



# Gender Identity and Expression Guidelines

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# Introduction

These guidelines were developed in this context and are aligned with, and support the principles and expectations of the following Board policies:

- [Human Rights: Code Related Harassment and Discrimination Policy #240](#);
- [Equity and Inclusivity Policy #261](#);
- [Caring and Safe Schools Policy#668](#); and
- [Recruitment and Promotion Policy #532](#).

At all times, these guidelines should be interpreted to be consistent with the Human Rights Code and Board policies and procedures.

The [York Region District School Board's Human Rights: Code Related Harassment and Discrimination Policy](#) 240.0, outlines that each person has the right to learn and/or work in an environment that is free from discrimination and harassment and protects, promotes and supports human rights.

To support all members of the York Region District School Board community who have questions or concerns related to discrimination and harassment, the Board created the [Human Rights Commissioner's Office \(HRCO\)](#). It is the Board's arms-length office for Human Rights Code compliance under its Human Rights Policy. The HRCO manages and investigates human rights complaints, including those related to sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. The [HRCO Reporting Form](#) is available online for any member of the Board community to report a human rights complaint, matter or issue.

[Report It](#) is the Non-Emergency Student Reporting link for York Region District School Board. This reporting tool is for non-emergency reporting. It is not monitored 24 hours a day. It is not an emergency or crisis support/counselling line for immediate support. The goal of the Report is to support creating a caring, safe and inclusive environment for all of our students, families and staff members. This tool can be used to report student behaviours such as: bullying, drugs, cheating, vandalism, harassment, violence or any other inappropriate behaviour. It can also be used to report incidents of discrimination or hate, including anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, antisemitism, classism, homophobia, Islamaphobia, transphobia or other forms of hate. Positive behaviours, such as students demonstrating empathy, fairness, honesty or initiative can be reported as well.

This document is grounded in the understanding that people who are transgender, or gender non-conforming, come from all walks of life. Yet trans and gender diverse people are some of the most disadvantaged groups in society: trans people continue to face employment discrimination, discrimination in healthcare access, and disproportionately high experiences of harassment, sexual assault, and violence.

# Caring and Safe Schools, Gender Identity and Gender Expression

The [2017 York Region District School Board's Student Climate Survey](#) noted that students at the secondary level who reported their sexual orientation as 2SLGBTQ+ were twice as likely to report they had been bullied compared to their heterosexual/straight peers.

To promote education, communication, and trusting relationships to support bullying prevention, the Board has an Anti-Bullying Strategy including Bullying Prevention and Awareness Week. This connects to the broader Caring and Safe Schools policy and related procedures. [This policy outlines](#) the Board's commitment to creating and sustaining caring and safe schools which promote student learning, achievement and well-being. Each student has the right to learn in a safe, positive, respectful and inclusive environment, free from harassment and discrimination and where every effort is made to mitigate risk or the potential for harm. The Code of Student Conduct resides within the Caring and Safe Schools policy and related procedures, and states that all members of the school community must adhere to the following standards of respectful and responsible behaviour, including "Respect and treat others equitably, being inclusive of people based on a protected ground(s) as per the Ontario Human Rights Code."

The Board is committed to student achievement and well-being by working to ensure equitable access and outcomes through accessible and inclusive learning and working environments. Additional details are outlined in the Equity and Inclusivity policy and related procedures. The Recruitment and Promotion Policy demonstrates the Board's commitment to creating and sustaining an inclusive, caring and safe learning and working environment through recruitment and promotion practices that are consistent, equitable, transparent and free from discrimination.

## What Do I Need to Ask Myself?

*In each section, we will offer reflective questions for readers, asking you to examine your mindsets, positionality, current level of understanding, assumptions, and biases*

- Where do I go to report that I have witnessed or experienced harassment or discrimination based on my own gender or gender expression?
- Which policies and procedures do I rely on when I witness gender-diverse students experiencing harassment or discrimination?
- What supports or barriers do I notice in my school or workplace?

## How to read this document

**Note on affirming language:** Throughout this document, the term "gender diverse" will be used as an umbrella term referring to people who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, who are non-binary, trans, or transgender, and experience their gender identity and/or expression as fluid. Labels are individual, can be cultural, and personal. Please always use the words people use for themselves when talking about them. Not all the words used by people to describe their gender are in this document.

These guidelines were developed with YRDSB staff as the primary audience, to inform interpersonal and institutional-level actions and responses that both affirm and support students, parents, colleagues, and community members who are gender diverse. The intersectional social identities and the lived experiences of gender diverse members within our learning community require personalized, not generalized, responses and processes from YRDSB staff. Furthermore, YRDSB staff, regardless of the social identities they themselves embody, must approach this work purposefully and with cultural humility. Thus, a collaborative “shared solutions” approach can create the conditions needed for safety, mattering and belonging for gender diverse people.

Authentically enacting many of the improvement processes outlined in the YRDSB’s [Multi-Year Strategic Priorities \(MYSP\)](#), [Indigenous Education and Equity Strategy \(IEES\)](#), and [Director’s Action Plan \(DAP\)](#) can disrupt or prevent the perpetuation of heterosexism, cissexism, and other forms of oppression that gender diverse people can experience in educational settings. For instance, the DAP prescribes working in ways that:

- “Build safe, healthy and inclusive learning and working environments where students and staff feel they matter and belong”.
- “Build trust and collaborative relationships with students, families and staff through respectful and responsive communication focused on shared solutions”.

Similarly, the [MYSP](#) requires staff “to champion equity and inclusivity” by creating “safe spaces” and through developing “the knowledge, skills and attitudes to remove barriers in support of all learners.” YRDSB’s Gender Identity and Expression Guidelines can help staff conceptualize and contextualize what responsive and affirming supports, services, and environments can look like for gender diverse individuals regardless of their gender or gender expression.

The thoughtful application of these Gender Identity and Expression Guidelines can help staff to take responsibility for improving the experiences and educational outcomes for gender diverse students/staff and indicates a commitment to serving the broader 2SLGBTQ+ community. Following these guidelines is also vital to upholding YRDSB’s obligations under the Ontario Human Rights Code. The [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) (the Code) provides equal rights and opportunities, and freedom from discrimination. The Code recognizes the inherent dignity and worth of every person in Ontario. People who are discriminated against or harassed because of gender are legally protected under the ground of gender identity and gender expression. This includes transgender and intersex persons and other people whose gender identity or expression is, or is seen to be, different from their birth-identified sex.

The Gender Identity and Expression Guidelines are aligned with, and support the principles and expectations of the YRDSB’s [Human Rights Policy #240.0](#), [Equity and Inclusivity Policy #261.0](#), and [Caring and Safe Schools Policy #668.0](#).

**Other Considerations:** These guidelines are intended to improve inclusion, celebrate gender diversity, and prevent or mitigate harm (ie. acts informed by transphobia). Parts of this document also invite reflection about the ways in which settler colonialism and cissexism intersect with other forms of oppression (like racism and/or classism) to shape our notions of gender. Cissexism is unintentionally reinforced in harmful educational practices and curricula that serve to erase and forget the histories, and lived experiences of gender diverse people.

# GLOSSARY

For the ease of readers, we have organized these glossary terms in order of relevance to the topics described across this document.

## 2SLGBTQ+

An acronym for “Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Queer, Questioning, and related identities”. This acronym is often used as an umbrella term to encompass a broad spectrum of identities related to gender and attraction. This acronym takes many forms and can include: LGBPTTIQQ2sAAS+.

## AFAB

An acronym that refers to someone who was assigned female sex at birth. It stands for Assigned Female at Birth. This may also be expressed as Coercively Assigned Female at Birth (CAFAB).

## Ally

An ally is someone who believes in the dignity and respect of all people and takes action by supporting and/or advocating with groups experiencing social injustice. An ally does not identify as a member of the group they are supporting (e.g., a heterosexual person can act as an ally for gay people and communities; a cisgender lesbian can act as an ally for gender diverse people and communities). An ally is not a noun but an action.

Allyship is a never-ending process of education, as allies learn more about the social systems and institutions that continue to isolate, stigmatize and discriminate against gender diverse people.

## AMAB

An acronym that refers to someone who was assigned male sex at birth. It stands for Assigned Male at Birth. This may also be expressed as Coercively Assigned Male at Birth (CAMAB).

## Assigned Sex at Birth

Assigned sex at birth is the classification of a person as male, female or intersex based on biological characteristics, including chromosomes, hormones, genitalia, reproductive organs, and changes experienced during puberty. The reason we say assigned sex versus biological sex is to acknowledge that sex is often a value determined by medical professionals and is commonly assigned to newborns based on visual assessment of external genitalia. Inclusion here of the recognized category of “intersex,” frequently overlooked in discussions of sex, serves as a reminder that even at the level of biology, sex is not a binary system.

## Bisexual

A person who experiences attraction to more than one gender. Some bisexual people use this term to express attraction to both their own gender, as well as to people of a different gender. Some bisexuals do not focus on gender at all when they describe their attraction to a partner.

## Cisgender

A person whose gender corresponds with the social expectations associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. Cisgender is the appropriate term whenever describing individuals whose gender aligns with the social expectations of them based on their sex assigned at birth.

