

Framework for Gender Inclusive Schools

When someone with the authority of a teacher describes the world and you're not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing

--Adrienne Rich

Gender inclusive schools...

- Recognize that gender impacts all students
- Interrupt binary notions of gender
- Normalize gender diversity
- Question limited portrayals of gender
- Support students' self-reflection
- Teach empathy and respect

Entry Points

When focusing on the intentional development of gender inclusive school settings, it is helpful to think in terms of four discrete entry points: **Personal**, **Structural**, **Interpersonal**, and **Instructional**. Depending on the context, any one of these may prove the best starting point for this work.

Personal entry points focus on educators' own understandings of gender. It involves reflection about how each person's experiences and beliefs about gender impact the work they do with students. Using tools such as *My Gender Journey*, this entry point is really a foundation of learning upon which teachers build their gender inclusive practices, in the process applying a lens of gender awareness to all they do in their classrooms.

Structural entry points are institutional steps that create a foundation for gender inclusive practices to take hold. Structural entry points demonstrate to your community that the institution recognizes and honors gender diversity and actively works to reflect a more complex understanding about gender. Such approaches include:

- Policies/administrative regulations emphasizing gender as an area of diversity protected and supported by the school
- Systematic staff training that builds the capacity of teachers and other staff to honor the gender diversity of all students
- Student information systems allowing families to specify a child's gender marker, preferred name and pronouns
- Identified staff members functioning as leads around gender diversity work or issues
- Gender neutral restroom/facilities that provide options for privacy without stigmatizing any students
- Readily available written materials and information about gender diversity
- Signage/imagery celebrating gender diversity
- Procedures/forms that demonstrate a non-binary understanding of gender

Interpersonal entry points are the various ways in which individual interactions and communications are utilized to reinforce the school's commitment to gender inclusion. Supported by many of the structural components, these relational aspects nonetheless require intentional behaviors in the day-to-day interrelationships of a campus. They literally voice a school's commitment to honoring the gender diversity of all students. Frequently language-based, teachers operating from this entry point:

Use language that challenges binary notions of gender

- *There are lots of ways to be a boy or a girl or even something else; isn't that great?*
- *Toys are toys, hair is hair, colors are colors, and clothes are clothes*
- *Is there only one way to be a boy or girl? Can boys and girls like the same things?*
- Rather than "boys and girls," "ladies and gentlemen," etc., refer to pupils as "students," "children," or another non-gendered term for the group.

Help students understand the difference between patterns and rules

- *Who says only girls wear dresses? Do all-girls wear them? Do all boys wear dresses? Do some?*
- *What patterns have you observed about expectations for you about gender from peers? The media?*
- *Sure, boys might do certain activities more than girls or vice versa. But that doesn't mean all boys do those things or are supposed to wear that girls don't or shouldn't do that!*

Question limited portrayals of gender

- *Who decided what things are for boys and what things are for girls?*
- *Sometimes this stuff is confusing. We get messages that some things are for boys and some things are for girls. But these messages are just some people's ideas. They may not be right for you.*

Recognize that gender is more about our identity than anything else

- *No one gets to tell another person how to feel on the inside.*
- *How someone feels about their gender comes from their hearts and their minds (and not their pants!)*
- *Some bodies are thought of as "boy" and some thought of as "girl" but that's not true for everyone.*

Support processes of reflection

- *Who we are or who others think we are on the outside is not always who we are on the inside; think of all the wonderful things about yourself that no one else knows about by just looking at you!*
- *Being a boy or a girl or something else is not about what you like or what you wear or your body. It is something that each of us figures out for ourselves based on how we feel inside*

Teach empathy and respect

- *How do you think you would feel if people were always asking you about your own gender?*
- *No one likes to be pointed out by others. Does it feel good if you think others are talking about you?*
- *Have you ever been teased? How does it feel when you are teased or treated as an outsider?*

Normalize gender diversity

- *Ideas about gender are changing all of the time.*
- *History is full of examples of gender diversity! There have been gender diverse people in every culture and religion, from all over the world and throughout time.*

Instructional entry points are specific ways in which teaching and learning are used to instill greater awareness and understanding about gender. Whether standing alone or integrated into other aspects of instruction, these approaches are the most direct way to impact students. In some ways, instructional approaches are the most easily accomplished. Teachers in their classrooms can have a great deal of autonomy for what takes place there. Yet at the same time, in an era of increasingly scripted curricula or environments in which controversial subjects are highly scrutinized and regulated, instructional methods for creating gender inclusion can have the highest stakes for teachers or other educators. Instructional approaches include:

- Designing lesson plans to expand understandings of gender diversity
- Exploring curriculum areas or units for inserting gender diversity issues or topics
- Using literature that has themes raising gender diversity issues
- Utilizing the arts to explore gender
- Using the social-emotional curriculum to surface gender related themes
- Examining the media and popular culture for gender related messages
- Assigning open ended projects that include gender related topics, readings, or news
- Arranging for transgender or other gender expansive people to present in classrooms
- Analyzing data about various trends related to evolving understandings of gender
- Inviting guest speakers who work for greater gender equity in education, law or other fields
- Using video or other media that present specific ideas about gender
- Creating space for students to articulate their own understanding and beliefs about gender
- Integrating gender into curriculum areas through story problems, writing prompts, readings, art assignments, research projects and more