

6 Tips For Teachers And Administrators From A Trans Student

When I began my transition from female to male in high school, I was prepared for the worst. Horror stories of rampant bullying, hostile teachers, and bigoted administrators filled my head. Why would I expect anything else? All I had ever heard was that being trans in school was hell. When the school year began, I headed into the classroom anticipating a war.

Instead, I was surprised (and lucky) to find sympathy and support from my peers and the adults who worked at the school. In truth, it was a net-positive experience, though it didn't come without stress. In particular, I bore the burden of doing most of the teaching about what it meant to be trans, in addition to dealing with my own personal anxieties during my transition. The teachers and administrators, for all their goodwill, simply didn't know what to do. I was the first openly transgender student to attend the school, and they were flying blind. Over the years, I've heard similar stories from transgender students time and again: even in cases where adult authority figures (teachers and administrators, mostly) are generally supportive, they don't know where to start. (Note: I'm mostly writing this article directed at those cases; I recognize that some students suffer far worse feelings of alienation—but this can be a starting place.)

Now, with transgender issues emerging with greater visibility each day, teachers and administrators need guidance more than ever. Here are some tips (and an anecdote or two) for school leaders, from a regular kid who transitioned in high school.

by **Sabian Mignone**

1. Create an LGBTQ-inclusive space no matter what.

Approaching teachers and administrators is typically intimidating for a student, especially when said student may be undergoing personal changes that affect their life in school. This is especially true for transgender students, who generally have no way to tell whether an adult in a position of authority will react to their coming out with support or hostility. GLESN's SafeSpace stickers or other LGBT-positive visual signs are a great way to let your students know that you're safe to talk to.

The best thing teachers can do is preempt any discomfort by establishing the classroom as an LGBTQ-positive space in these simple ways, regardless of whether they know of any out LGBTQ students in the student body.

2. Get to know your students' rights.

Is gender identity and gender expression covered by your district's anti-discrimination rules? Has your state's supreme court set a legal precedent for the treatment of transgender students? Is there language in the district's bylaws regarding transgender students' use of bathrooms?

Finding the answers to these questions can be time-consuming, but the information is important to have when you're creating school policies regarding transgender students. Teachers can talk to administrators about these questions to garner further support and infrastructure. And if necessary, administrators can look to outside experts for guidance.

3. Summon experts who really know about this stuff.

On that note, ideally, all teachers and administrators should have basic education on transgender students. But in reality, many people don't have time to do the research—or they aren't aware of the right questions to ask to establish an adequate baseline curriculum on these issues.

That's why in many cases, you may need to bring the information to them—especially if you are in a position of trying to solicit support from your school. Reach out to local transgender and LGBTQ advocacy groups. See if they have any educational material that could be distributed among school staff and faculty. Better yet, arrange for these groups to give a presentation on a professional development day. That way, you can shift from having to be in the role of educator to instead simply facilitating the education that will help you feel comfortable.

4. Be careful when calling the roll, rote as it may seem.

My first year of school after transition, I didn't want anybody to know that I was trans. I wanted to experience high school as a "normal guy," and resolved to keep my past a secret. This resolution lasted until second period, when the teacher checked attendance by reading everybody's legal names as listed on the roll. I was mortified to hear my obviously female legal name announced to the entire class, and my dream of blending in was dashed before it had a chance to begin.

Like many transgender folks, I hadn't completed the process of legally changing my name. Legal name changes cost money and are time consuming, especially for minors. If your school uses attendance software that allows an alternate name to be input, great! In that case, trans students can then advocate for themselves to make sure the school inputs an alternate name.

But if you're stuck with a software that only shows legal names, there are a few things teachers can do to avoid outing trans students. The first time you call roll, only use last names, and then ask what the student wants to be called. Don't display your computer screen with the roll on it to the class.

When you have a substitute coming in, have a printed-out roll with the students' correct names on it for the substitute to read from.

5. Don't panic about bathroom panic.

Bathroom access for transgender students has been a contentious issue as of late, and for good reason. In my experience, many students were just fine sharing a bathroom with their transgender peers. I recognize this isn't the case for many institutions, but it's important to keep in mind that we often project way more panic onto these situations than is often there naturally.

If a student feels unsafe in the bathroom for any reason, offer them a pass, signed by an administrator, granting access to the faculty restrooms. Avoid restricting students to a sole bathroom; this can cause a problem where a student can't use the bathroom between classes and still get to class on time, because their designated bathroom is on the wrong side of the building.

6. Accept that you'll make mistakes—and keep working at it.

For many administrators and teachers, transgender issues are something they've never thought about before. They have the best intentions, but they end up slipping up on terminology or pronouns. It's okay. It happens. My favorite teacher messed up my pronouns for weeks. But every time, she would apologize and correct herself, and since I knew she was trying, I was OK. If you find yourself repeatedly making mistakes, you may want to take time to speak one-on-one with your transgender student to let them know that you aren't acting with malice.

Following these tips is a great first step to create a supportive environment for all of your students. Write to submit@trans.cafe with your questions about school or workplace sensitivity, and trans.cafe will respond by writing and publishing relevant pieces. And if you're an expert in any of these areas, please contact to offer your own original content, as we believe in sharing resources around and about trans education.