

# SEXUAL ORIENTATION & GENDER IDENTITY

YOUR STUDENTS AND COLLEAGUES

NEA WAS AMONG THE SPONSORS OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN FOUNDATION'S INAUGURAL TIME TO THRIVE CONFERENCE IN FEBRUARY. READ THE CAMPAIGN'S GROUNDBREAKING REPORT "GROWING UP LGBT IN AMERICA" AT [MARYLANDEDUCATORS.ORG/ALDIGITAL](http://MARYLANDEDUCATORS.ORG/ALDIGITAL).

FEELING LIKE YOU LEAD TWO SEPARATE LIVES. LIVING IN CONSTANT FEAR OF NAME-CALLING, BULLYING, HARASSMENT, AND EVEN ASSAULT. LOOKING IN THE MIRROR AND FEELING LIKE THE PERSON YOU SAW THERE WASN'T REALLY YOU. WONDERING IF ANYONE ELSE WILL EVER UNDERSTAND.

That's the reality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning—LGBTQ—kids. Even in 2014.

And for LGBT educators, *even in 2014*, the situation remains difficult in their classrooms, with their administrators and supervisors, and with parents.

What's the problem? There's an anti-bullying program in nearly every school. Gay marriage is legal in Maryland. The state just passed the Fairness for All Marylanders Act, which bans discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Turn on the TV and you might see ads from the 90-year-old Honey Maid graham cracker company which include two dads with their new baby in what *USA Today* called a "new, multicolored, multisexual world of advertising."

But in public schools (and often at home) sexuality seems to still be in the closet and that means LGBTQ kids are left with fears and questions that the adults in their lives often just aren't ready to talk about with them. They turn to their accepting peers and the internet for information and comfort.

For educators, it means that those who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual may be out to their colleagues, but not students or parents; for those who are transgender, it means hoping for the expert professional development that would support understanding differences in gender identity.

Educators interviewed for this article said there is an odd disconnect between what is happening in the world and what is happening in their school, district, or with parents regarding sexuality and gender identity.

"There's a culture of silence around sexuality in education and I think part of that is based on this antiquated notion that homosexuality, bisexuality, and gender identity is about sex, and talking about sex with kids is inappropriate and uncomfortable," said Todd, a 29-year-old elementary teacher who came out in high school, but is not out at his school.

"Being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender is about relationships and identity, not sex. I think not focusing on that is a real disservice to kids. A positive, empowering school environment for kids, colleagues, and families would be one that is more explicitly supportive.

"We know the cumulative socializing effect that schools have, and we know that there are LGBTQ students in every class. When we're not sending supportive messages that let them know they are safe and valued, they're internalizing that," Todd added. "This decision not to make a decision is still a decision and misinformation, persistent cultural roadblocks, and lack of commitment on the part of part of public education seem to win out every time."

"We have LGBTQ alliances in the high schools in my district," said Karen, a middle school physical education teacher, "but when we've tried to start one here, we're told that parents wouldn't be receptive. I guess they think middle school students don't have a sexual identity."

Research has found that's simply not the case. More and more students are identifying as LGBTQ in middle school. The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) says those students experience more verbal and physical harassment than LGBTQ high school students, and significantly more physical assaults. And, GLSEN added, most middle schools lack the resources and supports that can improve LGBTQ students' experiences and mitigate the negative effects of a hostile environment, such as Gay-Straight Alliances and supportive educators.

Without open dialogue and support about sexual orientation and gender identity in schools, educators don't feel supported much more than students. Karen says that stereotypes like that of the lesbian physical education teacher persist. That feels like a threat to her relationships with parents, so she's out to her colleagues and administration but not her students.

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“Parents still have the final say in communities and from a PE perspective, there’s the locker room issue. If I’m straight, I’m just in the locker room; if I’m a lesbian, I’m suddenly a sexual person in the locker room.”

“That there’s part of my identity that someone could take objection to and make my professional life difficult makes me feel vulnerable,” Todd says. “I don’t hear real strong advocacy about it from unions or from the school system.”

Bisexuality can be confusing and sometimes simply dismissed by straight people. More people are coming out as bisexual ... but not in school. “At school, I don’t think I have the same emotional need to come out as other LGBT people,” said James, a bisexual high school teacher. “Bisexuality affords me a little more cover. I can maintain a public face that isn’t a complete lie to myself.”

Even as very serious issues of LGBTQ bullying persist in schools, it is perhaps the issues of gender identity that are the most challenging and painful for transgender students and educators, as well as for their peers. A transgender person is one whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth; this realization is often accompanied by a traumatic path of discovery and self-acceptance. Suicide attempt rates for transgender people is an alarming 41%—nine times the national average. For youths who have been bullied, the rate is 51%.

*ActionLine* talked to Sam, a young transgender man and 2013 graduate from a high-ranking central Maryland suburban high school, and Caitlin, a transgender educator in a suburban high school in her early 40s. Though their ages differ by more than 20 years, their experiences are strikingly similar—confusion, rejection, self-loathing, self-harming, and taking the steps they needed to be truly themselves.

