel encounters two mini ponies, part of a program that offers riding lessons to students with disabilities. Her work seeks to include students in all facets of school life.

“People get frustrated when they have no options and no tools and no support and no understanding,” Aspel said.

Under Aspel’s leadership, the rural district, located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, has woven a safety net for students with mental health issues from mild to severe. The district has managed to do this through artful braiding of grant money, which supplements the district’s local, state, and federal funding. That extra financial support is essential in a district where more than half of students come from families eligible for food stamps; the district’s poverty level allows it to offer free lunch and breakfast to all students. About 60 percent of the student body is white, 27 percent are Black, and 7 percent are Hispanic.

Cleveland County’s commitment to providing mental health services for its students is also born of necessity, Aspel said. The county is home to dozens of therapeutic foster care providers and group homes that offer residential supports for children with mental health challenges. In 2019, the district served more than 100 students who lived in one of those placements.

“We want kids to academically strive, but in reality, to be able to maximize that, we have to be able to meet those other needs as well,” said Superintendent Stephen Fisher. “You just can’t do one thing and not build up the entire scaffold of support for students.”

In Cleveland County, staff in all schools have been trained in recognizing suicide risk in students. All schools also have in place an entry protocol for children who are transferring in from a mental health setting, an alternative school or a correctional setting—a change from previous years, when staff members might have been in the dark about a student’s emotional or behavioral needs.

The district has also entered into partnerships with community mental health providers, allowing them to provide services to identified students during the school day. More than 4,000 outpatient therapy sessions were provided to students at school during the 2018-19 school year.

Plus, the school district is piloting several other programs, including one that is intended to strengthen the district’s multitiered systems of support framework. Another district initia-



—Swikar Patel

LESSONS FROM THE LEADER

- **Have a plan:** Develop a vision and get stakeholder involvement. It also means thinking about how you are going to train new people, and how you are going to assess when changes are needed. Provide the long-term coaching necessary for “a new program” to become “how we do business.”
- **Build a supportive partnership:** You can’t lone-wolf it. New initiatives take all the key stakeholders working outside of their silos. To overcome challenges such as turfism, resistance to change, and gatekeeping, people must believe that at the end of the process things will be better and that their contribution made a difference.
- **Never give up:** Be determined. Be patient. Be focused. There will be challenges, obstacles, and opposition you did not anticipate. Be willing to adjust and negotiate, but never compromise on doing the right thing and doing things right.

tive, called the Community Resiliency Model, trains not only school staff and students, but parents and the community at large, on methods to reduce the impact of emotional trauma.

In 2018, Cleveland Schools was one of three North Carolina districts awarded a portion of an \$8.8 million grant from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Dubbed Project ACTIVATE (Advancing Coordinated and Timely Interventions, Awareness, Training, and Education) the money is meant to cut the need for

school discipline, reduce dropout rates, and train school staff to recognize and respond to student mental health needs.

North Carolina chose Cleveland County as a pilot district because the district has already shown success with other programs it uses to improve student behavior.

“The uniqueness of this grant is there’s not a scripted approach,” said Sherry Thomas, North Carolina’s state director of special education and an undergraduate classmate of Aspel’s. Cleveland County is “able to take the tools, a

Building a Positive K-12 Data Culture

Based on research conducted by Whiteboard Advisors for the PowerSchool-commissioned report, *From Sight to Vision: When Data Use Becomes Data Culture*,¹ by Liz Cohen and Evo Popoff



Introduction

Data culture is a critical component of strategic planning for schools and districts focused on continuous improvement. **But what exactly is data culture, and how can it be built or improved?**

Defined in a recent Forbes' article, it's "the collective behavior and beliefs of people in how they use (or don't use) data for decision-making."²

In other words, while factual data is the information you collect, data culture involves harnessing the power of that data. Data culture is more of a mindset, and ultimately part of creating a culture of innovation.