## Cisnormativity

A cultural and societal bias, often unconscious, that privileges cisgender identities and gender norms, and ignores or underrepresents gender diversity by assuming that all people are cisgender and will express their gender in a way that aligns with perceived gender norms.

In other words, cisnormativity is the idea that being cisgender (ie. identifying with the gender you were assigned at birth) is “natural”, “normal”, and true for everybody. This is an idea that can be held by individuals, and is upheld by systems and institutions (eg. the existence of gendered bathrooms).

## Cissexism

Prejudice and discrimination against gender diverse identities and/or expressions. This includes the presumption that being cisgender is the superior and more desirable gender.

## Culturally Responsive And Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP)

When Nicole West-Burns came to Canada from the U.S. to work with Jeff Kugler in the Centre for Urban Studies at University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE/UT), she brought her deep knowledge and experience of this research to add to Kugler's many years of working as an educator/administrator in Toronto's Regent Park. Combining the theories of Ladson-Billing's Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Gay's Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, they framed an approach many Canadian educators now know as Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP).

CRRP is not a program that can be delivered to schools in a box and distributed at a staff meeting or even on a single professional development day. Instead it is a dynamic framework that provides a set of tools and lenses that, if taken seriously, can lead to thoughtful unpacking, personal reflection and honest dialogue among staff, students and communities. CRRP examines issues of power and privilege, calls participants to challenge the beliefs and assumptions about the students in their class and explores on a very deep level what is necessary to enable all students to be successful in school. It intentionally centres the cultural assets that students bring with them to the classroom and uses those assets as a way to get to know the students and their way of knowing the world, and as a way of engaging all students. But it also forces educators to consider how those assets are put to work to allow students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and in the life of the school.

## Eurocentrism

Presupposes the supremacy of non-Indigenous western civilization, specifically Europe and Europeans, in world culture. Eurocentrism centres history according to European and western perceptions and experiences.

# Gender

Gender is a system that operates in a social context to classify people, often based on their assigned sex. In many contexts, including the western eurocentric culture, this often takes the form of a binary classification of either 'man' or 'woman'; in other contexts, this includes a broader spectrum that recognizes more gender diversity.

Gender is a part of a person's internal and individual experience and sense of self. This could include an internal sense of being a man, woman, both, neither or another gender entirely. A person's gender may or may not correspond with social expectations associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. Since gender is internal, it is not necessarily visible to others. It is important to remember that gender is not the same as sex/assigned sex.

Gender is occasionally referred to as 'gender identity.' However, the language 'gender identity' is often used to describe the genders of transgender or gender diverse people. It is rarely used in reference to cisgender people, resulting in larger cultures of inclusion using language that serves to dismiss or invalidate gender diverse people. For this reason, we use the word 'gender' consistently across this document for all people - whether we are describing transgender, cisgender, or gender diverse people. One exception to this is where this document quotes policy or legislation that uses the term 'gender identity.'

## Gender Binary

An institutional, prescriptive model and understanding of gender (and sex) that posits that there are only two genders (women and men), sexes (male and female), and that they are opposite, distinct, and uniform categories. This view also asserts that gender is determined by sex.

## Gender Diverse

An umbrella term for gender identities and/or gender expressions that differ from cultural or societal expectations based on assigned sex.

## Gender Expression

The way a person presents and communicates gender within a social context. Gender can be expressed through clothing, speech, body language, hairstyle, voice, and/or the emphasis or de-emphasis of bodily characteristics or behaviours, which are often associated with masculinity and femininity. The ways in which gender is expressed are culturally specific and may change over time. Gender expression does not always align with a culture's expectations of connection to gender, for example: not all women have a feminine gender expression. Gender expression may also be referred to as gender presentation or gender performance.

## Gender Fluidity

Gender fluidity refers to the potential for change in ideas, experiences, and expressions of gender at an individual and/or societal level. This concept recognizes the potential for individual movement within a gender spectrum when it comes to self-presentation or expression. For some people this concept is embodied by self-identifying as 'gender fluid.'



Dominant Canadian culture is cisnormative and informed by our system of settler colonialism. We are taught that gender is a static, unchanging characteristic. We are either always a “boy” or always a “girl”. While that may be the experience of some people, others’ experience of their own gender is sometimes more fluid, always changing. These individuals may express their gender in ways that align with their inner experience from day to day.

## **Gender Spectrum**

This is a model that recognizes that people may have a range of experiences (and realities) in gender. It may include a spectrum of understanding of sex as well that recognizes intersex identities and experiences.

## **Heteronormativity**

A cultural and societal bias, often unconscious, that privileges heterosexuality, and ignores or underrepresents diversity in attraction and behaviour by assuming all people are heterosexual.

In other words, heteronormativity is the idea that identifying as heterosexual or straight is “natural,” “normal,” and true for everybody. This is an idea that can be held by individuals, and is upheld by systems and institutions (eg. forms that ask for “mother” and “father” information only).

## **Intersectionality**

A lens of analysis of social relations and structures within a given society named by Kimberlé Crenshaw. The concept of intersectionality recognizes how each person simultaneously exists within multiple and overlapping identity categories (including but not limited to: ability, attraction, body size, citizenship, class, ethnicity, gender expression, gender, nation, race, religion, sexual orientation). The ways in which an individual experiences systemic privilege and oppression are impacted by the interplay of these identity categories, depending on how they are valued by social institutions. Intersectionality, as a lens, focuses race and ethnicity at the core of its analysis and the compounded experiences of marginalization when someone holds multiple marginalized identities. For example, Black lesbians experience racism, sexism, and heterosexism all at once. Their Black identities can not be separated from their gender or identity as a lesbian.

## **Intersex**

A person born with sex characteristics (chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, or genitals) that do not fit the typical medical definitions of male or female bodies.

## **Non-Binary/Genderqueer**

A person whose gender and/or expression may not correspond with social and cultural gender expectations. Individuals who identify as genderqueer may move between genders, identify with multiple genders, or reject the gender binary or gender altogether.

## Pansexual

A person who experiences attraction to people of diverse sexes and/or genders. The term pansexual reflects a desire to recognize the potential for attraction to sexes and/or genders that exist across a spectrum and to challenge the sex/gender binary. Pansexual people, bisexual people, and other people who experience an attraction to more than one gender often create community together - sometimes called the Bi+ community. The selection of one identity word over another and how it is defined is a personal process.

## Pathologizing Gender Identity

The action of characterizing aspects of a person's gender identity, feelings, traits, characteristics and/or experiences as medically or psychologically abnormal or distressing. This phenomenon occurs when folks make the false connection between mental health stress and gender identity. One way we see this occur is when gender diverse youth are ushered into therapy, as if gender diverse identities are 'issues', 'situations' or 'problems.' It is vital to speak to and fully support gender diverse youths' wants and needs before assuming they need formal mental health support.

## Pronouns

Words that are used to talk about someone in place of their name. Common pronouns include:

- they/them/their/theirs/themself
- she/her/hers/herself
- he/him/his/himself
- ze/zir/zirs/zirself
- And infinite other possibilities!

(source: [www.transstudent.org](http://www.transstudent.org))

## Queer

A term used by some in 2SLGBTQ+ communities, particularly youth, as a symbol of pride and affirmation of diversity. This term makes space for the expression of a variety of identities outside of rigid categories associated with sex, gender or attraction. It can be used by a community to encompass a broad spectrum of identities related to sex, gender or attraction (as with the acronym 2SLGBTQ+), or by an individual to reflect the interrelatedness of these aspects of their identity.

Queer was historically a derogatory term for difference, used in particular to insult homosexuality and 2SLGBTQ+ people. Although sometimes still used as a slur, the term has been reclaimed by some members of 2SLGBTQ+ communities. The term queer can also be used as a verb. When we queer literature, resources or classrooms, it means that we make them inclusive of diverse gender and sexual identities and that we identify and challenge cis/heteronormative assumptions.

# Questioning

An umbrella term that often reflects a process of reconciling three different pieces of information:

1) The feelings you have within yourself about the attraction(s) you experience and/or how you experience gender; 2) The language you have available to you to frame those feelings; and 3) The sense you have of how this will impact your interactions with other people in a social context.

# Transgender

A person who does not identify either fully or in part with the gender associated with the sex assigned to them at birth — often used as an umbrella term to represent a wide range of gender identities and expressions.

# Transphobia

Fear and/or hatred of any transgression of perceived gender norms, often exhibited by name-calling, bullying, exclusion, prejudice, discrimination or acts of violence—anyone who is trans and/or gender diverse (or perceived to be) can be the target of transphobia.

# Transition

Some people who do not identify with the sex/gender they were assigned at birth may choose to change something about the social, legal, or medical expression of their gender. This process is known as transitioning. It's important to note that not all people who identify as something other than the sex/gender they were assigned at birth transition, and that affirming a person's gender should not be dependent on their physical or social expression. Transitioning is an individual process that looks different for each person. It is important to not try to fit someone's transition into a cisnormative lens.

Transition may or may not be a lifelong journey. Transition may not always be desired by, available, or safe for everyone.

