

THE ADVOCATE EDUCATOR'S HANDBOOK

Creating Schools Where Transgender
and Non-Binary Students Thrive



VANESSA FORD, M.A.T.
REBECCA KLING

JB JOSSEY-BASS™
A Wiley Brand

Praise for *The Advocate Educator's Handbook*

“The notion of ‘Brave Education’ is never in opposition to the idea of a ‘safe education.’ Safety is just such a low bar and should be an inalienable feature of public education, not optional or a bragging point. *The Advocate Educator's Handbook* supports the notion that schools have to, first, be safe enough to honor the bravery so many LGBTQ+ students and educators are already demonstrating. Schools that promote a safe and excellent education for all students need this handbook if genuinely committed to living into that promise.”

—**Tim'm West**, M.Ed., Executive Director, LGBTQ Institute at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights

A resource such as this couldn't come at a more crucial time, as transgender youth in the U.S. have become the opportunistic targets of the escalating waves of anti-trans rhetoric and legislation. With its comprehensive and methodical approach to tackling challenging issues facing advocates for transgender rights, this handbook will become a fundamental tool for anybody who works with and serves youth.

—**Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen**, Executive Director, The National Center for Transgender Equality

“For educators, administrators, school staff, and anyone else who has asked, ‘How can I best support transgender students?’—this book is for you. *The Advocate Educator's Handbook* is scaffolded to meet educators where they are, and is a critical tool for creating safer, more inclusive learning environments for transgender students everywhere.”

—**Keygan Miller**, Director of Public Training, The Trevor Project

“This is my job in a book! *The Advocate Educator's Handbook* is a one-stop shop for all the need-to-know information on supporting trans, non-binary, and gender-expansive youth in schools. It is an invaluable resource for educators and youth-serving professionals who want to implement equitable practices for LGBTQ+ youth.”

—**Booker Marshall**, LGBTQ and Sexual Health Manager, Chicago Public Schools

“Ford and Kling have written one of the most comprehensive tools for educators not only to understand how to help LGBTQ+ thrive, but to understand how to position themselves, as educators, in the journey to understanding, acceptance, and advocacy of their students. Every teacher, counselor, administrator, and parent should know this book.”

—**Willie Carver**, Author of *Gay Poems for Red States*, 2022
Kentucky Teacher of the Year, Member of the
American Federation of Teachers National LGBTQ+ Task Force

“A modern guide for anyone seeking to boldly support transgender and non-binary students. Resources, reflection, real situations—all in one.”

—**Levi Arithson**, Program Manager, LGBTQ+ Equity
Initiatives, Denver Public Schools

“This book could not come at a more critical time. Any youth-serving professional or family member looking for tools to advocate for LGBTQ+ youth should read this book. I am grateful for the concrete strategies to ensure LGBTQ+ youth are in environments where they are valued and can be their authentic selves.”

—**Cheryl Greene**, Senior Director, Welcoming Schools,
Human Rights Campaign Foundation

“*The Advocate Educator’s Handbook* is an accessible and comprehensive toolkit that teachers, administrators, policymakers, and parents can use to create more inclusive, affirming, and joyful educational experiences for trans and non-binary youth. By asking them to reflect on their own motivations, knowledge, and commitment to education, Ford and Kling inspire readers to disrupt inequitable policies and practices to better meet the needs of our gender-diverse students.”

—**Sara Moore**, Associate Professor and Chairperson of
Sociology, Salem State University

“As a parent of a trans youth, navigating the school system felt like an overwhelming and intimidating process. This book makes it less so! Every parent of a transgender kiddo should read this book and feel confident that their child can and should be supported in their schools and by their peers. Every teacher should read this to learn how to support and cultivate an inclusive classroom! This is a must read!”

