

Celebrating and Supporting Trans and Gender Diverse Students in the Music Classroom

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The Definition of Transgender – “Transgender is an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth.” (American Psychology Association)

- Non-binary people also fall under the umbrella of transgender identities, although not all of them like to use that label for themselves. Non-binary people often use the pronouns they/them, but some are comfortable with multiple pronouns or newly created ones.
- Transgender (or its shortened form, trans) are adjectives. For example, if someone was assigned male at birth but identifies as female, she is called a trans woman. Calling someone “a transgender,” or refusing to use someone’s chosen pronouns and/or name is an artificializing tactic meant to dehumanize and delegitimize the trans experience.
- Someone who is cisgender is “an individual whose gender identity and gender expression align with the sex assigned at birth.” (American Psychology Association) Cisgender or cis is not a slur.
- Coming out as transgender is the beginning of a long journey of self-discovery, the destination of which may change or may not be clear at the onset. Identities, pronouns, and names could change more than once in the process. Be patient with trans people as they figure themselves out.

Facts about Transgender Identities

- **The trans experience is not a monolith** – The trans experience differs from person to person, before, during, and after their transition. Medical and social supports needed, gender presentation, desired friendships/partnerships, likes and dislikes; these things and more vary from person to person.
- **Gender Identities emerge and evolve over time** – Trans kids often know they’re trans as early as age four, but for many, that realization doesn’t come until puberty. Fear and shame often keep trans people in the closet until much later in their lives.
- **The impacts of gender dysphoria differ** – Gender dysphoria is defined as a “marked incongruence between [a trans person’s] experienced or expressed gender and the one they were assigned at birth.” (DSM 5). Gender dysphoria looks different for each trans person. For some, it can lead to issues with body image, addiction, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidal thoughts. For others, gender dysphoria is manageable or even non-existent.
- **Trans people have always existed** – The apparent sudden increase in trans people in the last twenty years has more to do with societal acceptance than with any kind of cultural influence. There’s more trans people around because we are not killing ourselves or hiding in the closet as much as we used to.

Gender Affirming Care

- **Definition** - Gender Affirming Care encompasses a range of social, psychological, behavioral, and medical interventions “designed to support and affirm an individual’s gender identity when it conflicts with the gender they were assigned at birth.” (World Health Organization)

- **Gender Affirming Care is for Everyone** – Although the WHO’s definition of gender affirming care applies only to transgender people, cisgender people also affirm their gender through language, presentation, spaces, activities, and even medical/surgical care.
- **The Majority of Gender Affirming Care for Minors is Non-Medical** – Gender Affirming Care begins with names/pronouns, clothing, possessions, hair style, inclusion in gendered spaces/activities, and other actions. Medical interventions, such as puberty blockers and hormones, are prescribed with close consultation between the child, parents, doctors, counsellors, and psychiatrists.
- **Surgery for Trans Minors is Rare** – Surgery is only suggested for minors who are experiencing extreme gender dysphoria. There are a lot of steps before any trans kid can access this kind of care. No surgery is being performed in schools and definitely not without parental support.

How to be a Better Ally in the Classroom

- **Use Correct Names and Pronouns** – Make this the expectation from everyone in your music classroom
- **Rethink Gendered Language and Expectations in Rehearsals and Concerts**
- **Invite Diversity into your Repertoire Selection** – Representation is important for all marginalized identities. Including pieces by 2SLGBTQIA+ composers is an important validation.
- **Invite Clinicians of Diverse Backgrounds into your Classroom** – This is not just about representation, it is beneficial to all of your students to hear different interpretations of technique.
- **Cultivate an Environment of Mutual Respect and Kindness** – Don’t allow hate into your classroom. Students who use this kind of language are often just parroting what they’ve heard at home, from their friends, or things they’ve seen online. Interventions, both in class and in private, can help steer these kids towards kindness and empathy.

Building Trust with your Trans and Gender Diverse Students

- **Adorn your Music Classroom with Celebrations of Diversity**
- **Display a Pride Flag** – This immediately lets your 2SLGBTQIA+ kids know that your classroom is a safe space.
- **Beginning of the Term Questionnaire** – Doing a roll call at the beginning of class will often lead to deadnaming. Let students tell you who they are with a questionnaire at the beginning of the semester asking for pronouns, chosen names, and the names your students need to be printed in concert programs.
- **Dealing with Misgendering or Deadnaming** – Correct yourself in the moment, if possible. Apologize to the student. Try to do better in the future.
- **Let Students Come to You** – Trans students often need to time to develop trust in others. Affirm their identities in the classroom and show them you’re an ally.
- **Respect Confidentiality** – This is a safety issue. Trans kids may not feel safe around their peers to be themselves. Many trans kids live in unsupportive homes where they may feel unsafe sharing their identity because of the threat of violence.