Social transition is often the most common form for students within elementary or secondary school contexts. This may include changes to:

- Name(s)
- Pronouns
- Gender expression (e.g., clothing, accessories, mannerisms, way of speaking, etc.);
- Access to gendered spaces (e.g., washrooms, change rooms, religious/community spaces)

Our job in schools is to continuously create spaces in which people feel as safe as possible to express their genders however they want, and in which their genders are affirmed.

## Two Spirit

Two Spirit is used as an umbrella term that points to the important roles that Two Spirit people held prior to colonization; however, as an umbrella term, specific teachings, roles, meanings, and language must come from the community. The term reflects the historical acceptance of people of diverse gender identities, gender expressions, and sexual identities within Indigenous communities in pre-contact times.

More information about the importance, value, and history of this term can be found in the 'Understanding Gender Diversity' section of this document.

# SECTION 1 - SUPPORTING STUDENTS

## Anti-Oppression Framework

### Why an Anti-Oppression Framework?

We preface this entire text by highlighting an anti-oppression framework as it is an approach that helps to ensure that equity and human rights are foundational to our work as educators. This approach supports our roles as educators to work together in removing systemic barriers and identifying approaches for providing equitable and accessible services that lead to success and well-being in schools and workplaces. The anti-oppression framework encourages the practice of **identifying, addressing and changing the values, structures, policies, attitudes and practices that result in discrimination** against individuals or groups covered by the Ontario Human Rights Code, and beyond. Engaging from this framework leads us to understand how power, privilege and oppression operate within our institutions. It requires that we ally with marginalized individuals or groups, and that we acknowledge our own power and privilege in order to create an equitable organization.

[\(Equity Action Plan YRDSB\)](#)

### What are systems of oppression?

The term 'systems of oppression' refers to the ways in which institutional power and control function and are maintained across our society resulting in social inequity - perpetuating limited opportunities to some groups of people, and providing access, visibility and privilege to others based on their identities or experiences. Some examples of systems of oppression include: ableism, cissexism, classism, colonialism, heterosexism, racism. But there are many more.

We use 'systems of oppression' rather than simply 'oppression' or 'inequalities' to capture the ways that larger institutions (governments, social mores, or our schools) can replicate and perpetuate dominant patterns of thinking and behaviour, ways of knowing and understanding that function to exclude those who do not adhere to the strict limitations of acceptability. These systems become reified across time and in tradition and are embedded in all of the ways that our societies have been structured, like:

- In science, where medical research has historically ignored and under-studied the medical needs of women, Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities, and can often perpetuate the neglect and denigration of disabled people.
- Through law, by criminalizing particular behaviours across time and into today - like prohibiting expansive gender expressions or sexualities, carding or over-monitoring racialized neighborhoods.
- In schools, where students' behaviour has historically been monitored and met with punishment (a system that school boards like YRDSB are working to change every day!)

*This is not an exhaustive list of social institutions that shape the world, and there are many more examples where science, schools, and laws have harmed and continue to harm marginalized communities.*

Institutions and individuals can perpetuate these dominant, exclusionary patterns of thinking both knowingly and unknowingly. These patterns of thinking and behavior might be understood as 'common sense', or obvious to us, based on our socialization. As such, it becomes even harder to unpack the ways that everyday behaviour, actions, or regulations can serve to be exclusionary or harmful to particular groups of people.

*As an example, in western society we are taught from a young age that there are two genders: boys and girls. We are taught that those two groups of people have inherent differences, and know that they are expected to behave in different ways. This becomes 'common sense' to us because of all of the ways our society highlights gender differences: which toys we give either girls or boys, what kinds of emotions they are allowed to display, through media representation, or even putting 'girls' and 'boys' in different lines at recess. Over time, the differences that our society often emphasizes between boys and girls is normalized, and has material effects on how we organize our lives! This common-sense knowledge resulted in our schools being built without considering the possibility that a student may not be a boy or a girl at all, or that these categories might be much more flexible than we had been taught to know.*

## What is Privilege?

Systems of oppression result in the marginalization and exclusion of certain social groups of identity, while offering power and unearned privileges to others. Privilege, or power, in this instance, can look like increased access to services and supports, more representation, a louder voice, or even just the ability to move through a space without having to be a 'self advocate'. Being part of a privileged group does not negate or dismiss the challenges individuals can face in their lifetimes, but it does mean that there are built-in advantages to being born into certain social groups and that there are barriers that will never have to be faced by people who are members of them.

If we are from a privileged group, we learn to view ourselves and our realities as representing the norm - because it is our position that informs the 'common sense' that our society has been built around. This conditioning leads us to assume that our worldviews are universal and we develop a sense of "rightness" about ourselves and normalize our ways of being, patterns of thinking and how we should see and relate to others. As a result, those with privilege can make assumptions and perpetuate behaviours that treat those who are different from us as "other" or "less than." As educators, it is important to acknowledge our positions in the social hierarchy and understand how our own identities, privilege, and social locations shape our attitudes and our practice.

## Intersectionality

*"There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."*

~Audre Lorde

The concept of intersectionality was created specifically to understand how each person simultaneously exists within multiple and overlapping systems of oppression based on our particular identities and experiences (including but not limited to: ability, attraction, body size, citizenship, class, creed, ethnicity, gender expression, gender, race, religion).

This term was created by Black feminist scholar [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#) to address how we are impacted

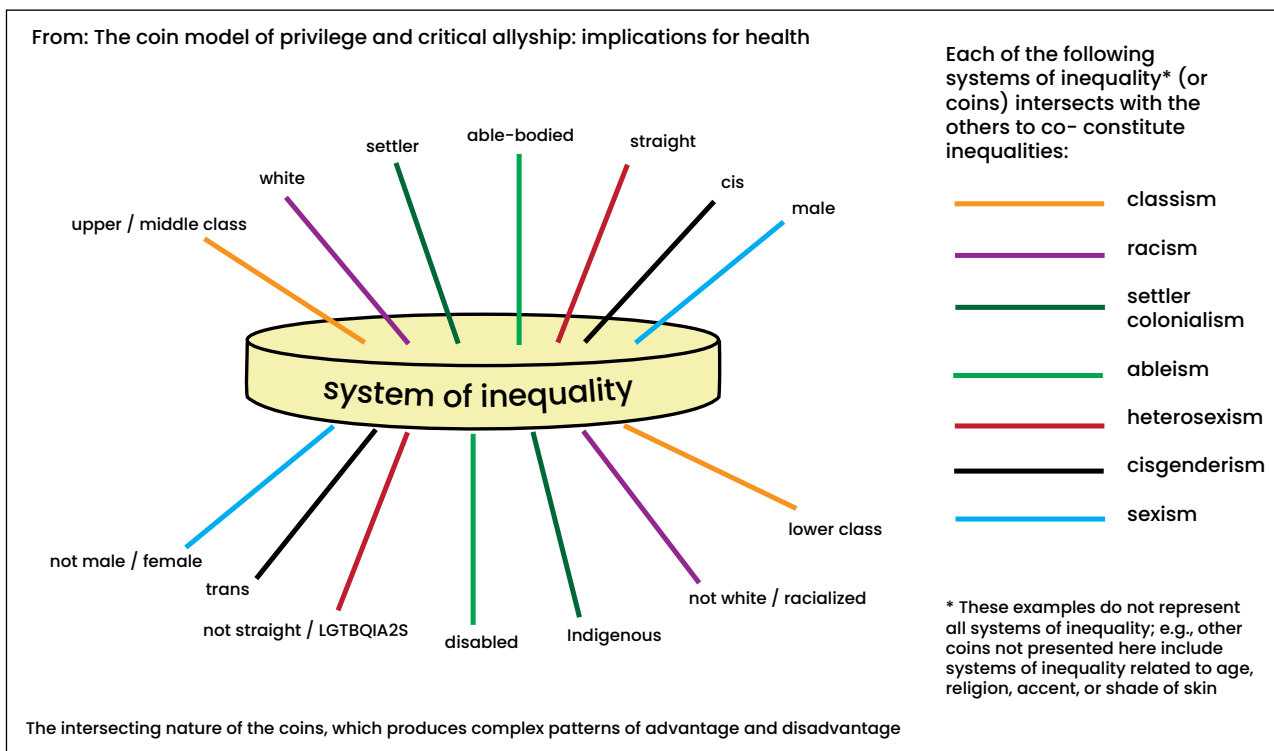
by multiple systems of oppression at the same time, resulting in complex experiences of violence and inequity - that one person doesn't experience an event as either 'a woman' or as 'a Black person' - but both. [Note: We use these examples because Crenshaw created this language specifically to unpack the particular forms of violence and systemic exclusion experienced by Black women - that Black women don't experience an incident of violence as either a white woman, or a Black man, might. Her work challenged the ways that feminist activism and Black community activism of the time were limited in the ways they advocated for issues based on one single identity.]

Individuals are not monolithic or one-dimensional. They can face multiple systems of oppression and their lived experience of marginalization can be very complex. A student who is gender diverse may also be racialized, living with disabilities, of low socio-economic status, gay and have to navigate many barriers arising from the interplay of cissexism, heterosexism, racism, ableism, etc. To be an effective advocate for gender diverse people, we need to challenge the various systems of oppression that impact them and be intentional about creating learning and working spaces that value all dimensions of their identities.

