

MEA RACIAL & SOCIAL EQUITY SERIES
LGBTQ+ ISSUES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Introduction

The percentage of students in Maine who identify as LGBTQ+ is growing. According to the [Maine Department of Education \(DOE\)](#):

LGBTQ+ young people are a growing minority of students in our schools. Data reports from the 2019 Maine Integrated Health Youth Surveys (“MIHYS”) show:

- High school students report that they identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or unsure at rates from 13.5% in Piscataquis County to 18% or over in Hancock, Oxford and Sagadahoc Counties.
- The proportion of young people identifying as transgender or unsure was at least 2.3% or more in 4 counties (Aroostook, Knox, Washington and York), 3% or more in 11 counties, and 4.5% in Knox county.

And the LGBTQ+ student population is vulnerable. According to the same DOE study, one in three (33%) of LGBTQ+ students experience bullying or harassing behavior. Compare this to the total student population where only 8% of students report the same victimization and it is clear that LGBTQ+ students are targeted more frequently. This can be attributed to negative cultural stigmas related to their identity, and a lack of peer and family support. LGBTQ+ students also suffer from higher rates of anxiety and depression as a result.

We should be clear: ***everyone deserves to feel comfortable in their own skin and school should be a safe place for all students.***

However, unfortunately, not everyone feels that way. From the movement to ban transgender students from participating in [sports](#) with their identified gender, to allowing transgender students to use the [bathroom](#) of their identified gender, or undue attention over a school flying the [pride flag](#), these issues continue to arise in Maine’s schools.

This document will provide you with resources and ideas for what you can do to be more inclusive and promote greater equity for Maine’s LGBTQ+ students.

Definitions

The [Human Rights Campaign Foundation](#) has a comprehensive glossary for LGBTQ+ issues. Some of the important ones to note are:

- **Cisgender**: A term that describes a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth.
- **Cis-Heteronormative**: This term refers to the assumption that heterosexuality and being cisgender are the norm, which plays out in interpersonal interactions and society, and furthers the marginalization of queer and gender diverse people.
- **Gay**: A term that describes a person who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to some members of the same gender.

- **Gender Binary:** The idea that there are two distinct and opposite genders—female and male. This model is limiting and doesn't account for the full spectrum of gender identities and gender expressions.
- **Gender Dysphoria:** Clinically significant distress caused when a person's assigned birth gender is not the same as the one with which they identify. According to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the term - which replaces Gender Identity Disorder - "is intended to better characterize the experiences of affected children, adolescents, and adults".
- **Gender Expression:** External appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, haircut or voice, which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either feminine or masculine.
- **Gender Identity:** An internal, deeply felt sense of being female, male, a blend of both or neither. Refers to how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. Can be the same as or different from their sex assigned at birth.
- **Gender Non-Conforming:** A broad term referring to people who do not behave in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of their gender, or whose gender expression does not fit neatly into a category.
- **Heteronormative:** The assumption of heterosexuality as the given or default sexual orientation instead of one of many possibilities, and that the preferred or default relationship is between two people of "opposite" genders.
- **Non-Binary:** An adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a woman or a man. They may identify as both, somewhere in between, or outside the categories of a woman and a man.
- **Transgender/Trans:** An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation.

For those who think these definitions might be too much for younger students to understand, there is a list for [elementary students](#).

Gender Identity of Students

Addressing someone by the gender pronouns they choose is a matter of respect. It is not up to us to decide whether another person is identified as male, female, or nonbinary. It is the right of the student to decide what pronouns best describe their identity. It is a personal decision and one trans people have put a great deal of thought into. It's understandable for mistakes to happen, especially when you first meet someone, but continuing to refer to a person as a gender other than the one they identify with is a form of suppression and an [abuse of power](#).

One way to avoid misgendering students is to ask for the pronouns they have chosen for themselves. You see this a lot when you see things like "John Doe, he/him/his" or "Jane Doe, she/her/hers" or "Jamie Doe they/them/theirs." Not only is this a way for trans people to inform everyone how they identify, it also is a way for cisgender (people who identify with the gender they were born) to show support. As a teacher, you can set this tone on your first day of class by how you introduce yourself and how you ask the students to introduce themselves.

One idea would be to have a “Welcome to My Class” handout that identifies yourself and your pronouns. Then, ask the students to fill out and return a separate form that lists their name, any nickname they prefer, their chosen pronouns, and anything else they would like you to know that would help you get to know them. By doing this privately via written responses, you avoid putting any student on the spot and having them verbally state their pronouns in front of their peers. Then, reinforce how each student identifies and be supportive.

Organizations and Resources for the Classroom

If you decide to address LGBTQ+ equity issues in your classroom, it’s important to remember that you are not alone. Always follow your district’s curriculum guidelines, but there are additional resources you can tap into. Below are some examples:

- The [NEA](#) has a lot of resources for educators who are trying to make their schools more inclusive, and MEA is in agreement that schools should be inclusive and welcoming to all students.
 - On NEA’s [Ed Justice](#) page, there are lesson plans, action items to take right now, and ideas for a Gay Straight Alliance at your school.
 - There is also an age-appropriate [reading list](#) that NEA put together.
- GLSEN (Gay Lesbian Straight Educator Network) has resources for lesson plans on LGBTQ issues, such as [name-calling](#), [kindness](#), [challenging assumptions](#), [how to step up and help others](#), and many, many [more](#).
 - There are different lesson plans for different grade levels, so any educator can find something appropriate for their class.
- Because of the time we live in, the Human Rights Campaign and the NEA have created a joint document on supporting LGBTQ+ students [during the pandemic](#).
- Learning for Justice, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, has a comprehensive [guide](#) for Best Practices for Serving LGBTQ+ Students.
- Equality Maine has a [Safe Schools in Maine](#) page, and a rather comprehensive [directory](#) of other organizations in Maine that work for LGBTQ+ rights and equity for all.

