


TO: Local Education Agency Superintendents

FROM: Carey M. Wright, Ed.D., State Superintendent of Schools 

DATE: March 20, 2025

SUBJECT: Creating Safe Spaces for LGBTQIA+ Youth in Schools

Overview

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) is committed to equitable practices which support the educational and social-emotional needs of all students. School safety, both physical and psychological, is a vital component of that commitment. Safety and prevention efforts that are inclusive, intentional, and impactful can provide students with safe, respectful, engaging, and welcoming environments in which to grow and learn.

This memo provides technical guidance and assistance as each Maryland local education agency (LEA) works to support the rights of all students, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) youth. Previous guidance developed by MSDE in October 2024, [Safe and Supportive Schools for All Students: Creating Inclusive Spaces for LGBTQIA+ Youth](#), can provide additional information and resources to support these efforts. While this memo is being circulated to Superintendents, the intention is for it to be shared with school-based staff as well, to ensure that they are equipped to effectively support students in alignment with these best practices. Superintendents should encourage staff to familiarize themselves with the content to help foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

What are the tiered supports for inclusive school environments for LGBTQIA+ students?

A safe and supportive school environment minimizes stigmatization, protects all students from harassment and bullying, and ensures no student is excluded or treated differently based on their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. The goal is to provide equal educational opportunity and healthy development of students. Tiered support for LGBTQIA+ students focuses on providing varying levels of support based on the individual needs and challenges students face. Tier one is the foundational support for all students, including school staff that advocate for, encourage and model inclusive practices. Tier one supports ensure the mission and vision of the school prioritize psychological and physical safety and the ongoing examination of data to assess school climate. Tier two may include school-based mental health providers and school leadership consulting with teachers and staff to ensure that LGBTQIA+ youth are not unfairly targeted, excluded, or victimized through macro- or microaggressions. Tier three focuses on the establishment of safe spaces; trust and transparency; peer support; collaboration; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural relevance and gender responsiveness within the educational setting.

What strategies can school-based clinicians use to help LGBTQIA+ students manage mental health challenges?

Supportive educators save students' lives. Educators can advocate on LGBTQIA+ students' behalf to school administration, as well as directly implement LGBTQIA+ content in class curriculum, address anti-LGBTQIA+ bullying or harassment, and serve as advisors for students to formally organize supportive groups at school. For many students, having adult allies in school to whom they can turn for support — or even simply knowing that LGBTQIA+ allies exist at their school — creates a more welcoming and safer environment for students to learn.

What strategies can school-based clinicians use to help LGBTQIA+ students manage mental health challenges related to bullying or discrimination?

Bullying is symptomatic of relationship problems and is best addressed holistically by students, schools, parents/caregivers, and the entire community. The [Bullying, Harassment or Intimidation Reporting Form](#) should be used to report alleged incidents of bullying, harassment, or intimidation that occurred during the current school year on school property, at a school-sponsored activity or event off school property, on a school bus, on the way to and/or from school, or through electronic communication on or off school property. More information on recommendations for supports to follow or respond to a bullying allegation can be found in [Maryland's Model Policy: Bullying, Harassment, or Intimidation](#).

What role do school-based clinicians play in facilitating access to external resources for LGBTQIA+ students and their families?

School-based clinicians play a vital role in facilitating access to external resources for LGBTQIA+ students and their families. Here are some examples:

- Collaborate with families to promote understanding and acceptance, address concerns and build strong partnerships
- Help students and families identify safe places and affirming environments in their community
- Encourage and support students being actively engaged in clubs, groups, and organizations within their community
- Connect students and families to resources (support groups, crisis support, etc.) about LGBTQIA+ locally and nationally through various methods (online, phone numbers, brochures, etc.)
- Make appropriate referrals for services (i.e. Mental health counseling, community resources, etc.)

How should school staff engage with parents to support LGBTQIA+ students?

Parents come to the topic of gender identity with differing levels of understanding and acceptance. Some may want to support their student but do not know how, while others may be reluctant to allow schools to embrace a student's requests to change their name, pronouns, or clothing to reflect their gender identity. It is essential for school staff to strive for balance when navigating how information is shared and to keep the student's safety and well-being paramount.

In supporting LGBTQIA+ students, school staff may want to review and consider these guidelines:

- Work closely with the student to assess what, if any, information regarding their gender identity the student is comfortable disclosing to their parent. In some cases, notifying parents carries risks for the

student, such as being rejected by family. Thus, decisions about information sharing should be made on a case-by-case basis.