## Web of Social Locations

Our social locations - our positions in the social hierarchy - determine how much power and privilege we hold in our society. The power and privilege we access can also change depending on the space that we find ourselves in. If we look at the graphic below, the closer our social locations are to the centre of the circle, the greater our access to status and advantages in society.

We encourage you to take the time and review the Web of Social Locations for yourself, and spend time reflecting on your own identity and experience.



Source: <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-019-7884-9>

# Understanding Gender Diversity

Our job in schools is to continuously create spaces in which people feel as safe as possible to express their genders however they want, and in which their genders are affirmed.

## Community and Service Provider Language

There are many, many different words that people use to describe their gender. Community language is continuously in flux and ever-expanding! Some words that people use to describe their gender are: woman, trans, non-binary, man, agender, genderfluid, many combinations of these words, and many other words as well.

In educator and service provider communities, we also use words like gender diverse, gender non-conforming and trans youth/children. We use these words to describe children and youth who either identify as something other or more nuanced than the gender/sex they were assigned at birth, and/or whose expression differs from socially expected/accepted norms.

Throughout the guide, we use many of the words above, particularly gender diverse. Gender diversity includes cisgender identities, and we recognize the problem with assigning the “diverse” category to non-normative (ie. non-cis) identities, thereby potentially further entrenching cis as the “universal norm”.

*Please refer to the Glossary for more detail about the language in this section.*

## Assigned Sex

Most children are assigned a sex, usually either male or female, at birth (or in utero) based on the physical appearance of their outward genitals. Some children are born intersex, an umbrella term to describe bodies that fall outside the strict male/female binary ([Planned Parenthood](#)). From the moment a baby is assigned a sex, they are surrounded by messaging about what the gender associated with their assigned sex means - what they should wear, what and who they should play with, how they should behave, and what is considered ‘normal’, ‘acceptable’ behaviour.

## Binary Gender Expectations

Our current western culture teaches us that gender exists in a binary: that there are only two genders: male and female, that they are separate and “opposite” of each other, and that identifying as one of these is “natural,” “normal,” and true for everybody. The language used to describe this system of oppression is ‘cisnormativity.’ We know that many cultures, over time and in the present, around the world have recognized and revered more than two genders. However, the impact of colonization has led us to normalize the gender binary. White, western culture has a long history of the erasure and enactment of genocidal violence, criminalization, and regulation of bodies, sexuality, sexual expression, and gender that informs how gender and sexuality are understood today. This regulation of gender cannot be disentangled from the institutionalization of racism, colonialism, and global imperialism. White colonizers perpetuated extreme forms of violence in order to carry out the colonial project: instituting a society in which white, cisgender, men hold all of the power, freedom, and ability to continue their violence with impunity. *[Note: for more insights about the compounded history of racism, colonialism, gender regulation and sexualization, refer to the works of Kyla Schuller, Mark Rifkin, Anne McClintock, and Qwo-Li Driskill]*



Sexism also informs how we understand the gender binary. We are taught that men should be “masculine” - ie. “strong,” “rational,” “self-reliant” etc. Women are expected to be “feminine” - ie. “gentle,” “emotional,” “nurturing” and “calm.” Femininity is often perceived as “weaker” than, or at the very least, the opposite to masculinity.

Again here, it is valuable to think about the interconnectedness of systems of oppression: colonialism, sexism, classism, ableism and cissexism, among other systems, all work to uphold this thing we understand to be the “gender binary” - what exists on either side of the binary, how it should look, and who can and cannot exist within it at all.

People who do not conform to these rigid definitions and expectations of gender, whether they are transgender, gender non-conforming, gender creative, or gender diverse, are often viewed as “abnormal,” “undesirable,” or their identities and experiences are pathologized as requiring “fixing,” curing, or accommodating. These views are perpetuated through the media, some medical communities, and other social norms and societal expectations placed on young people.

It is rare for gender diversity to be considered “normal” and healthy, and rare for environments and institutions to truly take into account the ways that a cisnormative environment fails gender diverse people, and all people!

## Youth Relationship to Gender & Perpetuation of Gender Norms

Children typically develop an awareness of their own [gender development by the age of three](#) years old. While some believe that children in elementary school are “too young” to understand gender, that understanding discounts this typical developmental milestone. Children’s toys, media and marketing are a constant reinforcement of these rigid gendered expectations. Our classrooms and school systems, as well as curriculum resources do very little to challenge typical gender beliefs or to affirm gender diversity.

Much bullying in elementary and secondary schools involves the use of sexist, heteronormative and cisnormative language and teachers are uniquely positioned to interrupt the ways that children are exposed to heteronormativity and cisnormativity and encourage students to establish and celebrate their own identities. (The Gender Spectrum: What educators need to know). In EgaleCanada’s 2021 [‘Still in Every Class in Every School: National Climate Survey](#) on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Schools’, 25% of trans student surveyed indicated that they had experienced sexual harassment in school, and 63% of trans students reported experiencing verbal harassment about their gender expression in the last year.

We must consider the impact of transphobia on how we talk about sex and gender. Gender diverse people are subject to exclusion and erasure due to a lack of safe, affirming spaces. As we work towards creating more inclusive environments, gender diverse people can become more visible and self-identify more safely. Not only does this disrupt cisnormativity, but those who are gender diverse are able to explore and better name the gender that fits them the best. As our gender diverse youth grow up with a more confident voice and are more welcomed to explore their true sense of self, they find and share new identities with the world and open our minds to a constantly evolving language.

# Gender Creativity

Gender creative students are students who identify and express their gender in ways that differ from what others may expect. Gender creative students are also sometimes referred to as gender nonconforming, gender variant, gender independent, transgender, gender diverse and in the case of some Indigenous children, Two Spirit. Sometimes gender creative students grow up to identify with the spectrum of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and Two Spirit communities... and sometimes they don't.

When unpacking gender diversity and the fluidity of gender, some people might ask: "if someone is a boy one day and a girl the next day, aren't they just choosing a different gender depending on the day?" Students who are gender fluid are not "choosing" which gender to express from day to day. They are "choosing" to honour how they experience the ever-changing nature of their own gender - which happens to be different from the experience of others. Assuming that gender fluid people "choose" a gender each day would be the same as assuming that cisgender students have "chosen" their own "static" genders. Work alongside gender-creative or gender fluid students to find a system that works for them in order to make sure their identities can be consistently respected.

Gender diversity is healthy and gender creative students deserve to be supported and affirmed in their families, schools, and communities ([gendercreativekids.com](http://gendercreativekids.com)).

## Two Spirit Students & Contexts

[Out Saskatoon](#) provides this important context and history about Two Spirit identities:

"The contemporary term Two Spirit was first coined in 1990 at the 3rd annual Native American and Canadian Aboriginal LGBT people gathering in Winnipeg. In creating the term, the founding group wanted to reflect the historical acceptance of gender-variant peoples and diverse sexual identities within Indigenous communities in pre-contact times.

Two Spirit is used as an umbrella term to reference a multitude of identities across different Indigenous communities, each with their own relationship to sexuality, gender, spiritual and/or cultural roles. The term was created to highlight the importance that Two Spirit folks held prior to colonization. Specific teachings, roles, meanings, and language concerning Two Spirit people must come from the community - For example a Cree 'Two Spirit' person from the plains area could go by aayahkwew (roughly translates to "neither man nor woman") while a Mohawk 'Two Spirit' person could go by Onón:wat (I have the pattern of two spirits inside my body). Furthermore, the teachings, roles, and responsibilities for a Two Spirit person differs from community to community.

The identity term itself was introduced by the Elder Myra Laramee through a vision she had prior to the 1990 gathering in Winnipeg. Myra shared the vision she had of her Anishinaabemowin name of niizh manidoowag; which roughly translates to having the ability to be neutral through the lens of having both a feminine spirit and masculine spirit within one's body.

Being Two Spirit is a very fluid identity as each Nation and Indigenous person has their own understanding of what it means to live and be Two Spirit. One important element to note however is that the identity is specific to being Indigenous, in that the identity is a direct acknowledgement of the disruption of Two Spirit teachings that took place when first-contact between Indigenous peoples and settlers was made and the ongoing impact of colonization."

Two Spirit is used by some, not all, Indigenous people to describe their gender, sexual and/or spiritual identity. Some may identify as LGBTQ+ and not use the word Two Spirit. Today it may be understood as a placeholder term where Two Spirit is self-defined by the individual Indigenous person. It is a self-defined Indigenous identity and may be a fluid identity.

As an educator, it is your responsibility to learn about how the colonial imposition of the western gender binary impacted and continues to impact Indigenous communities - Two Spirit people in particular. It is also important to understand Two Spirit is not synonymous with non-binary, or any particular LGBTQ+ identity, though a Two Spirit student might use other terms in that acronym to describe themselves as well. Much of the language used to describe LGBTQ+ communities are still produced within a white, western paradigm, and as such, they are limited in their ability to encompass the multitudes of genders that have existed across the world since time immemorial.

## You Can Help Gender Diverse Students!

It is not uncommon, as one begins to learn about gender diversity, to feel unsteady, confused about language and terminology, and maybe even uncomfortable. Most of us have grown up in cisnormative and even transphobic societies, and it is hard work to unlearn and re-learn internalized ideas about gender. Further, people may fear offending someone by using the wrong pronoun, not using or understanding most current language, or they may fear being called out for mistakes they will make. As we do this work, we must consider why information and understanding about gender diversity is not more widespread. How did understanding gender diversity become hidden knowledge? There is much to unlearn about what we were taught about gender so that we can move toward more expansive understandings of gender.