Resources for Your Employment

For our members who are part of the LGBTQ+ community themselves, there is the [NEA LGBTQ+ Caucus](#). They provide professional resources and support and work to provide a safe learning and working environment in public schools. MEA has the Human and Civil Rights and Social Justice Committee which addresses equity issues, too.

In addition, your MEA UniServ Director, Board of Directors member, and officers, are all resources for you in your job. MEA requires all affiliated locals to adopt nondiscrimination policies when dealing with internal union relationships. If a conflict arises within your local union, your UniServ Director can help you find resources to resolve the conflict and find a better way of relating to everyone.

If you have an issue with an administrator not treating people right, contact your local union leadership and your UniServ Director to see what options there are for addressing it.

GLSEN offers [professional development](#) courses to empower educators to act as allies for LGBTQ+ students and staff. Some topics include an inclusive school [assessment](#) and a safe space [kit](#).

[Pride at Work](#) is an organization that advocates for LGBTQ+ union members and has resources for workplace discrimination, collective bargaining rights, and sample contract language to include in your next collective bargaining agreement.

Another resource is USM's LGBTQ+ Collection, primary resources documenting Maine's LGBTQ+ communities. Along with collections, we have filmed our programs on everything from Transgender in Schools, to Transgender in Sports, to LGBTQ civil rights history, to AIDS and COVID.

Information on collections:

<https://usm.maine.edu/library/specialcollections/lgbt-collection>

Access to digitized collections:

<https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/lgbt/>

TORCH: Civil Rights Team Project newsletter

(Including newsletters of the Civil Rights Team Project)

Access to films of past programs:

<https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/spcoevents/>

Maine Attorney General's Civil Rights Team Project

**NOTE: The information below is from the website for the Civil Rights Team Project.*

[Civil Rights in Schools](#)

The Attorney General administers the [Civil Rights Team Project](#), a school-based preventative program. The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project (CRTP) is to increase the safety of elementary, middle level, and high school students by reducing bias-motivated behaviors and harassment in our schools.

The CRTP accomplishes this by supporting student civil rights teams in our schools. The CRTP and the student civil rights teams are active in engaging school communities in thinking and talking about issues related to:

- Race and skin color
- National origin and ancestry
- Religion
- Disabilities
- Gender (including gender identity and expression)
- Sexual orientation

We believe that bias-based behaviors are especially damaging, and because of their unique nature, warrant specific preventative efforts. The Civil Rights Team Project encourages school communities to engage in this important work, so that students of all identities feel safe, welcome, and respected for who they are.

[Civil Rights Team](#)

A civil rights team is defined by:

1. **Students**
A civil rights team is a school-based group of students.
2. **Adult advisors**
A civil rights team has at least one school-based adult advisor. The team can also include community advisors.
3. **Focus**
A civil rights team meets regularly and initiates projects that engage their school community in thinking and talking about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression) and sexual orientation in an age-appropriate manner.
4. **School support**
A civil rights team is supported by the school's administration.
5. **A relationship with the Civil Rights Team Project**
A civil rights team is registered with the Civil Rights Team Project and receives structure and support from our office. For some examples of civil rights team initiatives, and news about the Civil Rights Team Project, check out the most recent edition of our newsletter, [The Torch \(PDF\)](#).

[Why Should My School Have a Team?](#)

There are behaviors and practices in every school that we might describe as issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation. To ensure a safe learning environment for students of all identities, schools must identify and address these issues.

A civil rights team can help with this process. Specifically, participation in the Civil Rights Team Project will benefit your school by:

- Creating opportunities for students to engage in conversations around identity and their school's culture and climate.
- Empowering student members of civil rights teams to be leaders in their school communities.
- Preparing students for success in our increasingly interconnected world and diverse state and local communities.
- Signaling to targeted populations that the school actively cares about their safety and success in school.
- Creating structured opportunities for student response to public incidents of bias in the school or community.
- Improving communication between students and adults around common behaviors and practices adults are often unaware of.

- Increasing awareness and use of existing policies that protect students from harassment based on race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.
- Helping the school fulfill its obligations under [federal](#) and [state laws](#) guaranteeing equal access to education.
- Becoming part of a statewide network and connecting the school with resources available through the Civil Rights Team Project and the Maine Office of the Attorney General.

Conclusion

The most important thing to remember is that members of the LGBTQ+ community are people. People who deserve to be treated with respect and compassion. People who have feelings. People who may have struggled in ways cisgender, heterosexual people may never understand completely, just to present themselves as they are.

The mission of public education is to educate all students no matter what. School needs to be a safe and welcoming environment. For everyone. The least we can do as educators is to make our students feel welcome in our classrooms and support them as needed.

This document has a lot of resources to help create greater equity and inclusion in our schools. It is up to us to make sure that we create the right environment.