SAFE SCHOOLS

GUIDE TO MAKING YOUR SCHOOL SAFE AND INCLUSIVE FOR LGBTI STUDENTS

THE EDUCATION STATE

VICTORIA State Government | Education and Training

WHY WE CREATE SAFE SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

As educators, as parents, as citizens, we know that young people do better at school and in life if they attend schools where they feel welcome and safe.

Unfortunately not all students have this experience, and not all students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) have a positive school experience.

While schools need to be safe and inclusive places for all students – regardless of their sexuality, gender, cultural background, disability or other circumstances – this Guide specifically looks at how schools can provide safer and more inclusive environments for all their students who are LGBTI.

Many schools are already being proactive in ensuring they have school policies and implement other activities that create safe and inclusive school environments, and other schools may be on that journey.

This Guide contains research, ideas and strategies on how Victorian schools can become Safe Schools – so that schools can ensure they are doing everything possible in providing a welcoming and inclusive school experience for all students, their families, and staff.

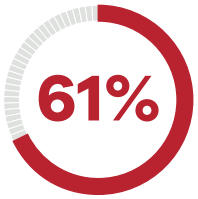
WHY WE CREATE SAFE SCHOOLS – WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

National and international research shows that positive and inclusive school environments lead to improved academic results, increased confidence and better attendance at school.[i]

All young people have a right to feel safe at school but many young people who identify as LGBTI, or same sex attracted, gender diverse or living with an intersex variation, have negative experiences in Australian schools.

Many studies around the world show that LGBTI students experience higher rates of harassment, social exclusion and bullying than their non-LGBTI peers.[ii]

Writing Themselves In 3, the third national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people found that:



of LGBTI young people report experiencing verbal homophobic abuse

report physical homophobic abuse

report other types of homophobia, including exclusion and rumours

respondents experienced the reported abuse at school[ii]

Two studies looking into the impact of homophobia at school found that for LGBTI students:

3 in 10
could not concentrate in school

2 in 10
missed classes or days of school

2 in 10
had lower marks

1 in 10
did not use the toilets

13%
dropped out of sport

1 in 10
moved schools

8%
dropped out altogether[iv]

In addition to poorer educational outcomes, LGBTI young people are at greater risk of self-harm, suicide, excessive drug use and sexual risk behaviours compared to non-LGBTI young people. In many cases, this is due to the effects of school bullying and can be even more pronounced for young people from multicultural or multi-faith backgrounds, or from regional, rural and remote areas of Australia.[vi]

Schools can be places where same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students experience discrimination, and severe bullying, leading to feelings of not belonging and isolation. These experiences significantly affect students' emotional wellbeing and social health as well as their engagement in learning and school activities.

Schools can also be powerful places of respect and acceptance and tolerance where all students, regardless of their sexuality or gender, are vital members of their school community. Research shows that where schools have inclusive and supportive policies in place, students perform better.[vi]

There are simple ways for schools to support gender diversity, intersex and sexual diversity, so that LGBTI students go to school feeling welcome and safe, and have the same opportunities as everyone else to enjoy school life.

RESPECTING DIVERSITY IN VICTORIAN SCHOOLS

There are many national and international research reports that provide an overall picture of same sex attraction and gender diversity among young people.[vii, viii, ix]

The Victorian community is diverse. It is important to make sure that all young people are safe at school and are learning in an environment where they can be happy, confident and resilient, regardless of their sexual or gender identity or the specific number of LGBTI members within a school community. Students cannot learn effectively if they are being bullied, harassed and do not feel safe at school.

By providing information and resources to schools that raise understanding and awareness of sexual and gender diversity, the Safe Schools program ensures that young people can demonstrate mutual respect and understanding towards each other despite differences in their culture, lifestyle, sexuality or gender.

Creating safe and inclusive school environments will also benefit students who have family members who are LGBTI, as well as staff members who identify as LGBTI.