How to be a Better Ally in your School

- **Advocate for Gender Inclusive Bathrooms and/or Policies** – Trans students should be allowed to use bathrooms that align with their gender identity and/or private facilities designated as Gender Inclusive. Trans people’s presence in bathrooms is not a danger to women.
- **Push for Inclusive Language in all School Communications** – Pressure your administration to remove gendered language from school bulletins, newsletters, ceremonies, and communications with parents
- **Ask your Administration to Program 2SLGBTQIA+ Training Sessions**
- **Consider Supervising a 2SLGBTQIA+ Advocacy Club for Students** – Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA) groups help students find community and support.
- **Know your School Board** – School boards are increasingly targeting trans kids through policies designed to suppress 2SLGBTQIA+ identities, out students to parents, and restrict access to resources, spaces, and activities. When board elections roll around, know the candidates and campaign for those who want to protect trans kids.
- **Stand up to Bigotry** – The current political climate has welcomed anti-trans sentiment into public discourse. Standing up to this kind of rhetoric in the moment is necessary, especially if you have privilege. The 2SLGBTQIA+ community NEEDS allies to push back.

Being an Ally during the Second Trump Administration

Donald Trump and the Republican Party have made their intentions clear, especially in terms of trans kids. The 2024 GOP platform promises to “cut federal funding for any school pushing critical race theory, radical gender ideology, and other inappropriate racial, sexual, or political content on our children.” We cannot predict the extent in which they will keep this promise, but they’re likely to start with amendments to Title IX.

- Title IX states that “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”
- The Executive branch, by means of the Department of Education, interprets and updates Title IX. No congressional approval is necessary. The Trump administration will likely try to move quickly on this, likely soon after the confirmation of the new Secretary of Education. Although legal challenges will likely delay implementation in blue states, changes to Title IX will likely be upheld by the supreme court. Trans kids in red states will not be given that short grace period.
- We can expect some, if not all, of the following changes to Title IX under the Trump Administration
 - Reversal of all protections given to trans students granted by the Biden administration.
 - An expanded definition of sex discrimination that includes, “discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, sex characteristics (including intersex traits), and sex stereotypes under Title IX” 106.2
 - “Schools must address anti-LGBTQI+ harassment” 106.2, 106.10
 - “Schools must allow individuals to participate in classes and activities, use bathrooms and locker rooms, and dress and groom themselves consistent with their gender identity.” 106.31(a)(2)

- A return to President Trump's 2020 Title IX language that made investigating incidents of sex discrimination and taking disciplinary actions against violators more challenging.
- Define gender in binary terms
- Prohibit the changing of pronouns or require schools to disclose that information to parents
- Prohibit trans participation in sports

Protecting Trans and Gender Diverse Kids

The trans community feels vulnerable right now, and for good reason. Our rights and our access to legitimately life-saving medical care are in danger. We need allies to step up and stand up to the Trump administration who is trying to make policy changes based on hate and ignorance. This will be challenging. They will threaten you with budget cuts. They will threaten your jobs. Right wing radicals will target schools that stand up against these policies. It will be tempting to think about the larger community of students at your school and consent to further marginalizing an already vulnerable student population. Caving to bigotry, however, sends a damaging message to all students.

- **Build community around your 2SLGBTQIA+ students** – Connect your 2SLGBTQIA+ students with one another. Check in with them often. The presence of at least one accepting adult in the life of a trans kid increases self-esteem and significantly lowers rates of attempting suicide. Your music classroom can be a safe haven in your school. You can be an ally to your trans students even when school policies limit your ability to talk about gender. Listening is a good first step.
- **Be a vocal and visible ally in your community** – Trans people are good at supporting one another, but great allies make that task easier. Consider donating to local organizations that support the queer community. Keep informed about the issues that face your community's 2SLGBTQIA+ population. Show up to protests, school board meetings, and pride events.
- **Help all of your students to become good human beings** – The Trump administration will make it more challenging to talk about gender and sexuality in schools, but they will say nothing about teaching your students critical thinking, kindness, and empathy. These skills are vital for building acceptance for all marginalized groups. Weave these lessons into your music making.
- **Encourage positive masculinity** – Your young men need healthy role models of masculinity, instead of the trumped up alpha male mentality pushed on them online. Work with male teachers at your school to present positive and affirming versions of masculinity. These kids are victims in all of this too.
- **Empower diverse femininity** – Your female students need to know that they can be any kind of woman they want to be. They are multifaceted – nuanced, complex, powerful, intelligent, and beautiful in every way. The patriarchy wants women to be divided, to empower white women just enough so they will turn their backs on women of colour and trans women. This division furthers bigotry and racism.
- **Talk to friends and family about 2SLGBTQIA+ issues** – Many people don't have any real experience with members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Their opinions on issues like trans rights are often built in fear. Leading people out of this fear begins with acknowledging feelings and asking questions. Some will be near impossible to reach, but many just need to be invited in with kindness and understanding. These conversations are challenging, but they help inch people closer to acceptance.