A school or district's data culture depends on not just collecting data, but on being willing to act on it. Today's ability to collect and analyze a significant amount of student data holds the promise for education. By painting a complete picture of the whole child, one that gives educators and administrators the ability to see each one as an individual, we have the potential to truly personalize learning. In the process, we can support teachers with informed instruction and build a more equitable educational system.

What Makes a Data Culture Strong?

For K-12 organizations, a positive data culture involves leveraging all kinds of data—from attendance and engagement to summative assessments and climate surveys—to create better outcomes, optimize operations, and help students learn. To get there, and achieve a strong data culture, it starts at the top with an organization's leaders. Superintendents and their leadership team members must make ongoing, robust, and visible efforts to improve their outcomes.

Collaboration, cooperation, and integration are keys to a healthy data culture. You can't silo positive data culture within a few forward-thinking individuals. It's dependent on bringing together both the data and the people who analyze it.

By becoming role models for school officials, teachers, and staff, district leaders and IT departments can create an environment that feels safe to try something new. From there, every member of the organization can feel supported to embrace the power of data as a viable tool for improving student performance.

BASED ON TRUST

It's critical to protect education data. K-12 cyberattacks are expected to worsen in 2022,³ and educators have a legal and moral responsibility to safeguard student, school, and district information.

The second element of trust is with teachers and other staff who need to believe that classroom data is a tool to inform instruction, rather than just a way to expose ineffective teaching strategies. For teachers to embrace a data culture, they can't fear that poor student performance data will be used against them.

Finally, trust also comes in the form of believing in the data you're using to inform instruction. "In speaking with passionate educators and administrators around the U.S., we've learned that **creating a true 'data culture' means building an environment where everyone believes that using data is essential to achieving instructional and operational goals.** The entire community—educators, administrators, and parents—must trust the data, and most importantly, appreciate its value and importance in supporting each student's unique educational journey," says Jean-Claude Brizard, President & CEO, Digital Promise.⁴



READ THE ENTIRE REPORT

From Sight to Vision II: When Data Use Becomes Data Culture

Learn what makes a data culture strong, as well as what makes a bad data culture.

In this whitepaper, you'll read examples of how different school districts have achieved positive results and best practices to improve or create better data cultures (and avoid fostering bad ones).

[Get the report >](#)



MEASURE WHAT MATTERS MOST

With the increasing dependence on digital tools and collection capabilities, we have more readily available real-time data than ever before. But that doesn't mean we have to embrace all of it, especially with a teacher's time already at or past capacity. Too much

data, especially information that's superfluous or not intimately connected to performance or growth, can be overwhelming.

"Just because we can collect data doesn't necessarily mean we should," says Melissa Tebbenkamp, CIO, Raytown Quality Schools, MO. "You can be a really data-rich district, and you can value data, but that doesn't mean you have to have every piece of data."

As an example of using data wisely, focusing on information that correlates with your district's strategic plan ensures you aren't wasting time and energy collecting every piece of data possible at the expense of making that data actionable.

SHARE BEST PRACTICES

Teachers are each others' best advocates and collaborators. When they share successes and practical experiences of using data, they can get fellow teachers on board and help them overcome obstacles to embrace a positive data culture.

Districts can use data to identify high-performing classrooms and then connect those teachers with ones who are struggling. The goal is to share that knowledge to learn how to replicate success.

BUILDING INCLUSIVITY THROUGH DATA

The goal of data is to inform decisions for continual improvement, which can sometimes mean uncovering inequities. These gaps, which may be subjectively overlooked or a result of bias, can impact family engagement and understanding of their child's learning needs.

According to a recent Digital Promise blog, "Data equity applies an equity-centered lens and mindset to ensure data is collected, analyzed, interpreted, and shared with diverse stakeholders without bias or exclusion. It enables schools and districts to make informed decisions by ensuring diverse stakeholders are authentically engaged throughout the data cycle."¹⁵

Improving your understanding of how various stakeholders use data differently builds awareness of the importance of inclusivity. You can use the findings to repair damages and rebuild trust.