For both Sam and Caitlin, confusion at their assigned gender (their gender at birth) began at three or four years old. Caitlin’s first humiliation came when she tried to line up in the girls line in a kindergarten class and was told she couldn’t. “I then realized that

I would need to hide who I was. ... In middle school, when hiding became more difficult, I was attacked, beaten, and sexually assaulted. I thought it was my fault.”

Sam said that he didn’t know that transgender people existed “until I discovered it online when I was a young teen, and then I knew that what I was feeling was gender dysphoria. I was convinced I was a freak and that my parents would reject me.” Sam’s self-harming, which began when he was just 11, escalated and he was hospitalized. “I realized I couldn’t keep living the way I was, pretending to be female, or I’d end up dead, so I started trying to change stuff.”

“My high school drama teacher knew something was wrong,” Caitlin said, “and during my study period, she would give me the key to the props room and I would lock myself in. I would put on the women’s costumes and be myself for that period. ... That was the only thing that kept me from committing suicide.” Caitlin later twice attempted to take her life.

In high school, Sam started to wear the clothes he wanted, cut his hair shorter hoping his parents wouldn’t notice, and changed his name on Facebook. “It was really hard for a while. A lot of people harassed me at school and in public, but I knew I felt better about myself and that’s all that mattered to me.” But the treatment Sam received from teachers and counselors at school is shocking. “I found very little support from counselors and teachers in high school. I experienced a few teachers who made very cruel jokes about gay and trans people. As the only visibly queer person in most of my classes, it was really humiliating.”

The National Transgender Discrimination Survey illustrates the alarming extent of transgender harassment in Maryland: 81% of respondents who were out as trans while in grades K-12 indicated that they had been harassed on the basis of their gender identity; 38% reported that the harassment escalated to physical assault; and 16% reported sexual violence. According to data from GLSEN, those who are able to persevere had significantly lower GPAs, were more likely to miss school out of concern for their safety,

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and were less likely to plan on continuing their education. Sam was in and out of school from 6th–10th grades with emotional- and anxiety-related illnesses.

Caitlin struggled with her gender identity through college and grad school and began her teaching career as a male. But in the past five years, her experience transitioning has been difficult. Her middle school students just wanted to know where she shopped, but for the adults, the process was very, very complicated—even the effort to change her name took two years. As she styled herself as a woman, yet was unable to be honest with her students about what was happening, they “got a bizarre picture of what was going on.” Human resources said they didn’t want a trans person teaching at middle school, so she transferred to a high school.

At the high school, Caitlin had been promised a staff diversity awareness program that would specifically address transgender people so her colleagues would have some background about gender identity. Five years later, there still has been no training for staff or students. “Before my first day, I talked to counselors and suggested that someone talk to my colleagues and students. They said, ‘That’s a bad idea—we’ll be taking your power away from you.’”

“Staff members and faculty members refused to gender me properly—even in front of students. Parents misgendered me in meetings and counselors would not correct them. Teachers told students that they thought what I was was wrong.” That was just three years ago, and while more staff members have become increasingly accepting, Caitlin is still abused by students in the hallways.

Sam is out to everyone now. “I knew it would be so hard to explain to everyone, but people were asking questions. I wanted to start hormones and I knew people would notice that. So I started hormones and started living as male full time. It felt like that’s when my life actually started. Now I’m living as my real self and I’ve never been happier.”

For so many LGBTQ students and LGBTQ educators, life is a daily struggle. Even as our society shifts towards greater awareness and acceptance, it’s obvious that across-the-board equity, compassion,

## NOTES FROM A TRANS KID

✧ Schools need to give trans kids access to gender neutral bathrooms and locker rooms, or the one that matches their gender identity, without making a big deal out of it. My school refused to give me access to the only gender neutral bathroom in the building, which was in the nurse’s office. I talked to my counselor and she spoke to the staff in the nurse’s office who said I could use the bathroom without a problem. But when I tried to go use the bathroom I was questioned by the staff every time, and they sometimes refused to give me access.

✧ Teachers and staff should use the correct name and pronouns as requested by the kids.

✧ For me, the hardest part of school emotionally was being called by the wrong name and gender by teachers and students. Being questioned and harassed by other students about my gender and sexuality was also difficult.

✧ The worst thing was having teachers make jokes in front of the class. Teachers need to know better than to make jokes targeting trans and gay people.

✧ Teachers and counselors should not be sharing information about a student’s trans status with anyone unless it’s ok’d by the kid.

✧ One terrible experience was when a substitute teacher who read me as male accused me of sitting in the wrong seat because they didn’t think my birth name [on the class roster] was me.

—Sam

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and understanding are still a long way off. But the bravery and candor of students and educators like Sam, Caitlin, Karen, and Todd is helping to pave the way for an easier road for students and educators.