



Charting a Path to Gender Inclusive Schools

By Joel Baum
Gender Spectrum

Independent schools are particularly well suited for addressing issues related to students' gender. What does it look like for them to do so?

The conversation related to gender that is currently taking place in many schools often focuses specifically on the needs and experiences of transgender¹ and other gender diverse students. That these young people face extraordinary challenges at school, as well as in society as a whole, is irrefutable. However, many of these difficulties are borne of a larger set of social forces, namely the assumptions and expectations that we place on people based on limited, binary notions of gender. Gender norms—whether about our bodies, the types of jobs a person should do, our interests, or how we should dress (among other things)—impact all of us. Young people in particular are often hindered by their ever-present nature. Like perhaps no other institution in our society, schools are well-positioned to interrupt this dynamic.

1. A note on language. Throughout this article, the term transgender will be used in a binary sense, meaning an individual who is assigned a particular sex at birth, and who now identifies as the “opposite” gender. Used in this way, it contrasts with the word cisgender, which refers to an individual whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. In other words, a cisgender man is someone who was assigned the sex of male at birth and feels like a man. Both of these terms contrast with the term non-binary, which refers to any individual who does not identify within the boy/girl or man/woman binary.



But what does it look like for schools to intentionally work towards greater gender inclusivity? More specifically, how are independent schools especially well-positioned to do so?

If you're confused about gender these days, you're not alone.

"In times of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned find themselves beautifully equipped to live in a world that no longer exists." (Eric Hoffer)

Few would argue that notions and conversations about gender are rapidly evolving in new and vibrant ways. At the same time, gender remains one of our least understood identities, steeped in binary assumptions and expectations. Remaining "learned" about gender means holding onto traditional understandings that inextricably link our gender to the sex we are assigned at birth. These binary notions are constantly reinforced in multiple ways in virtually every aspect of society.

At the same time, we are living in a time of drastic change when it comes to gender. Complicating this shifting context is an ever-changing gender vocabulary. It is not surprising therefore that few educators feel confident about addressing the topic. In fact, the ever-changing language of gender is a significant barrier to becoming more comfortable with the subject as a whole.

As with any aspect of our students' lives that are affecting their experiences at school, it is incumbent upon all educators to deepen

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their knowledge of gender, despite their discomfort. Schools must establish a common language and framework for understanding gender, including taking the time to explore how gender has impacted each person's own life and their work as educators. Rather than desperately clinging tightly to outdated ideas about gender, educators must become **learners**, or otherwise risk being "beautifully equipped to live in a world that no longer exists."

Charting a Path: Entry Points to Gender Inclusive Schools

We all know the saying that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This is certainly the case here as well. Gender inclusive schools do not happen by accident. Through employing a systematic set

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of approaches and practices, schools can convey a commitment to gender inclusion across the span of a child's educational career, resulting in gender literate graduates prepared to thrive in a diverse world.

Establishing an organization-wide level of gender literacy is a critical first in that process. It is one of four distinct areas of focus that can provide educators with a sense of efficacy and impact. A framework for creating a gender inclusive school² utilizes four "entry points" for making this work actionable. The first of these, the *Internal Entry Point*, we've already discussed, namely an institution's commitment to ongoing learning about gender diversity.

The second area of work, the *Interpersonal Entry Point*, is represented by the interactions, intentional behaviors and communications that reinforce the school's commitment to gender inclusion for all. They are designed to interrupt simplistic notions about gender by providing broader ways for students to see gender. This entry point is all about providing "counter-narratives" to the binary gender messages surrounding youth.

"Teachable moments" best represent this component, such as when an educator encounters a student demonstrating binary assumptions or stereotypes. A teacher might overhear a student saying something like "boys don't play with dolls" and interject

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along the lines of, "Hmm, let's think about that for a minute. Do all girls play with dolls? Does anyone know any boys who play with dolls? I don't think there are any 'boy toys' or 'girl toys.' Toys are just toys!" Whether something as simple as getting students' attention without always saying "boys and girls" or "ladies and gentlemen," or ensuring that a cisgender boy who happens to prefer skirts is not mistreated, this entry point literally communicates the school's commitment to a more gender inclusive climate.