—**Lizette and Jose Truillo**, Parent Advocates

“This book is a fantastic resource, and I cannot wait to share it with educators throughout Minnesota! Whether you are new to these concepts or a seasoned advocate, this book has something that each of us can learn. As states and municipalities across the country pass vastly different policies regarding transgender and nonbinary children, this book offers steps that each of us can take, within the bounds of our local laws, to support a school atmosphere that allows transgender and non-binary students to thrive. Thank you for creating such an amazing resource!”

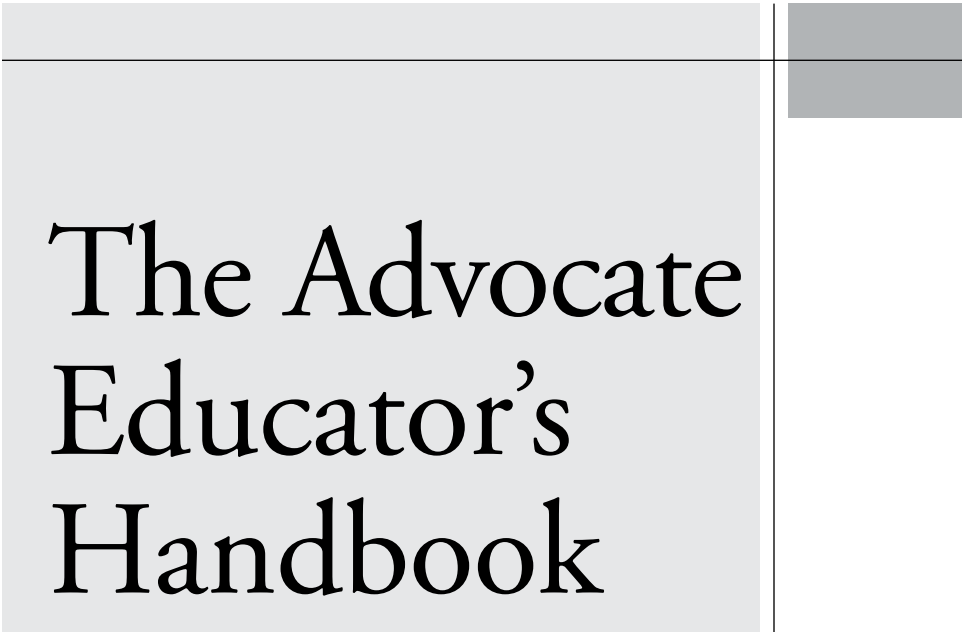
—**Kelsey Waits**, Activist and Founder of Transparent Alliance

“A timely and much-needed handbook! EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) practitioners, consultants, and facilitators like myself—not just teachers and school administrators—will learn and benefit greatly from reading and using this excellent guide.”

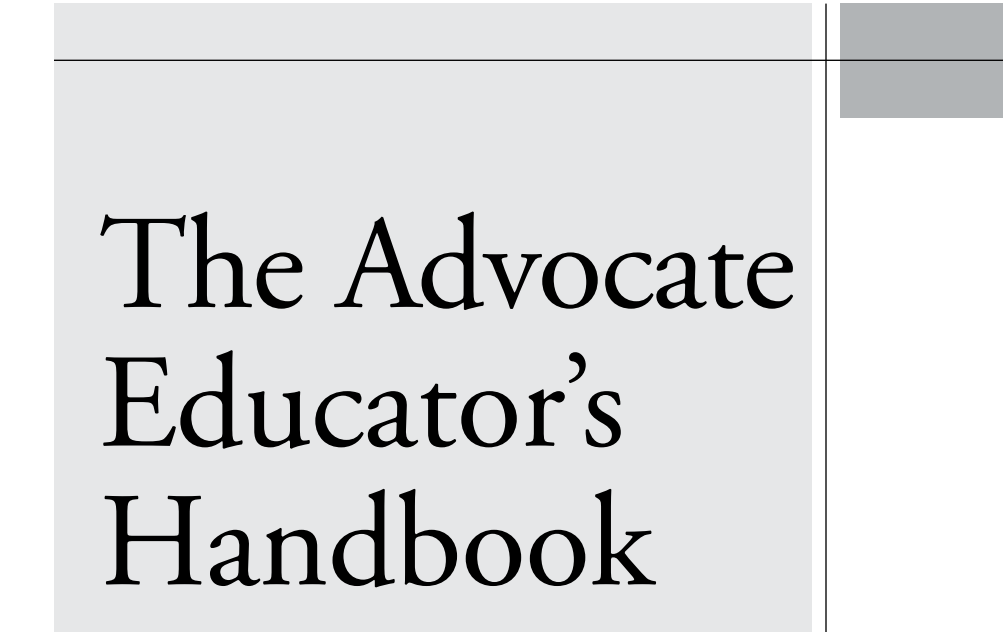
—**Yee Won Chong**, Senior Racial Equity Fellow,
Western States Center for EDI