### *Quick Exercise:*

*Take 5 minutes to think (or write) about your own gender, being as descriptive and expansive as you can. What does it feel like for you, what are your attachments? How do you express your gender: do you make these decisions consciously? What feels affirming to you about your gender in your everyday life? What do you like about your gender, how might you celebrate or own your gender, fully?*

## Using Affirming Name & Gender Pronouns

Educators can create safer and more inclusive spaces for gender diverse students who socially transition by normalizing opportunities for all students to share their names and pronouns, and respecting these requests throughout the year. Staff are advised to contact Inclusive School and Community Services when they receive a request from a student for support in transitioning socially and if students are looking for support for medical transitions.

When we refuse to acknowledge or use someone's pronouns, we are telling them:

1. I know you better than you know yourself
2. I would rather hurt you than change the way I speak about you
3. Your sense of safety is not important to me
4. Your identity isn't real and shouldn't be acknowledged

5. I want to teach everyone around me to disrespect you
6. Offending you is fine if it makes me comfortable
7. I can hear you talking, but I'm not listening
8. Being who you truly are is an inconvenience to me
9. I would prefer it if you would stop being honest with me
10. I am not an ally, a friend, or someone you can trust

Using the name and pronouns a gender diverse person uses for themselves is a powerful act of affirmation of their gender. Choosing not to use someone's pronouns is not only hurtful and invalidating, but also a [violation of their human rights as outlined in the OHRC](#).

## What Do I Need to Ask Myself?

- What have I been taught to believe about gender?
- What are my cultural norms about gender? How do they show up in my everyday life? In my beliefs and life goals? Do I ever impose those beliefs and goals on others?
- How would my personal beliefs about gender impact my practice and the success of my students? How would they impact families and colleagues?
- Challenging cisnormativity is essential for the well-being of our gender diverse students, staff and community. How does interrupting this system also benefit cisgender students and staff?
- What are my assumptions about what transition might look like?

## Demonstrating Effective Allyship for Gender Diverse Students

- Do not make assumptions about your students' gender identities. Gender diverse students may be present in your classrooms, but not be able to express their gender. Gender diverse people may be in your staff rooms, but uncomfortable sharing that identity due to discrimination. Additionally, any assumption you make about a student's gender is inherently coloured by your own lens or understanding of gender - gender expression is individual and elastic - our personal understandings of 'masculinity', 'femininity', and everything outside of those categories change over time, locations, and cultures.
- Create the opportunity to share your pronouns and for others to share theirs. Sharing pronouns is something that we do in relationship to one another - it says 'this is how you can affirm my identity when you are speaking with me.' Do not only ask for pronouns selectively based on your own reading of a student's gender expression, and do not demand any student share that information with you if they are not comfortable.
- Use gender neutral pronouns in your classroom and work spaces when people have not had the opportunity to share the pronouns they use.
- Consider ways in which you can recognize, identify and disrupt cisnormativity. Understand that no space, including our classrooms, is neutral. Look for ways in which you can reframe your thinking to promote more gender inclusive spaces.
- Find ways to challenge the traditional gender binary by teaching and integrating language that reflects gender diversity and examples that showcase gender diverse people.

- Understand that your students are multi-dimensional. To be inclusive, you need to address the multiple ways they may experience oppression as individuals.
- Similarly, different students will have different needs when it comes to respecting their gender diversity. Some students might want announcements, some students might prefer privacy, some students may have fierce advocates as parents, some might require your discretion. Ask them.
- All students have a right to privacy; schools must keep a student's gender diverse status confidential. Therefore, school staff should not disclose a student's trans/gender diverse status to others that do not have access to the student's Ontario Student Record without explicit consent from the student (e.g., to fulfill a specific accommodation request).
- Some trans and gender diverse students are not out openly at home because of safety and or other reasons. A school should never disclose a student's gender diversity or trans status to the student's parent(s)/guardian(s), other students, staff or other parties without the student's explicit prior consent. When school staff contacts the home of a trans or gender diverse student, the student should be consulted first to determine an appropriate way to reference the student's gender identity. If students have first disclosed their gender diverse and/or trans status to staff, it is strongly suggested that staff privately ask trans or gender diverse students at the beginning of the school year how they want to be addressed in correspondence to the home or at meetings with the student's parent(s)/guardian(s).
- Find professional learning resources and participate in workshops related to gender diversity, including those written by gender diverse people.
- Listening and understanding the lived experiences, perspectives and knowledge of gender diverse people is the first step. Being an effective active ally is standing beside and behind gender diverse people, and not attempting to speak for someone or over them unless they invite you to do so.

## Gender-Affirming Classrooms

*"The assumption that classrooms and training rooms are neutral spaces where teachers and learners are basically alike and equal is not valid. A far more realistic view is that teachers and learners are ranked in relation to one another, just as they are in the world outside the classroom. People are allocated or denied privileges based on where they are in the social hierarchy. We bring our long-held ideas about each other based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and physical ability into the classroom. Without consciously changing these ideas, relationships in this setting play out based on these identity categories as they do in every other setting."*

~Cassandra Drennon~

It is widely accepted that schools are microcosm of the broader community which is founded on eurocentric, patriarchal, cisnormative values. Our classrooms will naturally reflect those values which cause harm and do not always speak to the lived experiences of marginalized students, staff and families. When creating inclusive learning environments, we must ensure that the diverse voices, stories, cultures, narratives and identities of students, families and communities are an integral part of all classrooms. This is important when affirming students who are gender diverse. It is imperative that these students see themselves reflected in their curriculum and their learning environment.

Who we are is how we teach. Our approaches and practices are informed and guided by the values, beliefs and experiences that are centred around our social locations. We need to examine our positions in the social hierarchy - who we are, where we hold privilege, where we are marginalized, and how our social locations shape our attitudes, beliefs and relationships. While we are largely unaware of our

learned biases, they still inform our perspectives, our practices, and the decisions that we make. How we see, interpret, and experience the world based on our socialization impacts our practice and is an important first step in becoming a gender-affirming educator. We must be willing to engage in self-reflective practices to support all students regardless of their gender identities.

*“Self-reflection is foundational to the examination and identification of one’s own biases. This critical process includes understanding the issues related to the distribution of power and privilege and the relationship of power dynamics to one’s own social experience. Self-reflection also allows us to recognize how our own social identity is constructed and to think about how social identities are positioned and shaped by society. This is what it means to possess socio-cultural consciousness.” (CRRP monograph)*

As an educator, it is important to start by examining our mindsets which influence how we teach and how we relate to students. In order for that to take place, we must first identify our own biases and recognize how they are at play in the classroom context and how they could impact gender diverse students. As educators and staff, we need to clearly communicate that students of all gender identities and expressions are valued and their lived experiences are to be affirmed and reflected in what they are learning.

## What Do I Need to Ask Myself?

- What is my current understanding of my gender, gender in general, and how is it evident in my school or classroom?
- Am I teaching like it’s a given that transgender students are in my classroom?
- Am I assuming that trans or gender diverse students are inherently “at risk” because of their gender identity, rather than a cisnormative or transphobic atmosphere?
- When I, or people I’ve known, look or act in ways that do not conform to gender expectations, what have the consequences been?
- What dominant perspectives and values do I perpetuate in my classroom?
- Whose perspectives and values are missing? What is the impact on students?
- What messages are gender diverse students getting about their history, present, and possible futures from my classroom?
- When I talk about gender, am I only representing eurocentric, western ideas? If so, am I naming them as such and making efforts other representations of gender?
- How do I know that gender diverse students feel safe and affirmed in my classroom?
- What do my classroom/office resources reflect about my knowledge of gender diversity?
- Am I prepared to respond to transphobia?

## Demonstrating Effective Allyship for Gender Diverse Students in the Classroom

- All students must be able to see themselves in the daily learning of the classroom.
- Call students by the names and pronouns they go by. Model pronoun sharing by sharing your pronouns at the beginning of the year. Invite students to share the names and pronouns they use at the beginning of the year either during introductions or in other ways that may not be as public.

- Connect with students individually to talk about what names and pronouns to use in different contexts: in the classroom, communicating with family, communicating with administrators or other teachers. ISCS is available to work with students and teachers as a team to support the student and staff in creating this plan.
- When addressing students, we often default to terms such as “boys and girls” or “ladies and gentlemen”. Stop using binary language and use gender neutral terms like “everyone” to foster a more inclusive environment.
- When a derogatory term or slur is uttered, [it must be addressed every time](#). Many students report that, despite a teacher or adult having heard anti-2SLGBTQ+ comments, these hurtful and damaging statements are often not addressed. Capitalize on the interaction as an opportunity to not only educate but also further support not only our gender diverse students who are open about their identity but also those who may be exploring, uncertain or fearful of expressing themselves.
- Establish ground rules or norms for the classroom that foster respect for diversity. It is beneficial that you co-create the norms with your students to ensure that there is a shared ownership over the learning.
- Critically examine the texts you use in your classroom and images you display on your walls and consider what messages are being communicated to your students about their gender identities? If an example of cisnormativity comes up in class materials, take the time to unpack what it means before moving on or simply dismissing it - it is a learning opportunity!
- Texts or signage/imagery that includes and celebrates a variety of gender identities should be visible. Posting pictures depicting gender expansive individuals or cultures in which diverse gender identities are revered such as Indigenous communities or the Hijra of India, helps to dispel dominant eurocentric notions of gender, and helps to challenge the idea that gender diversity is “new” to the world, that it is a product of the internet, or any other harmful misunderstandings of gender diversity.
- Create a bulletin board with a list of community resources for all students with specific resources for 2SLGBTQ+ students and families.
- Understand that students are not monolithic. They can experience multiple forms of oppression in addition to cissexism. Creating gender-affirming classrooms means creating inclusive spaces for all aspects of our students identities.