The Safe Schools' values of support, respect and inclusion are universal; their benefits extend beyond LGBTI young people. A school that celebrates diversity benefits everyone.

MEETING YOUR LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

It is unlawful to discriminate against a person on the grounds of their sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status.

Anti-discrimination laws:

- require schools to take reasonable and proportionate measures to eliminate discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status, including by taking positive steps to promote an inclusive school environment
- prohibit direct and indirect discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status.

Creating safe and inclusive environments for LGBTI students at school is a positive step in this direction.

RELATED LEGISLATION

- *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic)*
- *Equal Opportunity Act 2010 (Vic)*
- *Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)*

VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT SCHOOL POLICIES

All schools must take reasonable steps to eliminate discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status. Schools are required to support same sex attracted, gender diverse, transgender and intersex students by:

- providing a positive, supportive and respectful environment
- respecting privacy and confidentiality in relation to all students
- supporting students who want to affirm or transition gender identity at school
- challenging all forms of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and intersexism to prevent discrimination and bullying
- giving proper consideration to the impact of any requirement to participate in school activities according to gender identity or an assumption of heterosexuality (e.g. school formals, sports activities, camps).

Victorian Government School Policies that support this include:

- Bullying Prevention Policy
- Student Engagement Policy
- Gender Diversity Policy

CREATING SAFE AND INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR LGBTI STUDENTS

The Victorian Government has committed to expanding Safe Schools to all Government secondary schools by the end of 2018.

Safe Schools is a formal and public commitment that schools make to create an inclusive and safe environment for their school community, including for LGBTI students, families and teachers. This commitment recognises that creating a safe and inclusive environment is key to tackling bullying, discrimination and harassment at schools, particularly arising from homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and intersexism.

How this commitment is realised is determined by each school, based on its local context and the needs of its school community.

Making a commitment to creating safe and inclusive environments in your school is the best way to ensure LGBTI students are happy, healthy and connected. By doing this we will ensure that LGBTI young people remain engaged and connected to school and are supported to achieve their potential.

To be a Safe School, schools take the following steps:

1. Make a commitment to create a safe and inclusive school environment, including for LGBTI students
2. Identify actions the school will take to meet the commitment
3. Identify the intended outcomes of implementing the school's actions and commitment
4. Publicly communicate the commitment, actions and intended outcome(s).

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to implementing these four steps, and the most effective safe schools are created when actions and policies are tailored to suit individual school environments.

Below is a list of the different ideas and actions schools can use in creating a Safe School as well as a Program Participation Plan (see page 12).

An online version of the plan is available on the Department's Safe Schools webpage.

Schools may wish to incorporate the four elements into existing policies or documents. New, standalone policies are not required.

BEING PART OF SAFE SCHOOLS INVOLVES FOUR STEPS

Step 1: Develop a commitment statement for your school

The first step is to develop a commitment statement demonstrating your school's support for creating a safe and inclusive school for LGBTI students.

The following commitment statement is a good example your school can use, or you might want to develop your own:

"[Insert school name] is committed to creating a safe and inclusive environment for all its students, including LGBTI students."

It's important to ensure your commitment statement explicitly states the school's commitment to LGBTI students (or students who identify as same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse).

A co-educational Year 7-12 High School in Melbourne's eastern suburbs

"Our school became a safe school in 2011 with the aim of better supporting LGBTI students and developing a sense of inclusion within the school. We have worked in conjunction with students to create a Stand Out group, started using the 'All of Us' resource at Year 8, reviewed uniform policy and provided professional learning for staff. We have received positive feedback from our students and believe that our strategy has led to increased staff confidence and a stronger sense of inclusion and belonging at school."

Step 2: Outline the actions that your school will take to meet the commitment

There are many things that schools can do to create safe and inclusive environments for LGBTI students. Below are some examples of what to consider in implementing the Safe Schools commitment.

Review your policies and procedures

Does your school have anti-discrimination, anti-bullying or diversity policies? Do they clearly name discriminatory language against LGBTI students and signal the school's commitment to using inclusive language? Do the policies explicitly mention and support same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students, staff and families?

