



LGBTQIA+ Inclusive School Environments

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One of the consequences of the pandemic has been broader acknowledgment of the role that schools play as places that go beyond academic instruction. They also provide educational opportunities and relationships that are critical to young people's overall health and wellbeing. Educators play important roles in the lives of students and what they say and do matters.

The time spent at school and in school-based activities, means it is one of the most critical environments in young people's lives. It is therefore important that when young people tell us their school environments are unsafe, we listen and advocate for change on their behalf.

Beyond supporting academic learning, educators, must provide emotional and physical safety for all students, including cultivation of their identity in nurturing environments.

When we make a commitment to provide child-friendly and child safe environments for children and young people we must follow through in all environments, including schools. There are no exceptions. This is both a requirement under international conventions and under State Legislation.

Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognise the right of every child to an education which supports the development of their personality and talents, as well as their mental and physical abilities, so that they can reach their full potential.

In addition, the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017* sets out the duty of every person in the State to ensure every South Australian child and young person is safe from harm, does well at all levels of learning, is taught skills for life, enjoys a healthy lifestyle, and is given opportunities to be an active citizen who has a voice and influence. This duty is consistent with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. Schools must take action in both policy and practice to actively celebrate and provide inclusive and affirming support for diversity.

Furthermore, the *Education and Children's Services Act 2019* states that students should not be discriminated against on the basis of their gender, mental or physical impairment, religion or race, nor that of their parents. A child's safety should also be the paramount consideration in the enforcement of this Act. This includes putting in place policies and practices to protect their best interests.

When the safety, confidence and comfort of some students is compromised in the school environment, it limits the safety, confidence and comfort of all students.

Many young people have said that significant progress had been made in some schools to include and support LGBTQIA+ students. Some students noted that because society has made progress overall towards acceptance and respect for LGBTQIA+ people, identity-based bullying and discrimination is often considered to be 'solved' or only a problem of the past, making it much harder to raise concerns.

Given the level of discrimination being described by LGBTQIA+ children and young people, schools must ensure the children entrusted to their care are supported to experience a learning environment that keeps them safe and nurtured, promotes their physical, mental, and emotional health, and maintains their engagement with their school and broader community.

Today's young people are acutely aware of the diversity of their peers, both in South Australia and around the world. As the first truly global generation, our children and young people value inclusiveness and place great importance on personal identity. They understand there is no "normal Australian" and that there are thousands of ways to be a unique and valued member of a community.

Young people and other stakeholders have raised concerns that particular groups of children face barriers to feeling known, valued, included and heard at school. LGBTQIA+ young people are one such group.

Children and young people, speak about the concerns they have in relation to religious intolerance, to racism, sexism, homophobia, and all forms of sexuality and gender-based bullying. They speak openly about their commitment to a multicultural and inclusive community and their desire for education that teaches respect and tolerance for differences.

Key Insights from Young People

- Discrimination based on sexuality and gender diversity takes many different forms in a school environment, and has short and long-term impacts on student safety and wellbeing, relationships, and educational engagement.
- School plays an important role in how young people navigate social, emotional and physical changes as they begin making sense of how those around them perceive them and accept who they are.
- When the safety, confidence and comfort of some students is compromised in the school environment, it impacts the safety, confidence, and comfort of all students.
- The support children receive early in their education can promote positive health outcomes and prevent bullying and exclusion in later years.
- Young people overwhelmingly believe that promoting greater inclusion for LGBTQIA+ young people strengthens tolerance.
- Changes to school environments and culture, alongside structural changes to the curriculum and school policies, can make a significant positive difference to the lives of all students, particularly LGBTQIA+ students.



LGBTQIA+ Identities and Experiences

Young people reported that what schools don't do is just as important as what they do. Many young people focused on the ways in which schools 'silenced', 'avoided' or 'pushed out' LGBTQIA+ students in conversations, school culture and participation opportunities.

Some students reported that their schools remained silent on gender identity and sexual diversity across key areas of the curriculum.

“ Mostly it is in the erasure. Forgetting to include sex education, life experiences and stories from LGBT+ people. There is an assumption of cis het orientation.” (17 year old)

Other young people described LGBTQIA+ students as visible but treated 'differently' in their school environment. This 'different' treatment was commonly described as 'less favourable'.

Many LGBTQIA+ students described feeling like they were being punished for who they are and not getting the same opportunities as their peers, particularly when schools failed to provide them with support services.

When students do not feel safe it negatively impacts on their sense of belonging at school, which in turn compromises trust and relationships with peers and significant adults. This has flow-on effects for school attendance, engagement and attainment.

One of the most common suggestions was to improve the breadth of the curriculum. Many young people would like to see diversity openly discussed and normalised across key areas of the curriculum, including relationships and sexual health education, history, science, health, social studies and religion. They saw the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ histories and identities in education as strengthening rather than undermining religious tolerance.

“ Acknowledging LGBT people’s identities are valid in environments such as health classes could make school environments more inclusive.” (17 year old)

“There are gay kids who don’t even know other gay people exist and feel that they are broken. Education is super important so that kids don’t think that they are broken.”
(17 year old)

Many young people suggested diversity and inclusion training for teachers and other staff, including the school leadership. They felt this could effectively raise awareness about diversity and homophobia and promote sensitivity and inclusion.

“ Teachers undergoing further training in how to teach these classes well or bringing in experts to teach specific classes. Work with [the] student body to promote a culture of acceptance within a school. Allow trans students to use the bathrooms of the gender they identify with.” (17 year old)

Young people wanted teachers and school staff to be willing to engage in conversations, rather than ignoring or shutting down discussions related to the lives, experiences and identities of LGBTQIA+ students.

Alongside practical support, many stressed the importance of seeing symbols that represent and validate diverse identities. They highlighted the benefits to their wellbeing when schools recognised clubs, events, or special days like Wear It Purple Day and Pride Month.

“ Never underestimate the power of pride flags and other symbols of safety and acceptance for queer kids. For me personally, this is always something I look for in every new setting, whether it be at a school, university, café, or doctor just to have the reassurance that this is a welcoming space for my whole self, and I know many other queer kids share this thought.” (18 year old)