## Student Engagement

All students, regardless of their gender or gender expression have the right to participate in all curricular and extracurricular activities in a healthy, safe and inclusive manner. All school staff and community partners have a responsibility to foster a school culture that welcomes and affirms all gender identities.

As educators, we assume that our learning and working spaces are bias-free and that the dynamics associated with power and oppression are not operating. However, according to the 2017 [YRDSB Student Climate Survey](#), only 56% of elementary (grades 5-8) and 54% of secondary students who identify as gender diverse report feeling welcome at school.

Our education system is based on the eurocentric and cis/heteronormative values established by colonizers who settled this land. In schools, our typical practices tend to reflect these values and centre the needs and safety of cisgender people, signalling that these spaces are not safe for those who are gender diverse. Disrupting dominant ways of understanding gender is imperative if we are to remove

the barriers facing gender diverse students, and this is especially visible in the realm of student engagement and extracurricular activity. School staff and community members need to explore how to reduce the practice of segregating students exclusively according to gender (e.g., avoid structuring activities involving the selection of a Prom Queen and King, or a boys-only volleyball team, girl-only cheerleaders, etc.). When gender segregated opportunities are offered, it is important to remember that students have the right under [YRAA](#) to participate in activities that are in alignment with their lived gender identities.

The feeling of belonging in any community is dependent on access to learning spaces that are affirming and inclusive of students' identities. School attachment—the feeling that one belongs in the school community—is a crucial issue in this regard because of its connection to lower suicidality rates for all students, including 2SLGBTQ+ students ([O'Donnell et al., 2004](#)). School attachment has also been linked to academic performance for 2SLGBTQ+ students, especially for boys ([Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007](#)). Affirming and positive environments are created verbally, emotionally, and physically; they are made possible through welcoming, kind actions toward all, as well as through inclusive physical spaces. Students, staff and community members need to remember that traditional ways of understanding gender do not correspond to the lived experiences of many individuals and create school communities that do not lead to greater engagement and success.

## What Do I Need to Ask Myself?

- How can I challenge cisnormative and gender-segregated approaches to athletics and extracurricular activities?
- What barriers do I notice that prevent gender diverse students from engaging in safe and equitable participation in extracurricular activities (including recreation, athletics, clubs)?
- How can I support the establishment of GSA or similar groups? Are these groups inclusive of gender diverse students? [By law \(Bill 13\)](#) states that, if requested, all elementary and secondary schools are required to establish the development of a trans-inclusive GSA (Gender-Sexuality Alliance) or similar group, developed and named by the students. They should support actions, activities and campaigns that are trans-positive and create awareness about transphobia, gender stereotypes, and gender-based violence.
- How Can I Demonstrate Effective Allyship?

## Demonstrating Effective Allyship Toward Gender Affirming Student Engagement

- Minimize gender-segregated activities and consider creating co-ed and gender neutral possibilities. For example, think about identifying Prom Ambassadors rather than Prom Queens and Kings, or other gender neutral identifiers like Athlete of the Year.
- Offer students the possibility to participate in non-gendered athletic teams.
- Avoid normalizing gender norms by inviting students of all gender identities to participate in activities that are traditionally constructed as “for boys” or “for girls.”
- When gender-segregated activities are offered, remember that students have the right to participate in any activities that are in alignment with their lived gender identity, and consistently affirm this right as necessary in programming and materials.



- Support GSAs (Gender-Sexuality Alliances) and other clubs related to social justice, which provide a sense of community, solidarity, and identity for students of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities or gender expressions. GSA clubs support 2SLGBTQ+ youth to be more engaged in school work, extra curricular activities and the school community.
- Invite school GSAs to join or collaborate in different school activities, clubs, sports or spirit day promotion and organizing.
- Dress codes and clothing expectations should not be gendered.

## **RESOURCES & FURTHER LEARNING: SUPPORTING STUDENTS**

[Gender Galaxy Exercise - Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights](#)

[Inclusive and Affirming Language Tips - Eagle Canada](#)

[Black and LGBTQ: Approaching Intersectional Conversations - The Trevor Project \(US Resource\)](#)

[Creating Authentic Spaces - The 519 Community Centre](#)

[Becoming queerly responsive: Culturally responsive pedagogy for Black and Latino urban queer youth - Brockenbrough \(2016\) - YouthRex Research Summary](#)

[Developing LGBTQ-Inclusive Classroom Curriculum - GLSEN \(US Resource\)](#)

[Creating Community in your Classrooms: "I am Me" Poem Lesson Plan - HRC \(US resource\)](#)

# SECTION 2 - SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

## Accommodations - Facilities

*“There are three teachers of children: adults, other children and their physical environment.”*

*~Loris Malaguzzi~*

Our classrooms, our building layouts, signage, even the choice of colours and symbols in our physical spaces reflect the dominant norms, beliefs and values in our culture and impact the learning and success of students, particularly those who come from marginalized groups. Gender diverse students as well as staff and community members enter our buildings and quickly realize that the physical environments they enter are designed by cisgender people for other cisgender people. They see signage and symbols indicating that washrooms are constructed for two genders. They notice visuals in hallways and classrooms that do not include representations of gender diversity. They realize that their physical environment is cisnormative, met with the assumption that only cisgender people learn and work in these spaces. When considering facilities, the barriers that gender diverse students face are both symbolic and material - resulting in real barriers to their comfort and safety. This means that not only do gender diverse people experience a sense of exclusion, a feeling of not being acknowledged, but also the fear and very real possibility that they will not have access to facilities that will accommodate their lived gender identities. Even when there is available access, gender diverse people can be at risk of feeling singled out or of experiencing harassment and harm when they try to use these facilities. Our physical environment, this “third teacher” can either enhance the kind of learning that optimizes our students’ potential to respond creatively and meaningfully to future challenges or detract from it.

Access to gender-affirming facilities is essential to the safety of students and staff. In the [2015 US Transgender Survey](#), nearly 10% of those surveyed reported having a kidney or urinary tract infection, or another repeated medical issue, as a result of avoiding restrooms in the past year. For gender diverse or other 2SLGBTQ+ students, some spaces in our schools are safer than others. In Egale Canada’s 2021 [‘National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Schools’](#), 53% of 2SLGBTQ+ students identified Phys Ed change rooms as an unsafe space in schools, with 43.1% of students saying the same for washrooms. It is important to remember that all students need safe access to a washroom and change room. These spaces can be spaces of high anxiety for gender diverse students, staff and community members. YRDSB has [committed to all access washrooms](#) across our buildings. The main priority should be for all members of the school community to have safe access to washrooms, and when applicable, change rooms. All school community members have the right to safely access facilities that align with their genders. This applies during school time and to school-related activities on and off school property including field trips and athletic events.

*Quick Exercise:*

*Map out your school (either on paper or in your head). Think about where each of the single-stall accessible washrooms are located. Imagine how many minutes it would take to make it to this room from the opposite side of the building.*

*How many extra minutes might travelling to a prohibitively distanced affirming washroom take out of a student's learning time in a day. A week? A year?*

*How might this material barrier, or structural limitation, create further barriers to a student's education and wellbeing?*

In Egale's 2021 survey, 42.5% of students indicated that school hallways are unsafe spaces for them - rated the 3rd least safe environment in schools. When discussing gender diverse students, conversations often move quickly toward discussions around washroom and changeroom spaces - for obvious reasons - they are typically unsupervised by staff, and access to these spaces is paramount student health, wellness, and safety. They are not, however, the only spaces where gender diverse students are unsafe. It is vital that our conversations and our advocacy for gender diverse student safety across school facilities is expansive and encompasses all school environments.

## **What Do I Need to Ask Myself?**

- What are the layout and facilities in my building teaching students, staff and families about gender diversity?
- What does it mean to have safe access to washrooms and change rooms?
- What is my school's culture, policy, or regulation around accessing all-access washrooms?
- What barriers exist for anyone to access gendered washrooms and change rooms? All-access washrooms? Gender neutral change rooms?
- Do we assume that certain people are less likely to display unsafe behaviours in washrooms and change rooms?
- What messages are being communicated around gendered use of facilities?
- What is the impact on both gender diverse and cisgender individuals?