Establishing and implementing these policies and procedures sets up a strong foundation for further activities. Research shows that anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies in schools are one of the strongest protective factors for same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse young people.[x] You can seek advice from the Department on how to strengthen your school's policies to be even more inclusive. Once your school policies are introduced or updated, be sure to 'launch' them and make sure the whole community is aware of any changes.

Support student-led action

Student-led action is a very effective way to create cultural change at school. If your school already has a 'Stand Out' group, 'Queer-Straight-Alliance' or other groups, which support gender and sexual diversity, further support this activity. Another way to encourage student-led action is to support students in organising days of celebration, such as the annual International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersexism and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT) or Wear It Purple Day.

Mark any special dates on the school calendar so you can plan in advance.

Professional learning

It is important staff are supported in knowing how best to role model behaviour, such as intervening to challenge discriminatory behaviour, and that they understand their important role in creating safe and inclusive spaces. Whole-staff presentations, specialised training modules and workshops delivered by the Department's Safe Schools Unit, which draw on current national and international research and provide best practice examples, are good ways to improve teachers' knowledge and confidence.

Get in touch with the Department's Safe Schools Unit to organise a professional learning package that works for your school.

Challenge discriminatory language

Encourage school staff to make a commitment to challenge all discriminatory language or behaviour every time they hear or see it. By consistently challenging language such as 'that's so gay' and 'what a fag/dyke' or 'are you a boy or a girl?' teachers can have an immediate impact on school culture and provide positive role modelling for students. Being a safe school means that everyone has zero tolerance to, and actively addresses any offensive language or behaviour.

Find out about your school

It can be really useful to know about the experiences of staff and students at school and their ideas to create change. Are there already student leadership or other groups interested in getting involved? It is a good idea to ask staff for their thoughts and start conversations with leadership teams.

The Department's Safe Schools Unit has confidential online survey tools for schools to gauge staff and student perceptions and opinions. This information can help you identify what you're already doing well and what your next steps may be. The same survey can be used again later to evaluate the difference being a safe school has made. Contact the Department's Safe School Unit to get access to these surveys.

Include diversity in teaching

Identify opportunities to include same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse people, histories and events in teaching. Whatever the subject and your experience, there are always new ways you can better integrate diversity through case studies, texts, and other examples. In discussions, challenge gender stereotypes and assumptions that heterosexuality is universal or preferred.

All of Us is a teaching resource for Years 7 and 8 that aligns to Australian Health and Physical Education Curriculum. It has short videos and interactive learning activities to introduce students to sexual diversity, gender diversity and intersex topics.

Staff leadership

Form a staff working group/team to work on the development and implementation of becoming a safe school. You could also create a special role for a staff member to support diversity in your school.

Be visible

Do you have clear signs of support for sexual and gender diversity around the school? If not, the Department's Safe Schools Unit has a range of free posters and stickers. Order some today and display them around your school. Or your students could create their own posters for their school that celebrate diversity and LGBTI inclusion.

Resources

Make sure staff and students have access to resources that provide appropriate information about gender and sexual diversity. Ensure that relevant books, videos and other resources in the library and other suitable locations are up-to-date, appropriately labelled and easy to access.

You can also find some useful resources on the Department's Safe Schools website

www.education.vic.gov.au/safeschools

Know where your local support is

It is important to know about local referral and support services that are available. Contact the Department's Safe Schools Unit to find out about other youth and community service providers that work with LGBTI young people in your region.

Step 3: Identify what will your safe school look like

The level of your school's activity in becoming a safe school will influence the level of positive change you achieve.

Your commitment to becoming a safe school may result in less discriminatory behaviour and language in your school or increased school attendance. Students might report greater respect for diversity and safety at school or feel more empowered and engaged, leading to improved academic outcomes.

Staff may start more discussions with students about the importance and benefits of diversity and respect in society.

