



Top questions to ask your school administrator: A list for parents

Any parent or caregiver could certainly have a lot on their plate with respect to their trans or nonbinary child, especially at first. A child's disclosure of their gender identity is often sudden and unexpected. It can be fraught with emotion for everyone. While a caregiver is navigating this crucial time, they must also consider the place where their child spends the most time outside of the home – their school. Children do not tend to consider any advance preparations that their school might need to do, nor should they. This is not their responsibility and they are often unaware of what could or should be done in order to optimize their schooling experience. A caregiver that takes time in advance to learn more about the school climate will find themselves better prepared for these next steps with the school.

The list of questions below can serve as a starting place for a parent/administrator conversation. It can be a nerve-wracking conversation. A parent may not know whether their child will be well-received or that their needs will be accommodated. If uncertain of the administrator's receptivity, some parents will choose to make an initial anonymous call to preserve their child's privacy.

Or they may ask a friend or family member for assistance. Calmness and confidence, while potentially difficult to find at first, are feelings to embrace. If this is the first conversation of this nature for the school principal or superintendent, you can be sure they too will be searching for their own sense of calm and confidence.

Whether by phone, video, or in-person it would be of benefit to parent and administrator to request adequate time and privacy to ensure that both parties are free from potential interruptions. The questions below may not generate informed responses – after all, it may be an administrator's first time fielding a call of this nature. Regardless of the principal's familiarity with the needs of gender-diverse students, a parent will certainly gain a sense of their openness/receptivity or otherwise.

Have you had transgender and/or nonbinary-identified students in your school?

If so, how did you address the needs of that particular student(s)? Did you work directly with the student's parent or caregiver? Do you have a process/plan to support the needs of that student? If so, would you describe that to me? Who is involved in that process?

If there were/are gender-diverse students, how did that go?

This is an open-ended question and deliberately vague. How an administrator answers this will provide a parent with a sense of the administrator's responsiveness, hesitancy, or dismissiveness. This question can be followed with an invitation to say more. Without disclosing any personal information, can you tell me the grade level of the students? How did it go in their classrooms? Were there difficulties? What worked well? How did they identify – transgender, nonbinary, etc.? Were teachers and students consistent with names and pronouns? Did any teasing or bullying occur? If so, how was that handled? Was the student's gender status known to their peers or was it private?

Does our district have a gender-inclusive policy? If so, where can I find it?

Including gender identity and gender expression when articulating the diversity and inclusion values/commitments of any school is necessary language that helps foster a shift within the school culture. Gender inclusive policy is key to communicating this commitment to the entire school community. It is foundationally important to have these statements clear and easily accessible to students, staff and teachers, and the parent/caregiver community. Policy, guidelines, mission, and values are commonly found in student handbooks, school and district websites, and within parent communications/resources. If policy doesn't exist, the question makes evident the need for this important articulation from the district.



If policy does exist, how is this communicated to parents/teachers/students?

The school community cannot benefit from policy and guidelines if they can't find them. Are teachers aware of their responsibilities? How might gender-diverse students know where to turn?

Has there been training on this topic and if so, please tell me about that training?

If the response is, Well, yes, we've had some guest speakers at the high school GSAs (Gay/Straight Alliance), that's not enough. Educators at every grade level need professional development opportunities to further their understanding – especially to make the crucial delineation between gender identity and sexual orientation. If gender differences are continually framed in the context of sexuality, and therefore “too mature” to discuss or address with children, then the experiences of trans and nonbinary children will be ignored, dismissed, or ridiculed. The patterns of gender-based teasing and bullying will be solidly entrenched well before it is decided (if ever) that students are “mature” enough to discuss gender differences.

If the school has had training, was it offered to all staff—teachers, counselors, leadership, office staff, PE/coaches, etc.?

All staff will benefit from deeper learning. Different employees have different needs and considerations. It is just as possible for janitors, cafeteria staff, bus drivers, and paraeducators to inadvertently or purposely disclose a trans child's status as it is for teachers or principals. All need to understand the factors that impact a child's safety and right to privacy.





Have you offered learning opportunities for the parent community? If so, how did that go? If not, do you have that in the works? And...

Parents may express concern or distress about the presence of gender diverse children and whether the topic might be addressed in the classroom? How do you/would you respond to these inquiries?

The concerns of the school community parents usually land at number one on a “top five fears list” for most administrators. How a principal responds to this question will be indicative of how they might respond when, or if, a parent of another student makes a complaint. The parent community can tip the scales for a school’s successful journey towards inclusion. Offering regular learning opportunities for parents is the best way to respect and include them in the school’s journey. An administrator’s response to these questions will give the parent insight into their level of confidence when engaging with the parent community.

Are you familiar with student support plans for trans kids? Do any of the staff have experience developing one with a student?

The answer may be no. What a parent can assess with this question is whether their administrator has interest in hearing more. Working with a student on a support plan is a thoughtful, comprehensive task. A principal who expresses excitement at having this resource at hand is preferable than one who dismissively states that a plan is not needed.

How do you ensure the privacy of any student that does not wish to have their gender history disclosed to students or faculty?