## **How Can I Demonstrate Effective Allyship toward Gender-Affirming Facilities?**

- Students should never feel they need to opt out of participation in any activities or events because they believe that the facilities will not be able to accommodate their needs.
- It is also important to recognize that gender diverse students may change their accommodation needs over time.
- As part of a comprehensive whole-school approach, strategies should be in place to ensure all areas of the school are safer for all students, all of the time. This may include implementing the following proactive strategies:
  - Washrooms and change rooms are highly gendered spaces and places of high anxiety for many trans, non-binary and gender diverse students, staff, and community members. When we are thinking about these gendered spaces, we want to focus on all school community members' appropriate behaviour and not whether the "appropriate gender" is in the space.

- Trans, non-binary, and gender diverse people should be able to access the washroom that feels most affirming, safe, and/or comfortable for them. This could include either of the gendered washrooms, along with the gender neutral washroom.
- Whenever possible, students are encouraged to let a trusted staff member know their plan so that staff member can provide support or intervention if inappropriate behaviour or harassment happens in that space.
- The use of a barrier-free, non-gendered, single-stall washroom is a matter of choice for students, staff, volunteers or visiting family, and not a compulsory requirement.
- Strategies are in place to ensure that clear behaviour expectations are communicated to and understood by students, staff and volunteers and that washrooms and change-rooms are adequately supervised by adults.
- Increasing adult presence and supervision, and monitoring key areas of the building and grounds.
- Schools provide a barrier free, non-gendered, single-stall washroom for use by any student who desires increased privacy, regardless of the reason (e.g., medical, religious, cultural, gender identity, gender expression, etc.). This washroom is in an easily accessible location within the school, and is established proactively to build inclusive spaces.
- The use of a barrier free, non-gendered, single-stall washroom is a matter of choice for students, staff, volunteers or visiting family, and not a compulsory requirement.
- When possible, schools have more than one barrier free, non-gendered washroom for use by all members of the school community.
- A student who objects to sharing a washroom or change-room with a student who is trans or gender diverse is offered an alternative facility (this scenario also applies when a parent or other caregiver objects to shared washroom or change-room facilities on behalf of their child). ([Alberta p.10](#))
- Activities such as extended field trips or camps that may involve overnight sleeping accommodations will be addressed on a case-by-case basis. In such circumstances, staff shall make every reasonable effort to provide an acceptable accommodation. If, for reasons of privacy or safety, gender diverse students find standard gender-separated sleeping accommodations or shared accommodations unacceptable, private accommodations should be made available to the student at no additional cost.
- Consult with ISCS staff for guidance and support.

## Athletics

Athletics is an area where gender diverse students can feel unwelcome and excluded. Typically, athletics are conceptualized and organized using a cisnormative, binary gendered lens which alienates students who might otherwise enjoy sports and physical activities. Physical Education classes, teams, tournaments and changeroom access are mostly designed to accommodate cisgender students and do not take into account the needs of gender diverse athletes.

It is important to know that gender diverse students have the right to participate in gender-segregated sports and PE class activities that align with their lived gender identities. Classes and teams can also be established in a non-gendered manner (e.g., a tiered approach or co-educational opportunity, etc.) Furthermore, students also have the right to a safe change-room that corresponds to their gender and best meets the individual student's self-identified needs - see the above section on 'facilities' for more details.

Students who choose to participate in any co-curricular activities, including competitive and recreational athletic teams, must be able to do so in ways that are comfortable for them and supportive of their diverse gender identities and gender expressions. In circumstances where activities are organized by gender, students have the right to participate on the team that is in alignment with their gender identity and students who identify as non-binary are eligible to participate on all teams.

([YRAA Constitution, 2019-2020](#)).

## What Do I Need to Ask Myself?

- How do my current athletic practices create barriers for gender diverse students?
- How would seeing beyond the gender binary help me create greater inclusion in athletics?
- What assumptions do I make about genders, biological sex, and bodies that impact or inform my own biases about sport participation?
- How can I establish athletic spaces that are not gendered and therefore safer and respectful of gender diversity?
- How do I communicate to students that gender diverse athletes are welcome to participate in sporting events at my school? In our board?

## How Can I Demonstrate Effective Allyship toward Gender-Affirming Athletics?

Determined on a case-by-case basis, accommodations that support gender diversity in athletics, can include:

- Offering co-ed PE classes in elementary and secondary schools.
- Providing opportunities to participate in non-gendered sports teams.
- Ensuring access to the change-room as would be afforded to any other student of that gender; use of a private area within the public area (a bathroom stall with a door; an area separated by a curtain) or providing a separate changing schedule in the private area (either utilizing the change room before or after the other students); or use of a nearby private area (a nearby washroom; a health room) as requested.
- Use equitable amounts of funding, practice time, and facilities for co curricular activities ([OFSSA, 2020](#)).
- Providing accommodations for changing, showering, or washroom facilities, when travelling for competitions or events at another school, staff ensure. Note: When staff make these arrangements, take care to maintain student's confidentiality by not disclosing information related to gender identity without the student's direct permission.
- Ensuring that all students are aware of existing offerings, policies, and accommodations available to gender diverse students.
- Challenging assumptions about ability, size, and strength based on outdated binary logics as they come up in extracurricular settings or PE classes.
- Ensuring that health and PE class curriculum includes information relevant to the health, sexual health, and safety of gender diverse students.

# Student Records & Documentation

There are many students who are gender diverse in our schools. However, information about these students is being kept in record-keeping systems that have historically been designed for cisgender students. In accordance with the Ontario Human Rights Code, official student records should reflect a student's gender and affirming name and pronouns as much as possible.

A person's self-identification is the sole measure of the person's gender. A person's gender may not match the gender/sex marker on their legal documentation (e.g., birth certificate, passport, statement of live birth). However, these examples of documentation are not required as proof of a person's gender. Administrators should not require students and/or parents/guardians/caregivers to provide legal documentation indicating a change of sex designation before respecting a student's gender (unless the accommodation includes legal changes).

It is important to note that students have a right to privacy and therefore schools must keep a student's gender and/or assigned sex confidential. It should not be communicated to other staff, community members, students and family, unless the student requests and consents to it ([YRDSB Gender Change Memo](#)).

1. Students can request a gender marker change on their student records. If a student makes this request, ask the student (if 16 years and over) or the parents/guardians/caregivers to complete a [Gender Identification Form](#) which will be kept in the OSR. This form can be kept in a sealed envelope if requested by the student or family. Students under 16 without parents/guardians/caregivers consent can create an accommodation plan with an administrator with ISCS support, if needed, to ensure that their identity is respected. It may be the case where a student uses different names and pronouns at school than at home. In these cases, schools should contact Inclusive School and Community Services (ISCS) for assistance and guidance before proceeding.
2. Update the student's gender marker in PowerSchool. Available gender identifications include: male, female, choose not to disclose, and self-identify (with fill in the blank).
3. Enter the student's chosen or affirming name into Trillium under the "preferred name." (Note: In order to change the legal surname and given name in Trillium, there must be legal documentation.)
4. The student's legal name will be printed on the top of the Report Card but the affirming name and pronouns may be used throughout the Report Card comments.
5. To change a student's gender on the Ontario Student Record (OSR), refer to the Ministry of Education - [Ontario Student Record \(OSR\) Guideline](#).
6. If a legal name change is requested, refer to procedures outlined in the [OSR Records Management Policy and Procedures \(#656.0\)](#).

## Quick Exercise:

*'Bureaucratic Violence' is a term that is occasionally used to describe the administrative burdens and mental loads that are placed on marginalized communities when trying to access services, supports, and accommodation.*

*For this exercise, count the number of forms, required parental notes, conversations with teachers and administrative figures, and processes a gender diverse student might encounter in order to make sure their*

*affirming name and gender pronouns are reflected across their documentation and in each of the spaces they navigate at your school.*

*Reflect on the number of material barriers faced by gender diverse students in your school, and the level of self-advocacy required before their identity is affirmed across all school spaces and processes. What are the effects of this mental load that cannot be quantified?*

## **What Do I Need to Ask Myself?**

- Who is the expert on students' understanding of themselves and their identity?
- In what ways do we limit gender as a binary structure in our systems?
- How can I best accommodate a student to feel seen for who they are? What names and pronouns would do that?
- How can I create a supportive environment for students and families to share this information with me?
- Where do students see their names and pronouns in the school system?
- Is it always safe for students to use their name and pronoun in every situation? What can I do to help create those spaces? What support would I need to do that? Will the student and I need a back up plan for if the wrong name or pronoun is used?
- Am I familiar with gender marker procedures? Whom can I consult for information and support?

## **How Can I Demonstrate Effective Allyship using Gender-Affirming Reporting and Records?**

- Create opportunities for safer disclosure of names and pronouns at the beginning of the year and throughout?
- Have conversations with students about what names and pronouns to use in different situations - with parents/caregivers, in class and outside of class, with supply teachers, with other teachers and administrators?
- Talk with the student about what to do when someone uses the wrong name or pronoun - would they like you to correct them?
- Ask about the name and pronoun would they like on their student records and level of support from parents at home. Talk about the limitations of the system for being able to record that gender based on the system and what accommodations you can make to create as many spaces as possible where their name and pronoun is affirmed.
- Ask about whether gender information should be sealed when changed.
- Ask about what name and pronouns they would like to see in their report card comments.
- Ask a student about how you should be referring to them with their parents, and how they would like for you to advocate for their pronouns and affirming name in parent-teacher interaction.