“*The Advocate Educator’s Handbook* is beautifully written, clear, comprehensive, specifically helpful, warm, and open...open to human potential, to change, and to more beautiful, meaningful, joyful exchanges in our classrooms, led by, and centered on, trans joy.”

—**Joji Florence**, Co-Founder of Transformative Schools



The Advocate Educator's Handbook



The Advocate Educator's Handbook

Creating Schools Where
Transgender and Non-Binary
Students Thrive

Vanessa Ford, M.A.T.
and
Rebecca Kling

J JOSSEY-BASS™
A Wiley Brand

Copyright © 2024 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved.

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.

Published simultaneously in Canada.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 750-4470, or on the web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permission>.

Trademarks: Wiley and the Wiley logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and/or its affiliates in the United States and other countries and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Further, readers should be aware that websites listed in this work may have changed or disappeared between when this work was written and when it is read. Neither the publisher nor authors shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information on our other products and services or for technical support, please contact our Customer Care Department within the United States at (800) 762-2974, outside the United States at (317) 572-3993 or fax (317) 572-4002.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic formats. For more information about Wiley products, visit our web site at www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Names: Ford, Vanessa, author. | Kling, Rebecca, author.

Title: The advocate educator's handbook : creating schools where transgender and non-binary students thrive / Vanessa Ford and Rebecca Kling.

Description: Hoboken, New Jersey : Jossey-Bass, [2024] | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023043579 (print) | LCCN 2023043580 (ebook) | ISBN 9781394178018 (paperback) | ISBN 9781394178025 (adobe pdf) | ISBN 9781394178032 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Gender identity in education. | School environment. | Transgender students.

Classification: LCC LC212.9 .F67 2024 (print) | LCC LC212.9 (ebook) | DDC 370.81—dc23/eng/20231024

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023043579>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023043580>

Cover Design: Wiley

Cover Images: © Alona Savchuk/Shutterstock

This book is dedicated to our parents,
who were our first teachers, and to trans youth
everywhere who inspire us every day.

“One child, one teacher, one book, one pen
can change the world.”

—Malala Yousafzai

“I like to reassure educators: you already know
how to do this. You just need to trust that you know
how to do this.”

—Kyle Lukoff

Contents

	Foreword	xv
	Author Bios	xvii
	Introduction	1
	Using This Book	1
	Focusing on Trans and Non-Binary Students	3
	Becoming an Advocate Educator	10
	Putting It into Practice	14
PART I	Setting the Stage	19
CHAPTER 1	Background Information	21
	A Brief History of Trans Identity	22
	(Some of) The Many Ways to Be Trans	26
	How Many Trans Students Are There?	27
	Putting It into Practice	32
CHAPTER 2	Glossary of Terms and Definitions	37
	Putting It into Practice	52
CHAPTER 3	Supporting Diverse Student Bodies	57
	Race and Racism	58
	Physical Disabilities	60

