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For both LGBTQ students and their peers, comprehensive support from their school and teachers will transform the way they're able to relate to themselves and each other. If LGBTQ students are supported, they will be able to grow where they're planted and bloom successfully. If those who don't identify as LGBTQ are taught compassion and empathy and supported in their own right, they'll be much less likely to lash out at the unfamiliar—creating a safer environment for all.

Ultimately, each school needs to work hard to create an atmosphere of trust in which each student can be themselves. In this final section, we'll discuss a few proactive ways teachers and administrations can work to make this happen.

### ***Are teachers able to go beyond teaching and help their students be fully themselves?***

Yes. Think back to your own formative school experiences. Was there ever a case where a teacher or support staff at your school helped ensure that you were able to grow? Conversely, did you ever feel like the administration looked away when you needed help most? See if you can brainstorm ways to ensure that no child under your care will experience a similar plight. It's impossible to be there at all times for all people, but with creativity and a little bit of effort, it's entirely possible to change lives for the better.

### **Teach Your Students the Art of Speaking (And Disagreeing) Well**

We teach our students the fundamentals of sentence structure and drill them in mental math. However, when it comes to putting together a logical argument, learning how to disagree with someone politely and productively, and having respect for each other through sticky situations—these are often skills which we assume (or hope) that our students will pick up by themselves. Instead of leaving this to chance, let's instill in our students a real-world skill which will ameliorate school violence now and set them up for a lifetime of success later!

**Why is it difficult for students to speak well? Why would they resort to other ways of working through confusion (such as bullying) instead?**

- In America, the #1 fear isn't death or falling from great heights; it's the fear of public speaking. Having to put your own thoughts on display and defend them in front of even one or two other people requires a vulnerability which makes most of us exceedingly uncomfortable. Because putting together a respectful response to an unknown scenario often requires a level of introspection requiring significant self-knowledge and, to be frank, not a little humility and effort, many students find it easier to speak with their fists (so to say) instead of their brains and hearts.
- Setting up a classroom (and school) environment in which opinions are celebrated and arguments are carried out well will allow students to find ways to express themselves peacefully, particularly if we help them walk through confusing and stressful circumstances to help them make it happen.

### **Teach Your Students to Respect Views Other than Their Own**

- When a child is very young, they tend to believe that the entire world is as it is viewed through their unique and very specific lens. This built-up world-view is extremely important for early development, as it allows the child to form the opinions which inform his personality, goals, habits, relationships, and other intrinsic facets of his life.
- However, when the child has grown to a more mature age, it's equally important that the child discovers their world-view isn't the only one, and that other, potentially very different, world-views not only exist but can be equally valid. The fact that not many people are able to understand this as adults (and act in a way commensurate with that belief) is the root cause of many problems. Ensuring that this understanding takes root during a child's more formative years can not only transform a school community, it can set up an entire generation for more positive action as adults.
- The best way you can help facilitate this awareness in your classroom is by giving your students the rhetorical toolkit they'll need—compassion, empathy, curiosity—and then exposing them to as many world-views which differ from their own as possible. This is a fundamental part of education.
- For a concrete approach to making this happen, consider equipping your students with thoughtful, respectful questions to use when confronted with a world-view they may disagree with. For example, they could say something like, "Can you

please explain why you believe/do/say that?” or “I respectfully disagree with what you just said, because [insert cogent argument here],” or simply “I think something different” instead of the much more forceful “You’re wrong.” It will certainly take time for students to achieve this level of mature discourse, but that’s what school is about: the journey and the training.

- Ultimately, it’s imperative to help students realize that a respectful disagreement is not a negative thing. It’s a positive thing—as long as it’s carried out with respect to all parties concerned.

### **Celebrate Mistakes Made in Your Classroom**

- As mentioned above, the act of sharing one’s beliefs before a classroom—or, even more pertinently, coming out to one’s community as a member of the LGBTQ movement—takes incredible amounts of bravery and vulnerability. Doing all you can to foster these two tendencies in your students will help ease the journey an LGBTQ student is going through. One concrete way you can foster bravery and vulnerability in your classroom environment is to celebrate mistakes made and lessons learned.
- Focusing on teaching students not only the right answers to questions but the development of a correct answer, the ability to justify their opinions and question others’ in respectful ways will take them further than memorizing mental math. Try to create a classroom atmosphere which positively supports each student’s growth—even when their trajectories take a dip (and perhaps especially then). This will foster an environment in which students feel safe to be themselves.

### ***Section Three Summary***

To make schools safe havens of growth for all students, teachers are called upon to go further than merely teaching their subject. Ensuring that every student has the creative space and trust necessary to be vulnerable and present their authentic selves in class without fear of being mocked or treated poorly will help them grow—and it may help them feel less likely to lash out when they encounter people who represent world-views different from their own.

Teachers should focus on celebrating students’ mistakes and growth and on teaching their students to disagree well. Respectful disagreement instead of incendiary,

instinctive disbelief and reaction has the capability to change the world—and certainly can change your students' lives for the better.

### ***Section Three Key Concept***

Respectful disagreement: The idea that two people with two differing world-views can in fact disagree without resorting to violence or unhelpful hatred.

### ***Section Three Personal Reflection Question***

Think about the last time you felt most like yourself. Who were you with? Where were you? What were you doing?

Do you remember the first time you felt that way? Was it a good or bad experience? Did anyone help you to discover that state? Consider the joy of helping someone else get to that place of self-knowledge as you prepare to make your classroom a more inclusive, fair, and helpful community.

## **Conclusion**

LGBTQ students comprise, according to some studies, roughly 8% of school-going children in the United States of America—which means that at least 1.5 million students in schools today face the challenges of navigating life with those who do not understand them. This would be difficult under the best of circumstances, but when those around them can be violent and vindictive, it's easy to understand why many LGBTQ students choose to just stay home.

It doesn't have to be that way. Those 1.5 million students—a number which is likely an understatement—can be supported and even cherished by their communities. Steps can be towards inclusion and fairness, steps which can simultaneously protect these at-risk youth from bullying, depression, discrimination, and other unhelpful and even harmful outcomes.

These steps towards safety need to be taken at the administrative, staff, and student level; but it starts with individual action. Begin to create an atmosphere of trust, an environment in which students believe they can share themselves with security and

even celebration, and students everywhere will be able to make the most of their education and become everything that they are meant to be.

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