# RESOURCES & FURTHER LEARNING: SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

[Queering the Social Studies: Lessons to be learned from Canadian secondary school Gay-Straight Alliances - Lapointe \(2016\)](#)

[Media Reference Guide: Discussing trans and gender diverse people - Rainbow Health Ontario and The 519 Community Centre](#)

[Model School District Policy on Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students - GLSEN \(US resource\)](#)

[Gender Affirming and Inclusive Athletics Participation - GLSEN \(US resource\)](#)

[In Your Corner: Connecting LGBTQI2S Sport Communities - Egale Canada](#)

[Transitioning Employers: A survey of policies and practices for trans inclusive workplaces - Rotman Institute for Gender & the Economy](#)

[Trans youth and the Right to Access Public Washrooms - YouthRex](#)

[Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario ETFO Ten Ways Educators can resist Transgender Erasure](#)

[Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario Ten Ways](#)

Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario Voices Magazines articles:

- [It's the Small Things that Matter Most](#)
- [Creating Safe and Inclusive Schools for Gender-Independent Children](#)
- [All Gender Cabins and Their Place in Trans-Inclusive Spaces](#)
- [How to Become a Super Rad Gender Warrior Classroom teacher](#)

[The Manitoba Teachers Society The Every Teacher Project on LGBTQ-Inclusive Education in Canada's K-12 Schools](#)

[Gender Neutral Language: An Activity For Day Of Pink Or Any Day](#)

[Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation: Shout Out Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Transphobia and Heterosexism](#)

[Ontario Human Rights Commission Questions and answers about gender identity and pronouns](#)

[Ontario Human Rights Commission: Teaching Human Rights in Ontario A guide for Ontario schools](#)

Ontario Human Rights Commission:

- [\(Policy Document\) Policy on preventing discrimination because of gender identity and gender expression](#)
- [\(Brochure\) Gender identity and gender expression](#)



- [\(Backgrounder\) Talking about gender identity and gender expression](#)
- [Glossary for understanding gender identity and gender expression](#)

[Human Rights Campaign Schools In Transition: A Guide for Supporting Transgender Students in K-12 Schools \(US Resource\)](#)

[American Psychological Association: Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Schools Key Recommendations for School Administrators \(US Resource\)](#)

[Trans Pulse Canada Report - Health and health care access for trans and non-binary people in Canada](#)

## **Affirming Gender Diverse Staff**

Staff who identify as gender diverse are entitled to work in environments where they feel safe and respected and where they are included. Under the Ontario Human Rights Code, employers, unions and service providers have a legal responsibility to accommodate people of all genders. The goal of the accommodation is to allow people to benefit equally from, and take part in, services. Gender diverse individuals have the right to define and express their gender openly. This includes expressing gender without fear of unwanted consequences, as well as the right to be treated with dignity and respect. All employees have the right to dress in a manner consistent with their gender expression, as required by the professional and safety requirements of the occupation. For transitioning employees, the decision as to when and how to begin to present in a gender-affirming way is the individual's choice. Gender Diverse Staff that are part of the Elementary Teacher Federation of Ontario should be aware of the [Transgender 82 Policy](#) in addition to these guidelines. Gender Diverse Staff that are part of Canadian Union of Public Employees should be aware of the [It's Got To Be About Safety: Public Services that Work for LGBTQ2+ Older Adults and LGBTQ2+ Workers in Canada 2020 Report](#) in addition to these guidelines.

All students, staff and community members have a responsibility to recognize the innate right of their colleagues to define their gender and gender expression and to treat colleagues with respect. This includes avoiding any action that could be taken as harassment or discrimination.

## **If you plan to transition in the workplace**

It would be helpful for an employee beginning the transition process to contact either their immediate supervisor, Inclusive School and Community Services or Human Resources before a planned transition date, to speak about their needs and concerns. The Employee Resource Group can also help support and provide direction for services and care in York Region. Any administrator/manager/supervisor who has been asked to facilitate an accommodation within the scope of these guidelines, will contact ISCS (for student accommodation) or the HRCO to consult on the identification and implementation of appropriate accommodation.

## What Do I Need to Ask Myself?

- What are some barriers in my environment that would create challenges for gender diverse staff?
- What is my current level of understanding about the challenges gender diverse staff may face?
- What needs to change for gender diverse colleagues to be able to work in a safe and respectful workplace?
- If I witnessed a colleague experiencing harassment or harm based on their gender, how would I intervene?

## How Can I Demonstrate Effective Allyship with Gender Diverse Staff?

- YRDSB should make an effort to hire and retain gender diverse staff across all levels of employment.
- YRDSB staff must consider each employee's needs and concerns separately. Understand that each gender diverse person is unique and has different needs. An accommodation that works for one employee cannot simply be assumed to be appropriate for another.
- Managers and supervisors should not hold judgement or share personal opinions regarding a staff member's appearance beyond how they would with any other staff member. ([Peel DSB](#))
- Maintain confidentiality: The trans identity of an employee is considered confidential and should only be disclosed on a need-to-know basis, and only with the consent of the employee, unless the employee directs otherwise. Transitioning employees are encouraged to participate in the necessary education of their coworkers at whatever level they are comfortable. ([KPR](#))
- Ensuring Washroom Access. To maintain dignity and respect, all employees have the right to use a washroom that corresponds to their gender identity, regardless of their sex assigned at birth. Staff should not be required to 'prove' their gender (through a doctor's letter, identity documents, etc.) ([KPR](#)). Where possible, YRDSB worksites also will provide an easily accessible, barrier-free, all-gender single stall washroom for use by any individual who desires increased privacy, regardless of the underlying reason. However, use of a barrier-free all-gender single stall washroom should always be a matter of choice and never imposed on an employee.
- Remember that an employee's self-identification is the sole measure of their gender.
- Use affirming names and pronouns. Employee records and work-related documents should be retained under the individual's legal name (as reflected on identification documents verified at the start of employment), unless and until the individual makes a legal change. Where a person's legal name does not match their affirming name, their chosen or affirming name should be used on all documentation, such as e-mail, phone directory, company identification card or access badge, name plate, staff list, etc., except where records must match the legal name, such as insurance documents.
- In everyday written and oral speech, an employee's affirming name and pronouns should be used as soon as that employee indicates they are ready.
- Intentionally addressing a staff member by the incorrect name or pronoun may be considered a form of discrimination and is not tolerated. ([KPR](#))
- Encourage and advocate for adequate gender equity and diversity trainings at any level you find yourself in at YRDSB, whether or not you yourself are gender diverse, especially if you find yourself unsure or seeking more information. Do not place the expectation to educate all staff on gender diverse employees.

# Community Engagement

Research shows that student achievement improves when parents and other caregivers play an active role in their child's education, and that good schools become even better schools when parents and families are involved. When parents, teachers, students, school leaders and others see one another as partners in education, a caring and responsive community is formed. Schools must also consider how the school environment supports or prevents families with gender diverse members from being partners in education.

Often, school communities assume that families and the communities that students are a part of are cisgender, which can result in the exclusion of families that include and celebrate gender diversity. These families play an important part of our communities. A gender inclusive school ensures that the diversity of gender is visible in hallway displays, during school events and through the community partners that help support the school community. Schools also have a responsibility to provide inclusive role models for all students - if a school community itself does not include gender diversity, connections to a broader community can help to ensure that gender diverse students see themselves represented.

Parents and other family members with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions may have experienced discrimination in the community and may not feel welcome or included in their children's school community. An intentional and inclusive approach to school, family and community partnerships— with strategies and activities that support student learning and well-being—strengthens families, invigorates community supports and increases student success.

([Alberta pp.13-14](#)).

Schools also support an inclusive school culture through the development and support of community partnerships. Involving and connecting students and families with these partners supports not only students and families, but the school community as a whole.

## What Do I Need to Ask Myself?

- How is cisnormativity reflected in the decisions I make to engage communities?
- How do I create conditions where gender diverse families are valued and supported as members of the school community?
- How will gender diverse members of our community know that our school is welcoming and inclusive?

## How Can I Demonstrate Effective Allyship to Gender Diverse communities?

- Use non-gendered and inclusive language on all school forms, websites, letters, and other communications (e.g., parents/guardians, caregivers, families, partners, “student” or “their” instead of Mr., Ms., Mrs., mother, father, him, her, etc.) Staff should use gender-affirming language to acknowledge and communicate with families. If unsure of the appropriate language, they can ask the family for guidance (e.g., how children refer to their parents and/or their parents' partners).
- Ensure that school-supported student, family or community events are designed in ways that are inclusive and respectful of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions.

- Respect the privacy and confidentiality of parents and families as it relates to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.
- Refer to the school's student code of conduct to address bullying behaviour that targets a student because of the actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender, or gender expression of parents or other family members.
- Ensure family members and community are able to access washrooms that are congruent with their gender identity. Schools also have a non-gendered washroom available for public use. ([Alberta pp.13-14](#))
- Work to include community partners in school events (i.e. Trans Day of Visibility)
- Display Positive Space signs around the school. Ensure that staff have an understanding and awareness to the purpose and commitment of these signs. Contact ISCS for Positive Space signs and how to utilize them.