

TEACHING TOLERANCE



A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER
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Common Roadblocks

Some individuals may hesitate about adopting practices or policies that advance equality and safety for LGBTQ students.

Among the common hurdles:

“I believe homosexuality is a sin and do not believe that schools should promote it.”

Teaching Tolerance, and others who advocate for inclusive school environments for LGBTQ students, are not asking you to forfeit your religious beliefs or to “promote homosexuality.” We are asking you to take a stand against anti-gay harassment and its damaging effects on the educational outcomes for LGBTQ students. Certainly, people of good will can agree that all students should be able to attend schools free of verbal and physical harassment.

In our work, Teaching Tolerance often turns to the U.S. Constitution for guidance on issues related to religious tolerance. The Constitution guarantees religious freedom for personal beliefs and establishes companion responsibilities. We have the right to exercise our own religious beliefs in our lives (or to exercise none at all), and we are charged with a responsibility to protect the rights of others to hold religious beliefs as they choose. This is a core tenet of our democracy and a great civics lesson for us all.

In today’s heated political marketplace, the Religious Right occupies the loudest pulpit, but does not represent the full spectrum of religious perspectives on LGBTQ people. Religious scholars increasingly challenge anti-gay interpretations of the Bible [1], and many faith traditions already are, or are becoming, gay-inclusive. For example, the United Church of Christ [2] has long affirmed equity for LGBTQ people, and, just this week, the nation’s preeminent rabbinical school [3] for Conservative Judaism announced that it is opening its doors to gay and lesbian applicants.

In the United States, in a diverse democracy, there must be room for all of us.

“I don’t want to give special preferences to gay students.”

Fighting anti-gay harassment will enrich the lives of all of your students, because students who are not LGBTQ are subject to anti-gay bullying, too. When students don’t conform to notions of what girls “should be” or what boys “should be,” regardless of their sexual orientation, they are often subject to anti-gay slurs and harassment. The boy in your classroom who loves theater, but not sports, is at high-risk for anti-gay harassment, whether he’s gay or straight. Anti-gay bullying is a weapon of sexism, as well as homophobia.

“It’s not appropriate to talk about sex in the classroom.”

While there certainly are appropriate spaces to talk about sex in schools—in sex education or health classes, for example—talking about LGBTQ issues is not the same thing as talking about sex.

Like heterosexual relationships, LGBTQ relationships are fundamentally about love and affection between human beings, and we must guard against reducing these relationships to mere sex acts. Such

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hypersexualization negates the love, care, commitment and non-sexual intimacies that sustain healthy relationships, heterosexual and homosexual alike.

“This kind of teasing is just a rite of passage.”

A rite of passage into what? A world where it's OK to demean a fellow human being with the power of words—and with fists? Are these social practices that will help students thrive in our increasingly diverse nation and in a global economy? Certainly not. Learning how to navigate human differences in healthy, respectful ways is a fundamental skill for success in the 21st century.