

Faith and 2SLGBTQI Youth

Promising Practices for Inclusive Schools

How can educators, school staff, and administrators build more inclusive school climates for Two Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, and intersex (2SLGBTQI) youth at the intersection of faith identities and faith-based settings?

This resource offers advice and concrete strategies that you can implement right away.

Affirm 2SLGBTQI people-of-faith

- Find creative ways to expose students to the lives and experiences of diverse 2SLGBTQI people-of-faith who may serve as positive role models. Reflect them in lesson plans, school presentations, library and hallway displays, in your Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA) programming, and during school events honoring days of significance (e.g., Pride month, Transgender Day of Remembrance [TDOR], International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia [IDAHOBIT], and diverse faith-based holidays, etc.).
- Challenge common narratives and assumptions that 2SLGBTQI people must renounce their faith entirely in order to live openly in their affirmed gender and/or attraction identity.
- Ensure guidance counsellors and support staff are equipped with resource lists of local services, programs, and information serving 2SLGBTQI youth across a range of diverse faith identities and communities.
- Ensure relevant web-based resources are available and accessible to students through the school's computer lab.

Create safer spaces

- Support 2SLGBTQI youth who express a desire to participate in faith-communities, even when they may not be entirely 2SLGBTQI-affirming. Avoid suggesting that they must renounce one aspect of their identity in order to affirm another. This might involve helping them to develop boundary-setting skills.
- If a student confides in you about their identity, thank them for entrusting you, listen to their story, and find out what support looks like for them. Respect confidentiality and never disclose a student's identity to their guardians or to

other members of the school community without their explicit consent to do so (Peter et al., 2021).

- Avoid assumptions about whether students' home environment is 2SLGBTQI-affirming or intolerant rooted in your own biases about their faith community. Let the student assess their own safety and comfort and let them take the lead on this.
- Act with cultural humility by listening actively and asking open-ended questions. Demonstrate genuine curiosity and a willingness to learn.

Cultural Humility: A mindset that uses continual self-reflection and close listening to others from cultural backgrounds different from our own with the goal of effective and informed interaction. Foundational to cultural humility is recognizing how social power imbalances shape our own biases and impact the way we treat and understand others, along with work to minimize that impact (Psychhub, 2020).

Plan Proactively

- Assume there are 2SLGBTQI people in your school community even if this is not known to you. If people are not open about their identities at your school, this may be an indicator that it is not a safe climate to do so. Don't wait for someone to come to you for support before taking action.
- Efforts to include 2SLGBTQI students at the intersection of faith identities and faith-based settings need to be explicit, loud, and visible. Unfortunately, the assumption that a space is 2SLGBTQI-intolerant is the implicit default, even if this is not the case (Peter, et al., 2021; Kosciw., et al., 2020).
- Create ways to identify your students' needs for support and access such as conducting confidential needs assessment surveys (The ArQuives, 2021).
- Involve all members of the school community in the process of planning inclusive initiatives. Collect anonymous information to help identify and address current barriers to inclusion and belonging for the most marginalized members of the school community (Peter et al., 2021)

Apply an intersectional lens

Intersectionality: A concept coined by theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw, that recognizes how a person's experience is influenced by the interplay of multiple, interconnected systems of privilege and oppression rather than by any single system or component of their identity alone.

- Include educational content on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia which addresses interlocking oppressions of racism and colonialism (The ArQuives, 2021).
- Act from the assumption that there are students-of-faith in your GSA and 2SLGBTQI students in faith-based student groups. Challenge common narratives which put forward the false idea that stepping away from one's faith identity is a precondition for affirming one's 2SLGBTQI identity.
- Ensure that events and programs designed for 2SLGBTQI youth acknowledge the presence of community members of diverse faith identities. Offer accommodations as needed, (e.g., provide kosher or halal food options at events where applicable, provide prayer times and spaces, schedule a GSA meeting at a different time from a faith-identity student group meeting, etc.).
- Ensure your GSA creates a positive climate in which all members can express their faith identities openly and with pride. Ground your GSA's mission, vision, and programming in an intersectional lens by acknowledging the complexity of our identities and the nuanced ways we may experience inclusion and belonging in the multiple communities we move through in our lives. Make space to discuss how 2SLGBTQI inclusion is interlinked with other social justice struggles including racial justice, disability rights, mental health, and liberated faith and spirituality movements (GLSEN, n.d.; The ArQuives, 2021).
- If a student reports an experience of bullying, intervene immediately. Apply an intersectional lens to help identify and address multiple overlapping factors of identity and discrimination that may be at play. Where possible, leverage incidents as teachable moments for the individual(s) involved or for the wider community in your class or whole school (The ArQuives, 2021; GLSEN, n.d.).
- Ensure your school's anti-discrimination, anti-bullying, and anti-harassment policy takes an explicitly intersectional lens. Be sure it includes a definition of intersectionality and provides concrete examples (Peter et al., 2021), (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Foster a braver learning climate

- Challenge yourself to facilitate respectful conversations on uncomfortable or potentially divisive topics in your classrooms and with any member of the school. Do this even when it feels intimidating. When we keep the status quo to dodge discomfort, we risk leaving toxic issues and harmful dynamics unaddressed (SXSWedu, 2017).

- Educators have a responsibility to reflect diverse lives, experiences, and social realities in their classrooms and lessons. Seize opportunities in the curricula you are teaching to integrate diverse 2SLGBTQI topics and perspectives. Be prepared to stand behind your pedagogical choices (The ArQuives, 2021).
- When teaching faith-based curricula, promote the idea that we can connect to our faith through our own gut, mind, and heart and that faith can offer us guidance to ask and to answer life's hardest questions. Allow students to question narratives which ask them not to think or feel for themselves or that position faith as blind trust in doctrine (Doyle, 2020).
- Recognize your students' own life experiences and knowledge as critical to shaping their learning. Facilitate healthy dialogue by asking open-ended questions designed to pique curiosity, rather than shut down charged conversations (e.g., Where do you think that idea comes from? Who benefits from this perception and who is harmed by it? Whose influence would be undermined if this idea were challenged? Who benefits by not questioning this?) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; The Social, 2021).

Build solidarity networks

- Find likeminded people in your school community who are aligned in your commitment to promote inclusive practices for 2SLGBTQI youth at the intersection of faith identities and faith-based settings. This could include connecting with other educators, support staff, administrators, members of the parent-council, or union representatives (The ArQuives, 2021).
- Share the load in your inclusive-schools advocacy work by sharing resources, problem solving, and strategizing together.
- Look to other schools and school boards who have had some success in achieving inclusive-school goals that are similar to yours. Network to find the people behind these initiatives. Connect to find out what strategies worked for them.

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