Identifying clear goals will guide activities, help measure what is working well, and identify what could be improved. To help with this, schools may wish to use existing tools such as the Attitudes to Schools Survey data or alternatively, a tailored survey that supports schools to better understand staff and student perceptions of LGBTI inclusion within the school.

A school in outer metropolitan Melbourne reported that since becoming a safe school they are now *"a safer environment for students who are exploring their gender and sexual identity"*.

They have *"safer classrooms in terms of awareness of supportive versus destructive language and attitudes; increased awareness of ensuring curriculum content and teaching strategies were inclusive of LGBTI; were developing best practice policies around gendered language in exams and assessments"*.

One school in regional Victoria has taken the following actions to create a safe environment for their LGBTI students

- Principal and student speeches at school assemblies
- International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersexism and Transphobia (IDAHoBIT) celebrations
- Displayed posters around the school celebrating diversity
- Conducted surveys with students on their feelings of safety at school
- Assisted transgender and gender questioning students
- Delivered professional learning workshops for staff.

Step 4: Communicate your school's commitment statement, actions and intended outcomes

It is important your school community is aware of the work your school is undertaking to create a safe and inclusive environment for students.

Newsletters are a good start. Using school assemblies, staff meetings, the school's website and social media are also highly effective in promoting your school as a safe school. The Department's Safe Schools Unit can support schools with communications material, including letters home to families explaining the school's commitment.

School staff may also want to include the school's commitment to being a safe school in their email signature.

Including your school's commitment to being a safe school in existing school plans and policies, such as the Annual Implementation Plan, Student Engagement Policy or Child Safe Standards statement, are other effective communication channels.

SAFE SCHOOLS – PROGRAM PARTICIPATION PLAN

An electronic version of this plan is also available on the Department's Safe Schools website: www.education.vic.gov.au/safeschools

Step 1 – Develop your commitment statement

Make sure your statement explicitly states your commitment to LGBTI students (or students who identify as same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse).

Our commitment statement is:

Step 2 – Outline your actions

Use the ideas in this document or develop your own. Please also outline what you are already doing.

Currently our school supports LGBTI inclusion by:

Our school will take the following new actions to meet our commitment:

Step 3 –Identify the outcomes your school would like to see

The outcomes we would like to see at our school are:

Step 4 – Indicate how you will communicate your school's work

We will communicate the commitment statement, actions, and intended outcomes to the school community by:

School name: .....

School principal name: ..... **Signature:** .....

Key school contact: ..... **Position:** .....

Phone number: ..... **Date:** .....

Email address: .....

Once you have completed this plan please email it to **safe.schools@edumail.vic.gov.au** or send to: **Safe Schools, Department of Education and Training, GPO Box 4367, Melbourne VIC 3001**

WHAT SUPPORT CAN SCHOOLS ACCESS?

The Department's Safe Schools Unit assists schools to implement the Safe Schools commitment through:

1. Professional learning on topics, including LGBTI health and wellbeing, using the Safe Schools teaching and learning resource *'All of Us'*, and supporting student-led groups;
2. Support to conduct a review of school policies and practice to assess and improve inclusion for LGBTI students;
3. Consultation, advice and resources, including in relation to school-based support for individual students who are gender diverse or transitioning at school;
4. Networking and linkages, specifically to external support services that help with referrals for individual students, as well as links to other schools to provide learning networks and communities of practice.

Support is available to all Victorian schools, including government, Catholic and independent, at both primary and secondary levels and specialist settings.

GET IN TOUCH

The Safe Schools Unit can be contacted on:

Phone: (03) 9637 3699

Email:
safe.schools@edumail.vic.gov.au

Our website is:
www.education.vic.gov.au/safeschools

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

All language evolves and changes. Using respectful and inclusive language means checking with the person about how they identify and the pronouns they use for themselves.

Bisexual

This refers to a person who is romantically and sexually attracted to individuals of their own gender and other genders.