- Schools are generally not required to disclose personal information about students unless it is recorded in an official record and requested by a parent. School staff should follow their local education agency’s policy on parent disclosure.
- Federal courts have recognized that schools may implement student support plans without parent input when the student expresses concerns that a parent would not be supportive, or that disclosing their gender identity would put the student at risk.
- School staff should not disclose information that may reveal a student’s transgender or gender nonconforming status to others, including school personnel and other community members, unless legally permitted to do so. Staff should be trained to prevent accidental disclosure of gender identity information.

What are some warning signs that an LGBTQIA+ student may be struggling with mental health issues related to their sexual orientation or gender identity?

LGBTQIA+ young people are not inherently prone to suicide risk because of their sexual orientation or gender identity but rather are placed at higher risk because of how they are mistreated and stigmatized in society. The following risk factors are inclusive of everyone, but the first five in italics are more likely to be experienced by LGBTQIA+ youth.

Risk Factors	Verbal Statements	Behaviors	Mood
<i>Experiencing homelessness</i>	Threats of harm to self	Increasing use of alcohol or drugs	Depression
<i>Family crises</i>	Feeling hopeless	Withdrawing from activities or loved ones	Anxiety
<i>Non-suicidal self-injury</i>	Having no reason to live	Sleeping too much or too little	Loss of interest
<i>Loss or grief</i>	Feeling like a burden	Visiting or calling people to say goodbye	Irritability
<i>Victimization</i>	Feeling trapped	Giving away prized possessions	Humiliation/shame
Mental health	Feeling unbearable pain	Fatigue	Agitation/anger
Accessibility of firearms or other means			Relief/sudden improvement
Academic pressure			Major or sudden mood changes
History of suicide in the family			

What resources are available to help schools support LGBTQIA+ youth?

- An Introduction to Bullying Prevention for Maryland Educators - MSDE online course that offers a new cohort each month in which all school personnel can be trained
- [GLSEN Professional Development](https://www.glsen.org/professional-development) - <https://www.glsen.org/professional-development>

- [GLSEN - Developing LGBTQ-Inclusive Classroom Resources](https://www.glsen.org/activity/inclusive-curriculum-guide) - <https://www.glsen.org/activity/inclusive-curriculum-guide>
- [GLSEN Safe Space Kit](https://www.glsen.org/activity/glsen-safe-space-kit-solidarity-lgbtq-youth) - <https://www.glsen.org/activity/glsen-safe-space-kit-solidarity-lgbtq-youth>
- Maryland State Department of Education's course, *"An Introduction to Bullying Prevention for Maryland Educators"* - each month offers a new cohort that all school personnel can be trained
- [Respect Workshop - American Psychological Association](https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/programs/safe-supportive/training/respect-workshop) - <https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/programs/safe-supportive/training/respect-workshop>
- [Supporting LGBTQ Youth of Color - GLSEN](https://www.glsen.org/lgbtq-youth-color) - <https://www.glsen.org/lgbtq-youth-color>
- [The Relationship Between Caring Teachers and the Mental Health of LGBTQ Students](https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/the-relationship-between-caring-teachers-and-the-mental-health-of-lgbtq-students/) - <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/the-relationship-between-caring-teachers-and-the-mental-health-of-lgbtq-students/>
- [The Trevor Project](https://www.thetrevorproject.org/) - <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>
- [Welcoming Students - Human Rights Campaign](https://welcomingschools.org/) - <https://welcomingschools.org/>

What is the Trevor Project and how can this initiative be utilized by schools in Maryland?

The Trevor Project is the leading suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for LGBTQ+ young people. Their mission is to end suicide among LGBTQ+ young people, but their bigger goal is to help every LGBTQ+ young person see a bright future for themselves. MSDE offers two Trevor Project Trainings open to any school staff. Ally training is an awareness-building and cultural competency training for adults working with LGBTQ+ young people. The Ally Training, while not a crisis intervention training, contributes to Trevor's mission of preventing suicide by creating safer, competent, and supportive environments for LGBTQ+ young people. CARE training is a basic suicide prevention training for adults and professionals working with LGBTQ+ people. In addition to educating audiences about risk factors and warning signs of suicide, this training is designed to raise awareness about the specific challenges facing LGBTQ+ people.

The trainings can be taken separately (1 hour each) or combined into one training (2 hours). Ally and CARE trainings are available on request. Please contact Mike Muempfer, Director Maryland School Mental Health Response Program at michael.muempfer@maryland.gov

Additional Information

If there are additional questions or topics that you would like MSDE to consider covering in future memos, please do not hesitate to contact Laurel Cratsley, Blueprint Implementation & Strategic Initiatives Coordinator, at laurel.cratsley@maryland.gov.

If you have additional questions and/or concerns related to Safe Spaces for LGBTQIA+ students, please contact Dr. April Turner, Manager, Student Support Services and Psychological Services, at aprild.turner@maryland.gov.