Best Practices for a Strong Data Culture

Innovative district leaders can use data to transform their schools—and the lives of their students. Here are best practices to build a robust data culture to help schools and districts use data more effectively:

- **Start with training on why data matters.** Embracing a new data culture can be challenging for school administrators or teachers who don't automatically understand the role that data can play in informing instruction and improving student achievement. Help make the connection between data and its positive impact when used effectively, and more stakeholders can better grasp its importance.
- **Exercise patience.** Building a data culture involves change, which naturally can meet resistance. If you allow time and paced growth, attitudes have a way of shifting once staff begins seeing the connection between leveraging data and improving academic performance.

- **Provide continuous support to educators.** Embracing a new data culture can be overwhelming. That's why it's essential to focus on the application of the data to inform instructional practices instead of getting bogged down in the data collection process.

Embarking on the Journey to Improve Data Culture

To fully embrace a data culture, everyone within the organization needs to fully understand how data can improve academic performance and help meet strategic goals. Providing that clear explanation is a critical step in any school or district's journey to improve their data culture, and by doing so, continuously improve and meet their strategic goals.

With a culture of innovation, you can harness the power of your data and act on it to make significant improvements in students' lives, as well as within the classroom, school, and entire district.



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little bit of funding, and they're creating that support based on that need," she said.

With all of these initiatives, the overarching goal is for student mental health issues to be addressed early and efficiently, instead of school staff just bouncing from crisis to crisis.

And that's a change from when Aspel became the special education director more than 10 years ago.

"We were reactive, and I felt like I was a fire chief. I just ran around trying to put out these horrible fires. And I thought, 'we cannot maintain this. We are not in front of anything. We are a day late and a dollar short all the time,'" she said.

She recalled that when she started as director, a number of students were on homebound instruction—"out of sight, out of mind"—because of behavioral issues. She brought them back into regular school with supports. A visit to a "chaotic" day treatment program for students with mental health needs led to her work to create a research-based therapy model alternative for students at their own schools.

Teri Putnam, the district's lead mental health liaison, pointed to a single "port of entry" for students entering school as a particularly successful initiative spearheaded by Aspel. The process allows all relevant district staff to quickly be brought up to speed on that child's needs—and ensures that a student has the help he or she needs to remain in school.

"Any child that comes into our county from a residential facility, a group home or a foster home, they come through a single portal," Putnam said. That means extra work tracking down records, which may be housed in more than one previous district.

But "you don't just throw a kid who needs multiple supports in a school," Putnam said. "We feel really good about not just dumping kids and setting them up to fail."

With multiple programs underway, Aspel's goal is to build a sturdy and sustainable culture that isn't dependent on one leader.

"Nellie will not let you move forward until you have this very well-thought-out implementation plan. What is the best thing for these people at this location?" said Ryan Etheridge, who is the district's Project ACTIVATE evaluator and coach. "If you don't have a place to support [these programs] it's not worth implementing."

But the work also goes deeper than just making sure programs are properly launched, Etheridge said.

"I remember being in [Aspel's] office one time, and she said, 'You know what? I can deal with working with ignorant people. I can teach them to be better. But I can't deal with people who aren't kind to kids. That's where these things come from, when you start with caring for kids first.'"

While the district has revamped its mental health supports for students and training for teachers, it has also made it clear that teachers are not to take on the job of mental health professionals.

Chris Bennett, the principal of the 730-student Burns Middle, is piloting some of the expanded work on building student emotional resilience.

"Teachers have been supportive," Bennett said. "We went in with the understanding that if we can remove the social and emotional barriers that are getting in the way of core instruction, they will be more successful in their classes."

With that said, teachers are also told that there are trained counselors available to grapple with problems that are too serious for an educator to handle.