Biphobia

The fear or intolerance of people who identify as bisexual, usually expressed through hostility, verbal and physical abuse, or discrimination. Biphobia also includes denying the existence of people who identify as bisexual.

Gay

This refers to someone who is romantically and sexually attracted to people of the same gender identity as themselves. It is usually used to refer to men who are attracted to other men but may also be used by women.

Gender diverse

This refers to people who do not identify as a woman or a man. In the same way that sexual orientation and gender expression are not binaries, gender identity is not a binary either. It is important to challenge our thinking beyond the binary constructs of male and female.

Some people may identify as agender (having no gender), bigender (both a woman and a man) or non-binary (neither woman nor man). There is a diverse range of non-binary gender identities such as genderqueer, gender neutral, genderfluid and third gendered. It is important to be aware that language in this space is still evolving and people may have their own preferred gender identities that are not listed here.

Gender identity

Gender identity refers to a person's sense of being masculine or feminine, or both or neither. Gender identity does not necessarily relate to the sex a person is assigned at birth. Rather, a person's gender expression is made up of the outward signs they present to the world around them. This could include their choice of name and preferred pronoun (which may include using no pronoun), their style of dress and appearance, and/or their mannerisms.

Heterosexism

Views or behaviours that assume everyone is, or should be, heterosexual and that other types of sexuality or gender identity are unnatural or not as good as being heterosexual. People with differences in their physical sex characteristics may experience heterosexism too. This may include elements of discrimination based on limited ideas about what is 'normal' and 'not normal'.

Homophobia

The fear or intolerance of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or same sex attracted, usually linked with hostility, verbal and physical abuse, or discrimination. Homophobia also includes institutional and cultural bias and structural inequality.

Intersex

This refers to the diversity of physical characteristics between the stereotypical male and female characteristics. Intersex people have reproductive organs, chromosomes or other physical sex characteristics that are neither wholly female nor wholly male. Intersex is a description of biological diversity and may or may not be the identity used by an intersex person.

Intersexism

The fear or intolerance of people living with an intersex variation, usually expressed through hostility, verbal and physical abuse, or discrimination.

Lesbian

This refers to a woman who is romantically and sexually attracted to other women.

Same sex attracted

People who experience feelings of sexual and/or emotional attraction to others of the same sex. This term includes people who may identify in ways such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual or heterosexual, who are questioning their sexuality, or who are not wanting to label themselves. Some people prefer to use the term 'same gender attracted'.

Sex

Sex refers to a person's biological characteristics. A person's sex is usually described as either male or female. The designation of a person as either male or female on the basis of their biological characteristics takes into account their chromosomes, genitals, hormones and neurobiology. Some people have both male and female characteristics, or neither male nor female characteristics.

Sistergirls and Brotherboys

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may use these terms to refer to transgender people. Brotherboy typically refers to masculine spirited people who are born female, and Sistergirl typically refers to feminine spirited people who are born male.

Transgender (also trans or trans*)

This refers to a person whose gender identity, gender expression or behaviour does not align with their sex assigned at birth. In Australia, at birth children are assigned male or female. Male children are raised as boys and female children are raised as girls. A person classified as female at birth who identifies as a man may use the label trans, transman or man. Similarly, a person classified as male at birth who identifies as a woman may use the label trans, transwoman or woman.

Transphobia

Prejudice or discrimination based on a person being, or perceived as being, transgender or gender diverse. Transphobia can be expressed through hostility, verbal and physical bullying or discrimination. Transphobia also includes institutional and cultural bias and structural inequality.

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[iv] Hillier, L., et al. (2010). Writing themselves in 3: The 3rd national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of SSAGQ young people. Melbourne: ARCSHS: Robinson, KH et al (2013) Growing Up Queer: Issues Facing Young Australian Who Are Gender Variant and Sexuality Diverse, Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne.

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[x] Hillier, L., et al. (2010). Writing themselves in 3: The 3rd national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of SSAGQ young people. Melbourne: ARCSHS.

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