A counselor may feel that everyone should be “out and proud” or a principal may feel that it would be deceptive to others to not share that child’s gender history but the bottom line is that students do have a right to request privacy regarding their gender history. It is their right to determine whether, when, and with whom to disclose this history. For example, a parent may wish for the school nurse to know their child’s gender status in case of any medical emergency but that does not mean the school nurse has the right to share that information with others.

How do you manage the experience of a student for whom privacy regarding their gender history is not an option and/or is not desired?

Some children socially transition with peers who have known them for some time. This means that their gender history will be known. Other trans children may not feel a need to keep their gender history private for any number of reasons. There is no singular approach that will work for all students. The safety of visible trans and nonbinary students should be a primary concern and it is important that a school understands and can respond to each student’s needs. Ask what safeguards are in place for these kinds of circumstances. How the matter of privacy/disclosure is managed by the school should be explicitly clear.

How do you address the questions or comments raised by other children? Do you feel that some or all of your staff are prepared to positively, confidently respond?

If yes to the latter, ask for an example. If you sense a hesitant response, this is a sign that further education may be needed. If you encounter a more dismissive response, it may represent future inaction, even opposition, if situations do arise. Worse still, and more common than you might imagine, is the assigning of blame to the gender diverse student for any adverse experiences they encounter. If only some of the teachers feel confident, this would be an important consideration for classroom placement.

How do you respond to teachers and staff who are resistant or feel conflicted about supporting the needs of gender-diverse students? What are your expectation of these staffers? What is expected of me as a parent, if my child encounters this?

This is still a very real scenario for many school administrators. Some teachers may feel conflicted because of their personal beliefs. It is necessary to understand how a principal or superintendent will approach complex situations like these. A parent needs to know if their administrator feels confident and capable to delineate to their staff the professional workplace expectations versus any one individual's personal convictions. You will want to know that your school administrator is on solid footing to make these delineations to their staff.

Are students able to use the restroom that best aligns with their gender identity? How will you ensure the safety and privacy needs of my student?

Too often, the solution proposed is that of an alternative bathroom such as a staff or nurse's facility. In some cases, such a restroom is a great distance away from classrooms and/or using such a facility draws unwanted attention to the child who is using it. While such an option can be desired by some, most students will either opt for the girls' or boys' restroom. You'll want to know that the facility that works best for your child is available to them. Ask your school administrator how they are going to safely support your child as they begin using different facilities.





Parents or teachers may express concern or distress about the presence of gender- diverse children in classrooms, bathrooms, and locker rooms. How do you/would you respond to these inquiries?

At the least, you need to hear that the administrator feels confident to address any conflict. It's okay to ask for an example such as "What would you say to a parent or teacher who says my child should not be in that particular bathroom?"

When considering sports and other activities, what are your considerations for participation? Do you have an athletic policy in place for gender-diverse students?

Like restroom usage and access to other gender-segregated spaces, trans and nonbinary students should have the ability to participate in activities based on the best fit for them with respect to their gender identity. You can provide them with the Gender Diverse Youth Sport Inclusivity Toolkit if they do not already have it.

My child starts school in one week. What are you able to do to ensure that my child is off to the most optimal start of the school year?

It does not always work out for a school to immediately prepare for the inclusion of a gender-diverse child. However, there are some short term steps that a school can take to get off on the right foot for the school year. This can include direct support or training for a child's teacher(s) while planning for more comprehensive staff training at a later date.

My family is early on this journey. I may need to revise my child's support plan as time goes on. How do I do that?

Children of any age need room to explore and discover. Having a supportive environment at home and at school is needed for that exploration. This provides a child with more information than they would otherwise get if they felt pressured to "choose". The way they describe their gender identity – and actions they want to take as a result – may change. A child may shift from a nonbinary description of their identity to a trans identity, or vice versa. Certain pronouns may be requested early on and then changed as time progresses.

It is important to provide the flexibility as they child finds their path. This is crucial too when considering the possible, albeit less frequent, notion that a child will step away from a diverse gender identification. While society fearfully anticipates the chance a child might "change their mind", all the more reason to allow for exploration, discovery, and movement – even if that movement eventually is towards a cisgender identification. Modifications to a support plan need to address all possibilities and provide thoughtful support every step of the way.



Of course, this is a lot of questions.

A caregiver may not be able to ask all of them. Be selective and prioritize the ones you consider most important to you and your child. Some questions may not be relevant to your circumstances. If you need to, schedule a second meeting to continue the discussion. The primary goal of this inquiry is to get a sense of your administrator's knowledge, experience, and receptivity. You will learn a lot! Take notes during and after the conversation. It is okay to ask the administrator to pause, or repeat something, as needed so you can properly document what was said. If follow up items are mentioned, document those too including what, with whom, and by when.

The Gender Diversity Support Plan and other resources will be an important part of everyone's journey. Every educator can benefit from having a copy of the book, *Trans Children in Today's Schools* (Oxford University Press, 2022). Be sure to mention or provide these resources to your school administrator to optimize the path forward.



Resources

Parent Support: [TransFamilies.org](https://www.transfamilies.org)

School Training: Gender Diversity

Book: *Trans Children in Today's Schools*

Best Practices for Supporting Gender Diverse Children: Family Acceptance Project

Sports: Gender Diverse Youth Sports Inclusivity Toolkit