

An illustration of a classroom scene. A female teacher with dark hair, wearing a tan cardigan over a white top and green pants, stands in front of a green chalkboard, gesturing with her right hand while holding a book in her left. Four students are seated at wooden desks in the foreground. From left to right: a girl with dark curly hair in a teal shirt has her right hand raised; a boy in an orange hoodie is seen from the back; a girl with short dark hair in a purple shirt is writing in a notebook; and a boy with blonde hair in a green shirt is looking towards the teacher. The background is a solid dark red color.

SUPPORTING IDENTITY AT SCHOOL

Evidence-informed strategies for fostering belonging, supporting identity development, and building more inclusive learning environments.



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SECTION ONE

SUPPORTING IDENTITY AT SCHOOL

Because How We Respond Today Shapes Tomorrow's Relationship





SETTING THE STAGE

EVERY STUDENT DESERVES TO BELONG

Schools shape far more than academic achievement. Every interaction, classroom, and relationship communicates who belongs, who feels safe, and who is seen.



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A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

EVERY INTERACTION TEACHES SOMETHING

Long before students remember **what** we taught, they remember **how we made them feel.**

- **Respect** — a name, a pronoun, said with care.
- **Curiosity** — a question that opens a door.
- **Affirmation** — a small, steady signal that they are seen.



OUR ROLE AS EDUCATORS

WE CAN'T CONTROL EVERY CHALLENGE STUDENTS FACE

WHAT WE CAN'T CONTROL

- What's waiting for them at home. —
- The messages they absorb online —
and in the wider world.
- The weight they carry through the —
door each morning.

BUT

WHAT WE CAN SHAPE

The environment they walk into every day.

Every educator can foster classrooms where students feel respected, supported, and ready to learn.





THINK ABOUT A TEACHER WHO CHANGED YOUR LIFE

THE PROMPT

Take two minutes to think about an educator who made you feel seen, valued, or capable.

- 1 What did they do?
- 2 How did they make you feel?
- 3 What small behaviors made the biggest difference?



Discuss with a partner before sharing with the group.

DEBRIEF

Most of us remember how great educators made us feel long after we've forgotten the lesson.

Creating safer, more inclusive learning environments begins with relationships.



— WHY THIS MATTERS

BELONGING IS A FOUNDATION FOR LEARNING

Belonging is not separate from learning — it is one of the conditions that make learning possible.



Physically safe

Free from harm and the fear of it — the baseline for anything else.



Emotionally supported

Held by adults who notice, respond, and stay steady.



Connected

Woven into a community that would notice their absence.



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THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

QUEER & TRANS KIDS ARE UNDER ATTACK

39–46%

of LGBTQ+ young people seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year – including 46% of transgender and nonbinary young people.

~12% (1 in 10) attempted

50%

of LGBTQ+ young people who wanted mental health care in the past year were not able to get it.

90%

of LGBTQ+ young people said their well-being was negatively impacted due to recent politics.

38%

of LGBTQ+ young people experienced houselessness or housing insecurity, compared to 23%.

771

active anti-LGBTQ and TGNC legislative bills being considered across 43 states.

DEFINE

GENDER IS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Society assigns roles based on biological sex — but those roles are **taught, not innate** — learned from the world around us. They've evolved through indigenous traditions, colonial influence, and modern globalization — and they're reinforced every day by the institutions around us.

GENDER ROLES ARE REINFORCED BY



FAMILY

First lessons in what 'boys' and 'girls' are meant to do.



EDUCATION

Dress codes, activities, and gendered expectations.



MEDIA

Constant images of who we're supposed to be.



CHURCH

Tradition and doctrine that assign roles.

DEFINE

SEX ASSIGNED AT BIRTH

The label — male, female, or intersex — recorded at birth from visible traits. A legal and administrative classification, not a reflection of gender identity.



FEMALE



INTERSEX



MALE

WHAT EACH LABEL MEANS

~2% OF PEOPLE

INTERSEX

Assigned — or noted later in life — when a person's physical sex traits don't fit typical definitions of male or female. Can involve differences in genitalia, internal anatomy, chromosomes, or hormones.

VISUAL ASSESSMENT

FEMALE

Assigned when a newborn's external genitalia are observed to fit medical and cultural expectations for girls. A quick visual assessment — it doesn't reflect gender identity, chromosomes, or hormones.