"We don't want teachers having deep conversations with kids about suicide," Bennett said. "We want them to refer out."

Thomas, the state special education director, said Aspel and her colleagues are always willing to share with other districts what they have learned, and the federal grant will help the county share its knowledge.

An important part of her job, Aspel said, is helping district staff understand that mental health needs mean students need continuous support. That can help steer administrators away from a punitive approach.

"Principals are more willing to show a little bit of restraint if they understand that at the end of the day they are not going to be left holding the bag by themselves. There are mechanisms for support. There are options," she said.

Aspel's work isn't just focused on Cleveland County. She is continually tapped by the state to share what she's learned with other districts.

"One of the things we are trying to do a much better job of is connecting all the mental health support work, so that we do have a unified system," said Thomas. Cleveland County is "about three and a half hours away, but we keep tagging her to come in."

Aspel doesn't mind hitting the road. But, she said, "it's not that what we're doing is so magical. It's the way that everyone works together to make it happen." ■

OPINION

Published May 7, 2019

Students With Disabilities Deserve Inclusion. It's Also The Best Way to Teach

By Hannah Grieco

Students with disabilities face substantially increased rates of abuse and restraint in schools. As an education and disability advocate seeking to change that, I frequently encounter well-meaning arguments for separating higher-needs students from the general population.

Many parents and teachers express sympathy, yet also a desire to keep certain groups of students away from the general population for a variety of reasons.

"Is mainstreaming special needs kids a good idea if it prevents the other kids from learning?"

"And what were the 20-something other kids in the room doing when the teacher was spending most of her time attending to your special needs child?"

"It's too bad the other children are the ones who lose out when special needs kids are mainstreamed. This story is all well and good, but it means that this woman's child got way more than the other children did in terms of support and attention."

These are the types of comments found in parent forums and in response to articles about autism and other disabilities in the classroom. And they are echoed by teachers who are facing poorly integrated classrooms with strong behavior challenges. Resistance to inclusion itself as a practice remains entrenched.

Many teachers and parents do not know the pedagogy behind inclusive instruction. Inclusion is not about throwing disabled children into general education classrooms without support or tools and leaving teachers to clean up the resultant chaos. Schools don't meet anyone's needs when they integrate thoughtlessly.

They also do not meet the legal requirements defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which guarantees all children the right to free appropriate public

education. That includes education for disabled students in the least restrictive environment possible—not segregated and sequestered away from their peers.

It might be less convenient at first for teachers and students (and parents) to learn about and embrace the disabled student populations at their schools. But there is no inherent right to be *free from inconvenience*. Perhaps it's time to look more closely at why we as educators and parents are demanding that to begin with.

Inclusion, by definition, involves carefully assessing a child's needs and then implementing a strategic plan to support that child within the general classroom setting. This is done by a special education team, rather than one general education teacher. The team offers options such as teacher training, team teaching, pushed-in special education instruction, classroom accommodations (a standing desk, computer workstation, etc.), an interpreter, or a classroom assistant added to the room for portions of the day.

My son is autistic, and he has an assistant in his mainstream classroom to support him and several other students as needed. The rest of my son's accommodations rarely affect his classmates at all. He uses a keyboard to write, he meets with the school counselor when he's overwhelmed, and he has social skills mentoring. The staff at his school meets and works together, mainstreaming children of all abilities. Test scores and academic achievement remain strong, even with a push-in of students from a countywide behavioral program for students with significant emotional disabilities. The general education students are doing great!

Cost is frequently at the heart of arguments against inclusion. It does take money to adequately support special needs students in mainstream classrooms, of course. It costs significantly less to push an assistant in and offer training, however, than to create a separate classroom with a special education teacher or place a child in a specialized private school.

The cost of time is more significant. Inclusion requires teachers, schools, and entire school systems to commit to the model. It requires training and a general overhaul in perspective—about the role of education and the inherent value of each child and his or her learning experience—disabled or not.