	Neurodiversity	63
	Economic Class	68
	Family Structure and Dynamics	69
	Putting It into Practice	70
PART II	The Four Core Principles	75
CHAPTER 4	Educate	77
	Determining Who to Train	78
	Determining What to Teach	82
	Determining Who Will Teach	89
	Challenges Facing School Staff	91
	Putting It into Practice	95
CHAPTER 5	Affirm	99
	Affirming Policies and Legislation	101
	Affirming Practices	117
	Putting It into Practice	124
CHAPTER 6	Include	131
	Windows and Mirrors	133
	Inclusive Education Communities	136
	Creating Inclusive Classrooms and Curricula	141
	Creating Inclusive Extracurricular Activities	161
	Putting It into Practice	166
CHAPTER 7	Disrupt	173
	Responding to Students	174
	Responding to Parents and Community	
	Members	175
	Responding to Anti-Trans Laws and Policies	180
	Considering Legal Action	186
	Advocating <i>with</i> Trans Students and	
	Student Voices	186
	Evaluating Your Comfort with Taking Risks	194
	Taking Care of Yourself	196
	Putting It into Practice	197

	Conclusion	201
	Afterword—Vanessa Ford	205
	Afterword—Rebecca Kling	209
	Acknowledgments	213
APPENDIX 1	Additional Resources	217
	Books	217
	Videos and Documentaries	218
	Scholarly Articles, Research, and Data	218
	Resources Intended Specifically for Educators	220
	Sample Curriculum Resources	222
	Courses and Professional Development for Educators	223
	Model Policies, Assessments, and Guidelines for Schools and Districts	224
	Real Policies and Guidelines for Schools and Districts	224
	Professional Association Policy Positions and Best Practices	225
	Other Government Docs and Resources	226
	Resources for Students	227
APPENDIX 2	Professional Development	
	Provider Options	229
	A Queer Endeavor	229
	Better World Collaborative	230
	GLSEN	231
	The Human Rights Campaign’s Welcoming Schools Program	232
	Stonewall National Education Project (SNEP) Symposium	233
	The Trevor Project	234
	YES Institute	235

APPENDIX 3	Guidance Template for Classroom Libraries	237
	Index	239

Foreword

WE CAN all agree that great teachers, without exception, have a lasting impact on the students they teach. As an educator, I am (was) in a constant state of curiosity, awareness, and appreciation of the importance and value of the experiences I had each day with students.

Relationships matter, a sense of belonging is critical, and we cannot allow discrimination to be a part of the lives of the young people we help shape.

Educators recognize and acknowledge the struggles of marginalized communities, including the LGBT+ youth. The school environment is meant to be a safe and nurturing space for students to grow, learn, and discover themselves. However, for many LGBT+ students, a school can be a challenging and even hostile environment. As educators, we are responsible for ensuring that every student, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression, feels supported and respected in our classrooms.

For this reason, I am excited to introduce *The Advocate Educator's Handbook: Creating Schools Where Transgender and Non-Binary Students Thrive*. Vanessa Ford and Rebecca Kling have gifted us with this brilliantly written book, a comprehensive resource for teachers looking to educate themselves on the issues faced by transgender and non-binary youth, and learn how they can create an inclusive and supportive classroom environment. This guidebook is written by experienced educators and LGBT+ advocates who have firsthand knowledge of these students' challenges and the best ways to support them.

The book provides a roadmap for teachers to understand the struggles of LGBT+ youth in schools, and offers concrete strategies to make classrooms and school environments more inclusive. The authors also discuss the importance of intersectionality, acknowledging that the struggles of LGBT+ youth intersect with other aspects of their identity, such as race, ethnicity, and ability.

The book provides insights into creating a safe and welcoming classroom space through inclusive language, diverse literature, and teaching materials. It also explores how teachers can become influential allies for transgender and non-binary students, and become an advocate for them. For teachers who may need help understanding LGBT+ identities and experiences, the guidebook offers an overview of the terminology, history, and culture of the LGBT+ community.

