

## Meeting the Needs of LGBTQ Families: Bridges and Barriers to Building Inclusive School Communities<sup>1</sup>

The following list identifies some of the potential barriers that may hinder schools from becoming inclusive learning communities for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified and queer (LGBTQ) students and same-gender parented families. Suggestions for addressing these barriers are also provided.

1. ***Homophobic prejudices and moral/religious beliefs:*** Many same-gender parented families fear that they will be rejected or discriminated against by school personnel who find same-sex relationships objectionable or immoral. Creating a school atmosphere in which *all* identities are affirmed and respected reflects the equality guarantees outlined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The Charter represents the living fabric of social diversity that blankets our schools and society. Notably, all publicly funded schools are subject to Charter scrutiny.
2. ***Heterosexist assumption:*** In many instances schools often fail to acknowledge the existence of same-gender family structures. This absence sends the message that LGBTQ parented families are inferior or abnormal when compared with “normal” heterosexual families. Schools should seek to ensure that their policies and correspondence (school newsletters, brochures, websites and letters to parents) recognize and value different family structures, which may include single-parented families, extended families, same-gender parented families and other family structures.
3. ***Political correctness:*** Paradoxically, some teachers and administrators use political correctness as a way to avoid examining their own heterosexist biases and beliefs. As a result, they may continue to hold prejudices that can develop into resentment or subtle forms of discrimination. Spaces for a safe, non-judgmental and critical dialogue that recognizes and respects differing viewpoints need to be created in every school. The failure to create such spaces leads to missed opportunities that could be more effectively used to challenge stereotypes and raise awareness about LGBTQ students and families.
4. ***Sex-and-gender binaries:*** People who hold rigid stereotypes about what constitutes appropriate behavior for males and females often reject LGBTQ families on the grounds that such families should not nurture children because they lack opposite gender role models. Recognizing that gender is a social and cultural construct can help to “break apart the binary” and facilitate an understanding that gender is fluid and often preformed according to societal sex role expectations. Often when students step outside their prescribed gender roles they are labeled as a “fag” or “dyke” as a method of regulating their identities to conform with heteronormative expectations.
5. ***Gender identity:*** Many individuals feel uncomfortable when they encounter trans-identified individuals who challenge the predominantly Western belief that gender

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from D Ryan and A Martin, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Parents in the School Systems," *School Psychology Review* 29, no 2 (2000): 207-16.

comes in two distinct and fixed categories: male and female. Such discomfort stems from cultural anxieties that regulate and maintain the defining characteristics of what it means to look, act and think like a male or female. Even educators who accept and affirm lesbian and gay parents may have difficulty accepting trans-identified students or parents who disrupt and transgress gender norms.

6. ***Hypersexual identities:*** Some people believe that LGBTQ persons are more sexually focused than heterosexuals and that, therefore, any discussion about LGBTQ families will inevitably involve inappropriate classroom conversations about sexual activities. Other educators fail to differentiate between sexual behavior and sexual orientation and, as a result, consider sexual orientation to be a private issue that should not be discussed in school.
7. ***Sexualizing the discourse:*** Many educators fear that, in discussing LGBTQ issues in the classroom, they will be called upon to address explicit questions about sexual behaviors that they are not equipped to answer. In reality, there is no more need to discuss details of same-sex sexual acts than there is to discuss heterosexual sexual activity. The real issues that need to be addressed are differing family structures, loving partnerships and student safety.
8. ***Language and knowledge barrier:*** The general lack of knowledge surrounding the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified and queer and the associated discomfort that educators often feel in using these terms may inhibit meaningful discussions and teachable moments. Many educators are afraid of inadvertently saying something offensive when they address LGBTQ issues. These educators need to learn to feel comfortable with language and to obtain accurate information in an effort to help create inclusive and welcoming school communities for all students and families.
9. ***Professional knowledge:*** The lack of pre-service education and continuing professional development training on LGBTQ educational issues can render some educators reluctant to address the topics of homophobia and heterosexism in the classroom. Many educators have very little, if any, training that would help them to understand the daily realities and educational needs of LGBTQ students and families. Teachers are encouraged to attend LGBTQ professional development workshops at teacher conventions and specialist councils when offered.
10. ***Parental reaction:*** Some school professionals fear that, by expressing support for LGBTQ families, they will elicit negative responses from heterosexual parents. Because they are poorly equipped to counter these responses, these professionals often choose to remain silent. The first step for any concerned educator to take is to build their own individual awareness and comfort level surrounding LGBTQ issues.
11. ***Administration:*** Unless they have the support of their school administration, school professionals may not be willing to take the risk of developing safe, supportive and inclusive classrooms that respect LGBTQ identities. School and district administrators should model inclusive teaching practices and take LGBTQ educational realities into account when developing their school policies, interacting with parents and planning teacher professional development programs.