VISUAL ASSESSMENT

MALE

Assigned when a newborn's external genitalia are observed to fit medical and cultural expectations for boys. It doesn't account for internal anatomy, chromosomes, hormones, or how the person may identify later.

DEFINE

GENDER IDENTITY

A person's core sense of self in relation to gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth. Other elements can include expressions of gender — appearance, clothing, speech, and mannerisms.



WOMAN (CIS)

NON-BINARY

MAN (CIS)

GENDER IDENTITY KEY TERMS

UMBRELLA

TRANS & GENDER NON-CONFORMING (TGNC)

An umbrella term for the many gender identities and expressions that differ from the sex assigned at birth.

UMBRELLA

TRANSGENDER

An umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth.

IDENTITY

CISGENDER

Someone whose gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth.

IDENTITY

NONBINARY

A gender identity that is not exclusively male or female. Can include identities like genderqueer, agender, bigender, or others.

IDENTITY

TWO-SPIRIT

A term used by some Indigenous North American cultures for a person who embodies both masculine and feminine spirits – holding cultural and spiritual meaning beyond Western gender categories.

IDENTITY

GENDER DYSPHORIA

Distress from a mismatch between identity and body or role.

DEFINE

IDENTITY ON A SPECTRUM

People’s identities can be fluid and are best defined by the individual – not by family, society, or the government.

ASSIGNED SEX AT BIRTH



SEXUAL ORIENTATION



GENDER IDENTITY



GENDER EXPRESSION



HARMFUL BEHAVIORS

WHAT NOT TO DO

- ✘ Assume you know a student's identity or experience.
- ✘ Expect LGBTQ+ students to educate the class or speak for an entire community.
- ✘ Ignore or minimize bullying, harassment, or discriminatory language.
- ✘ Avoid conversations about gender or sexuality because they feel uncomfortable.
- ✘ "Out" a student without their knowledge or consent.
- ✘ Use names or pronouns a student has asked you not to use.
- ✘ Dismiss a student's identity as "just a phase" or "attention seeking."
- ✘ Treat inclusion as optional rather than part of creating a safe learning environment.

THE DO'S

SAY THIS

- ✓ "Thank you for sharing that with me."
- ✓ "How would you like me to support you at school?"
- ✓ "What name and pronouns would you like me to use here?"
- ✓ "I'll do my best to help make this a safe and supportive environment."
- ✓ "You deserve to feel respected and included here."
- ✓ "Let's work together to figure out what support would be most helpful."

THE DON'TS

AVOID THIS

- ✗ "Are you sure this isn't just a phase?"
- ✗ "I need to call your parents before we talk about this."
- ✗ "Can you explain all of this to me?"
- ✗ "You don't look transgender."
- ✗ "Let's keep this quiet so it doesn't become an issue."
- ✗ "It's just too political to discuss at school."

INCLUSION

INVITES YOU IN

"You are welcome here."

Makes space for difference

Removes barriers to participation

Promotes fairness and access

Creates opportunities to belong

AFFIRMATION

CELEBRATES YOU

"Who you are is a strength."

Actively values difference

Takes a side

Recognizes identity as an asset

Responds to students' unique needs

IN PRACTICE

WHAT AFFIRMATION LOOKS LIKE



Ask, then use names



Hold the door open



Follow their lead



Carry the knowledge



Share the power



Name strengths



GROUP ACTIVITY • THINK • PAIR • SHARE

≈ 12 min

THINK • PAIR • SHARE

Pose one question, then move the room through three modes of thinking. **[Drop your prompt here.]**

1

THINK

Solo • 2 min

Sit with the prompt on your own. Jot the first honest response that comes.



2

PAIR

Partners • 3 min

Trade responses with one person. Build on what you hear rather than debate it.



3

SHARE

Whole group • 5 min

Offer one insight back to the room – yours or your partner's.





WORK A SCENARIO TOGETHER

THE SCENARIO

[Describe a short, realistic classroom moment – a comment overheard, a small conflict, a student who suddenly goes quiet. Two or three sentences is plenty.]



Read it aloud, then give groups a minute to sit with it.



DISCUSS IN YOUR GROUP

- 1 What is this student most likely feeling in this moment?
- 2 What is one response that would help them feel safer or seen?
- 3 What might get in the way – and how could you prepare for it?



Choose one voice to share back with the room.