In addition to providing information and strategies, the guidebook also offers examples of real-life scenarios that teachers may encounter in the classroom. It provides guidance on how to handle these situations. For instance, the book explores how to support a student who has just come out, how to respond to homophobic or transphobic comments made by other students, and how to handle bullying and harassment.

I was recently touched by the words of an immigrant teacher who came to this country not speaking the language and the sense of belonging teachers provided her, “I’ve been able to witness the beauty of our nation from perhaps a different lens, a lens that pays special attention to those who wrap their arms around those of us who are a little bit different. Often those who held me literally and figuratively were my teachers.” ~*Rebekah Peterson—2023 National Teacher of the Year*

What we do and say as teachers matters! I learned even more with every page I read, and I am thankful for the opportunity to grow and put my learnings into practice.

The cruelty of ignorance, the discomfort of guilt, and intentional discrimination can be decreased and hopefully eliminated if we all do our homework!

~Peggy Brookins, NBCT
President and CEO, National Board of Professional
Teaching Standards

Author Bios

Vanessa Ford (she/her) is an award-winning educator and author. Her children's book *Calvin* won the 2022 Lambda Literary Award for Best Children's Book. Vanessa was a classroom teacher for 14 years in Washington, D.C., Public Schools, and her advocacy has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Newsweek*, and NPR. She was a founding member of The Human Rights Campaign's Parents for Transgender Equality Council and sat for two years on the board of the National Center for Transgender Equality. She lives with her husband and two children, one of whom is trans, near Boston. Learn more about Vanessa's work at www.jrandvanessaford.com.

Rebecca Kling (she/her) is an educator, organizer, storyteller, and advocate for social change. Rebecca served as the community storytelling advocate and director of education programming at the National Center for Transgender Rights as well as on the leadership team of Harbor Camps, a sleepaway summer camp for trans and non-binary youth. She is also the co-founder of Better World Collaborative, a social impact consulting firm working to combat the recent flood of anti-trans legislation. She lives in Chicago with her two cats. Learn about Rebecca's work at www.rebeccakling.com and www.bwcollab.com.

Introduction

“Our role [as educators] is to try to meet young people where they are and to be relevant so that when we say things, or we set up a classroom, it’s actually something young people opt into with their minds and their hearts, so they are willing to say, ‘I’ll learn something from you.’”

—Bex Mui (she/her),
Director of Stonewall National Education Project

THIS BOOK is intended for anyone who helps shape the educational experiences of transgender and non-binary youth. (For a glossary of the terms and definitions used throughout this book—including *transgender*, *non-binary*, *gender binary*, and more—see Chapter 2.) You may be a classroom teacher, a school administrator, a policymaker, the parent of a trans student, or simply someone who wants to create safer, more inclusive, and more affirming classroom environments. You may even be trans yourself!

Using This Book

How ever you have arrived here, we encourage you to use this book in whatever way makes the most sense to you. For those at the beginning of their allyship journey, it may make sense to read the book in order from cover to cover. For folks with a little more

knowledge, feel free to skip around, jump right to a particular section, or identify the potential obstacles to equality that exist in your school community and go from there. At the end of each chapter, you'll find thoughts on addressing real-world challenges and questions for personal reflection. And while these can be helpful for individual learners, we also hope they can provide some focus and structure for book groups or community learning.

With that in mind, we hope you'll use the resources in this book not only to educate yourself but to educate your peers and colleagues as well. We'd like to think that the adults in your school community want all students to learn, grow, and thrive, but it's critical to dig into whether or not those goals are actually being achieved. Melinda Mangin (she/her)—author of *Transgender Students in Elementary School* and a professor in the Department of Education Theory, Policy, and Administration in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University—put it this way: “Most educators are well intentioned, want to do better, and aren't trying to cause harm. That said, the best of intentions doesn't mean you aren't creating harm.”