However, inclusion is best practice for disabled and non-disabled students alike. Studies show that when inclusion is done well, the whole class benefits. It doesn't take away from one group to focus on another—quite the opposite. It enhances the ability of non-disabled kids to cooperate, work together,

understand and value different perspectives, think critically, and even test well.

Yes, research indicates that a majority of general education students test the same or better on standardized tests when they are educated in the same classroom environment as their disabled peers. Classrooms that have several unsupported students with severe behavioral disabilities are the exception. But diagnoses like this are rare, and added supports for those students seems to be key.

When supported and given adequate training and tools, teachers in inclusive classrooms understand and instruct a variety of learners, individualizing instruction to meet the needs of all learners better. Students have varied needs and strengths, whether disabled or not. Teachers in inclusion settings learn to address this and teach better because of it.

Empathy—which cannot be measured quantitatively—matters, too. How children view peers who look and learn differently from themselves is also a consideration as they grow to adulthood and become members of their communities, and as they live and work alongside a diverse array of citizens. It's a critical factor in whether communities and workplaces are able to function and thrive.

Finally, and most importantly, disabled students *can achieve*. Their talents and gifts are varied, as are the talents and gifts of all students. They are legally entitled to an appropriate public education, but they also have so much to offer their non-disabled peers, teachers, and schools.

Inclusion works when educators collaborate, get the support they need, and believe in the value of all students. It's time for schools and teachers to reevaluate their long-held biases, and it's time to address the initial financial investment required for training and staffing. It's also the law.

Inclusion is the least expensive, most effective method of teaching students. It starts from the top, with administrators making this a priority. When administrators model inclusivity and support teachers in its implementation, the entire school (and school system) culture changes. Test scores are rarely negatively impacted and often go up. More importantly, children become better citizens.

Inclusion is best practice. It is also, quite simply, the right way to teach. ■

Hannah Grieco is an education and disability advocate, certified PK-6 teacher, and freelance writer. She works with parents, teachers, and community groups to support children who have unique needs.

OPINION

Published October 10, 2019

10 Tips for Building a More LGBTQ-Inclusive Classroom

By Joe English

October is LGBTQ History Month. Founded in 1994, the annual campaign includes forums, marches, lectures, and “National Coming Out Day,” all imploring Americans to increase the visibility of LGBTQ narratives.

Six states—California, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, and Oregon—have answered the call to action by passing legislation that will weave LGBTQ history and terminology into public school curricula. Colorado, for example, will reform history, English, and civics curricula, incorporating lessons on the AIDS epidemic and novels with same-sex parents. Such policies bring discussion of LGBTQ issues out of the shadows and validate the healthy diversity in our communities.

State legislators and LGBTQ advocates should be applauded for their efforts, but the real impact will happen in individual classrooms. Educators will need to translate abstract policies into classroom activities, lesson plans, and conversations. For many, daunting questions arise: “What does it mean to be LGBTQ? Will I need to talk about sex? What books should I use? How do I support LGBTQ students during these units?”

Thankfully, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. I interviewed 25 middle and high school teachers across the country by phone, over email, and in person to illuminate 10 key mindsets and teaching methods that help facilitate LGBTQ-inclusive teaching:

1. Know that your students are ready to discuss LGBTQ issues. In fact, they have been engaging with LGBTQ issues for years through media, family, and conversations with peers. Unfortunately, most of this information is biased: Over 95 percent of middle and high school LGBTQ students report hearing homophobic remarks in school, but just 13 percent hear positive messaging about

LGBTQ identity. Constructive in-class discussion about LGBTQ identities is a welcome—and necessary—addition to the dialogue.