The *Instructional Entry Point* represents the various ways that teaching and learning activities are geared to instill greater awareness and understanding about gender. Whether standing alone or integrated

2. Gender Inclusive Schools Framework: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/4x4wihzcsrkojy/Gender%20Inclusive%20Schools%20Framework.pdf?dl=0>



into other aspects of instruction, these approaches have the greatest potential for impacting students' beliefs and behaviors. This can take the form of lesson plans, speakers, or other activities explicitly addressing students' understanding of gender. A great many examples of lesson plans focused on gender diversity exist. Literature is another resource for raising the topic.

For more integrated approaches, an almost infinite number of ways exist to fold ideas about gender into subjects that teachers are already covering. For instance, a spelling test might include the word "celebrate."

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Why not provide an example that also gives a nod to gender diversity? "The word is 'celebrate.' Jamila is excited to celebrate her team winning the championship." Or perhaps a math problem: "Seventy-nine students are in the cafeteria. Thirty-six of them identify as boys, 34 of them identify as girls, and 9 of them identify as non-binary. What is the percentage of each gender?" A unit on Native American culture can easily include mention of Two Spirit individuals or a prompt for writing a persuasive essay can explore the relationship between gender and power.

Every instructional area can include some sort of gender-related connection. Whether it's exploring bio diversity in science, examining the challenges presented by masculine and feminine rules found in world languages, or studying cultural understandings of gender in social studies, the instructional entry point is a powerful tool for shaping gender literate graduates.

Finally these three entry points are most effective when they take place within a systemic context that supports and reinforces them. The *Institutional Entry Point* consists of various programmatic, structural, and other design features of the institution. They are specific policies, practices, and processes that create a foundation for gender inclusive practices to take hold.

Laws and governance form an important foundation of the Instructional Entry

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Point. But while various legal changes and policies that specifically protect and/or promote gender inclusivity are necessary, they are not sufficient. All too often, there remains an implementation gap that prevents them from truly influencing educational practices on the ground.

This entry point is marked by tangible systems and concrete structures. These include things like student information systems that accurately represent a student's authentically held sense of self, including those who identify in a non-binary manner. All-gender bathrooms, inclusive dress codes and uniforms, and visual reminders promoting greater awareness about gender also represent this aspect. Allotting resources to facilitate professional development about gender, or to support a specific individual to lead gender inclusion efforts all represent an institutional commitment to this issue. The school's mission, website, and communications can further enhance this element. Institutional Entry Points

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While at first the idea of becoming a more gender inclusive institution may feel daunting, in fact it is well within the reach of any school. Like never before, the conditions are right. As a society, we are thinking and talking about gender in brand new ways. Young people in particular are incredibly open and accepting of the gender diversity they see all around them. The basic concepts of gender literacy are relatively simple and straightforward, even if they are new for many of us. And finally, the steps for intentionally working to be more gender inclusive are well-established, with many schools already well along the way towards implementing them. More than anything, perhaps the greatest barrier to creating more gender inclusive schools is our will to do so.

Independent Schools Leading the Way

In multiple ways, independent schools are uniquely positioned to fully utilize the Gender Inclusive Schools Framework. Committed to ongoing professional learning, they can effectively support the necessary development of a more gender literate staff and adult community. Their flexibility allows them to operate in ways that can enhance work in each of the four entry points. Grounded in strong values and missions, independent schools have at their heart a commitment to celebrating the unique nature of each child.



Another attribute of independent schools that further positions them to engage in gender-inclusion work is their longstanding history of practitioner inquiry and scholarship. Coupled with generally high levels of continuity among staff and leadership, this culture can help schools avoid reactively responding to gender-related issues, instead working to make reasoned, well-informed decisions. Instead of reacting as the learned, such measured approaches are yet another example of why learners are best suited to implement a truly gender inclusive philosophy.

Finally, there are many compelling reasons for doing this work. As noted, we as a society are talking about gender in ways that are new and transformative. Gender impacts the lives of all young people, and for transgender and non-binary students, it is at the heart of the mistreatment and discrimination they frequently encounter. On a growing basis, various legal requirements make not doing this work simply irresponsible for any institution. For some students who lack support at home, a gender inclusive school may represent their only safe harbor in a sea of rejection.

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There remains an even more fundamental reason for seeking greater gender inclusiveness. When we show our kids that they can do and be anything they choose, that they do not need to limit their hopes and dreams based on contrived notions of gender, an entire world of possibility opens up for them. This work is not just a matter of feel good, political correctness. It is not a fad. We simply can't afford **not** to engage in it. Given the many problems we are facing in our world today, we need every one of our students to be able to bring their full selves to the challenge of solving them. Creating gender inclusive schools is a positive step in that direction. ●

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