But you don't need to go it alone! We believe that if you are looking to better support trans and non-binary students, others in your school community are looking to do so as well (they just might not be very public about it). It's possible that your school or district already has resources, policies, or best practices on working with trans and non-binary students. For example, Booker Marshall (they/he), the LGBTQ+ and Sexual Health Program Manager with Chicago Public Schools, cites “the demand from schools” as the primary reason for the growth of the Chicago Public Schools resources and professional development for creating LGBTQ+ supportive environments.

Even if you have not yet found allies in your community, you don't have to go it alone because you have the advice and encouragement of everyone we consulted over the course of writing this book. We conducted more than 50 interviews, speaking with educators, advocates, and researchers as well as trans youth and their families. Those interviews all took place in late 2022 and early 2023, mostly via Zoom. Quotes from those conversations can be found throughout these pages.

And while the data, organizations, and policy conversations mentioned in this book are U.S.-focused, the best practices for working with trans and non-binary students are broadly applicable. Likewise, if the resources you want don't yet exist in your school or district, you may be the perfect person to get the ball rolling by hosting a book group, sharing excerpts with colleagues and peers, or simply bringing a new perspective to your existing work.

We also know that advocating for trans and non-binary rights can be emotionally draining. That's why we spoke with trans students about what brings them joy and what gives them hope for the future. We'll be sprinkling those throughout the book as well as some trans joy thoughts and resources we've seen elsewhere. In the Conclusion, we also have thoughts about hope for the future from trans students.

Trans Joy

The best thing [about being trans or non-binary] is being able to express who I am and not having to be limited by the gender binary. I feel complete and amazing!

—Emma (she/her), 14

Finally, while this book is mainly intended for adults, we always recommend that you work *with* trans and non-binary students, rather than simply assuming you (as the adult) know what issues are the most important to them.

Focusing on Trans and Non-Binary Students

Every student deserves a learning environment in which they can thrive as their full, authentic selves. So then, some might ask, why should we focus specifically on how to support trans and non-binary students? There are a few ways to answer this question.

Trans and Non-Binary Students Need Support

Simply put, trans and non-binary students face challenges that their cis peers do not. The Trevor Project's 2021 *National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health* found that:

- More than 3 in 4 trans and non-binary youth reported symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder in the past two weeks.
- More than 2 in 3 trans and non-binary youth reported symptoms of major depressive disorder in the past two weeks.
- More than half of trans and non-binary youth had seriously considered suicide in the past year.¹

The Trevor Project also found that affirmation and support can be life-saving. Respecting the names and pronouns of trans and non-binary youth, and allowing them to change legal documents is associated with lower rates of attempted suicide.² Here's how Keygan Miller (they/them), Public Training Manager at the Trevor Project, put it:

Students are spending a third of their day or more in schools. And so if a young person is LGBTQ, the impact on their daily life of an affirming space is hugely shaped by [their] school, especially if they don't have an affirming home life; school might be the only space for that. And we know from our research that when LGBTQ students can have access to affirming schools—and trans students have support from their teachers and peers—they have lower rates of attempting suicide, they have less mental health issues, etc.

In fact, if you look at affirming spaces—schools, home, community, etc.—schools actually have one of the highest connections to lowering those rates, when [the school is] affirming. So that's a big deal. And we also know from our national survey research that when young people learn about LGBTQ people and issues in school, we also see significantly lower odds of a suicide attempt by our LGBTQ students. So just by

learning LGBTQ history, or learning about an LGBTQ person, that can lower those [suicide] rates.

Schools then become this twofold space: What are we learning about, how are we growing in our understanding of our community? But also, where can I find that safe and affirming space? You have to be addressing both of those pieces. And doing that is going to increase [student] mental health and lower suicidality.