2. Recognize that sexual and gender identity is multifaceted. Not every student fits into a box, and that’s okay. GLAAD maintains a guide to LGBTQ identities, but deciding how and when to use labels is still daunting. When one 8th grader began questioning his own gender, his teacher, Amanda, found that knowledge of the transgender community helped her understand the student’s concerns. She offered to use the student’s preferred pronouns, shared a novel with a gender nonbinary protagonist, and stopped dividing her class by gender (“boys” and “girls” lines, for example). She explained, “labels help explain different experiences, but they shouldn’t become rigid prescriptions for how someone should act or be treated.”

3. Refrain from “call out culture,” but when discipline is necessary, respond to all identity-based attacks consistently. If students misuse terms out of ignorance such as conflating homosexuality and being transgender, punishment may discourage them from asking questions or discussing LGBTQ issues generally. However, if students use intentionally insensitive slurs, treat the comment like any other slur; in fact, punishing racist comments while evading homophobic remarks could indirectly legitimize anti-LGBTQ attacks.

4. Don’t assume talking about LGBTQ issues has to involve talking about sex. In *Reading the Rainbow*, researcher Caitlin L. Ryan and educator Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth ask us to “shift our understanding of LGBTQ people away from sex and toward who people are, including how they live, whom they love, and with whom they build family and community.” In speaking to the many facets of sexual and gender identity, you can share a fuller perspective of what it means to be LGBTQ in age-appropriate ways.

5. Trust your own positive intentions. An imperfect advocate is better than a silent bystander. Kristin, an 11th grade English teacher, described her embarrassment after asking her lesbian student if she preferred to use male pronouns: “I turned bright red when I realized how ignorant that sounded.” Her student, however, saw genuine compassion underlying Kristin’s comment. Terminology is easy to fix when one’s heart is in the right place. Students will understand this.



6. Integrate LGBTQ-inclusive books with other books, and make them easy to check out anonymously. Shelly, a high school English teacher in Tennessee, explained, “At first, I created an LGBTQ+ section, but only students who identified this way picked up the books. When I integrated the books with the other genres, *many* students checked them out.” Her approach allows students to select books discreetly and leverages their complementary interests in, say, science fiction or fantasy.

7. Treat LGBTQ characters in literature as whole people with many interests and identities. Donna, a creative writing teacher, emphasizes the importance of creating many “points of relatability” between students and an LGBTQ protagonist—hobbies, aspirations, relationships, or other identities—to ensure students “don’t think sexuality has to define someone.”

8. Speak in terms of relationships rather than labels. For example, when teaching *The Color Purple*, AP Literature teacher Jackie refrains from asking if the main character, Celie, is lesbian. Rather, she tries to capture the complexity of attraction, asking students to “examine Celie’s relationship with Shug. Why is Celie drawn to her? What motivates Celie’s romantic interest in women generally?” The conversation reinforces that relationships are nuanced combinations of preferences, emotions, and circumstances.

9. Don’t rely on LGBTQ students to explain LGBTQ characters to the class. Let them

volunteer, but otherwise treat them like any other student. Many LGBTQ students are still figuring out their own identities, and asking them speak for an entire minority group is daunting. Additionally, singling them out may create the impression that LGBTQ people are monolithic.

10. Build in substantial free response and open discussion time. Zachary, a 7th grade ELA teacher, started a “Questions Mailbox,” where students can submit questions on any topic from class anonymously. He found it was a win-win: students could submit questions at their leisure, and he had time to craft a thoughtful answer before the next day’s lesson.

Many other resources help educators navigate LGBTQ-inclusive teaching. The “Welcoming Schools” project provides lesson planning resources, and Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth’s *Reading the Rainbow* highlights inclusive pedagogical approaches. If educators believe a student might need formal support for mental illness or physical harm, they should be ready to refer students to professionals.

By changing who is represented in the classroom, educators can signal to LGBTQ students that they are not alone, abnormal, or unwell; rather, their community and experiences are of value—worth writing about, studying, and discussing. Cultivating an inclusive classroom might be a daunting endeavor, but it is a crucial one. ■

Joe English is the founder of Hope in a Box, an education nonprofit based in New York City.

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