Ultimately, increased visibility of trans people across the United States has resulted in both greater support and greater pushback. One 2022 survey found that, paradoxically, more and more people in the United States favor protecting transgender people from the abstract idea of “discrimination,” but also that more and more people believe gender is solely determined by someone’s sex at birth.³ (See the Glossary of Terms and Definitions in Chapter 2 for more on what that “sex assigned at birth” means, and why this survey presents something of a paradox for trans people.) Trans and non-binary students need focused attention to ensure that vague or generalized ideas of support are translated into actual policy and practice.

Logan Casey (he/him), Senior Policy Researcher & Advisor for the Movement Advancement Project (MAP), told us about the double-edged sword of visibility:

While knowing a trans person doesn’t magically fix everything, it does—for a lot of people—really help begin a journey of changing hearts and minds. But it’s a double-edged sword: growing visibility is good because it helps us as trans people find each other, and not having to grow up the way I did, for example, with not knowing any trans person, or even what a trans person was, other than these really awful caricatures in the media that often ended in violent ways. There are some good things about that growing visibility, what it means for us as a trans community, and being able to find and see and connect to each other.

But with growing visibility, we're now seeing increased attention in the political sphere, targeting trans people and our rights to access basic things like housing, medical care, all kinds of things. So not purely a good trend. But definitely, there are good parts of it.

We are in a particularly critical moment for trans students, as trans and non-binary youth are under unprecedented legislative and policy attacks. In 2018, fewer than 20 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced in state legislatures across the country. In 2022, more than 150 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced. In 2023, more than 500 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced.⁴ Many of these bills would make it more difficult for trans people to change their names, make it difficult or impossible for trans youth to access gender-affirming medical care, ban trans athletes from participating in sports as their authentic selves, require teachers to jeopardize student safety by outing students, and more.

In some places, these anti-equality laws explicitly limit what educators can and can't say to students, such as Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill, which specified: "Classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards." Then, in April 2023, Florida expanded this bill to cover all grade levels, meaning discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity are banned for K–12 students in Florida. But studies have found that kids as young as three years old retain their expressed gender identity as they mature—which is a fancy way of saying, "Yes, they are really trans."⁵

Under Florida law, however, educators may be required to use the wrong name and pronouns for a trans student, lest the teacher be forced to provide "classroom instruction . . . on gender identity." Educators working with older students may still experience a chilling effect from the legislation, and those educators

may not be certain what behaviors or topics of conversation are or aren't permitted under the law. While LGBTQ advocates are continuing to fight the bill in court, they have had mixed luck so far and, as of March 2023, the case is still awaiting an appeal.⁶ In Chapter 7: Disrupt, we talk more about what educators can do to respond to anti-trans legislation.

Danica Roem (she/her), a transgender advocate and member of the Virginia House of Delegates, lamented the “demonization that we’ve seen of trans kids specifically, and LGBTQ kids more broadly . . . number one, you’re talking about children, and they [opponents of trans equality] are singling out and stigmatizing the most vulnerable people that these elected officials represent in the first place. So they’re attacking their constituents, and you cannot serve your constituents when you’re attacking them. And number two, [opponents of trans equality are] trying to establish a precedent that the existence of trans kids is wrong.”⁷

The Broader LGBTQ Community Needs Support

Hopefully, for most educators, the preceding clear needs identified are reason enough to support trans and non-binary students. But broader support—for all LGBTQ students, whether or not they are trans—is also crucial.

Absence of support may stem from a simple lack of knowledge or it may be part of a larger campaign against LGBTQ rights. Either way, schools and policymakers have a responsibility to take action. When Sarah McBride (she/her), transgender advocate and State Senator for Delaware’s First District, spoke with us, she stressed that “elected officials [in Delaware] have a constitutional and moral obligation to make sure that every student is able to access a safe and quality public education in our state. That is a universal responsibility and obligation, but it’s heightened for students who are vulnerable and marginalized, including LGBTQ students. And so we are not doing our jobs,