



Transgender and Non-Binary Students in the Secondary Choral Environment

Common LGBTQ+ Terminology*:

Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB) – A person who was assigned to the female sex at birth.

Assigned Male at Birth (AMAB) – A person who was assigned to the male sex at birth.

Assigned Sex at Birth (ASAB) – The biological sex assigned to someone by society based on genitalia or other biological factors.



Asexual – An individual who does not experience sexual attraction.

Binding – A process involving compressing breast tissue to minimize the appearance of breasts. This can be done in a variety of ways: Ace wrap, bandages, or a chest binder (a garment similar to a sports bra, but is designed to assist with binding).



Bisexual – An individual who is attracted to members of their own gender as well as another gender.

Dead-naming – Referring to a trans individual by their “dead name”, the name they were assigned at birth that they no longer use.

Female to Male (FtM) – A slightly outdated term still used by some to signify a physical transition from the assigned female sex at birth to the male sex that matches their gender identity.



Gay – An individual who is primarily attracted to a member of the same gender. Though it spans across all genders, it is more commonly used to describe those who identify as men.

Gender Dysphoria – Distress caused by the incongruence of one’s sex and gender. This can range from mild frustration to severe distress that can result in depression and/or suicidal thoughts/attempts.

Gender Expression – How one expresses their gender. This can be done through altering clothing, accessories, speaking patterns, or other external factors.

Gender Identity – A person’s internal sense of their gender.



Intersex – An individual who was born with male and female sex characteristics.



Lesbian – A woman who is primarily attracted to another woman.

Male to Female (MtF) – A slightly outdated term still used by some to signify a physical transition from the assigned male sex at birth to the female sex that matches their gender identity.



Non-Binary – An umbrella term for gender identities that are outside the gender binary (i.e. not exclusively male or female). Primarily called “Enby” for short, originating from the sound of the abbreviation “N.B.”



Pansexual – An individual who is attracted to members of all genders.

QTPOC- Queer and/or Trans Person of Color

Queer – An umbrella term representing individuals who identify in the LGBTQ+ spectrum. In the past, the word was used in a derogatory sense, though it later underwent a reclamation to its current definition.

Sexual Orientation – A term describing who a person is attracted to, whether physically, emotionally, or romantically.



Transgender – An umbrella term representing a person whose gender identity somehow conflicts with their assigned sex at birth (ASAB).

Transfeminine / Transmasculine – Umbrella terms for anybody who identify as feminine (former) or anybody who identifies as masculine (latter).

Transsexual – A slightly outdated term more commonly used by the medical community to describe an individual who wants/is planning to transition or has transitioned from their assigned sex at birth.



Two-Spirit – An umbrella term used in many Indigenous communities to describe someone operating in a third gender societal or ceremonial role.



Progress Pride/Inclusive Flag (created by Daniel Quasar 2018)

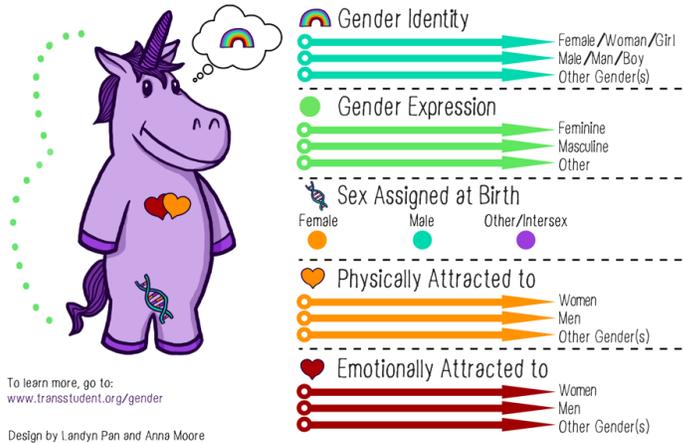


Latest iteration of the Flag (2021)

**Note: This list is not all-encompassing, nor is it universally agreed upon. As in many communities, vocabulary can change rapidly, and some in the community might have slightly different definitions of the words. Some may consider certain words to be completely out of usage, while others may strongly identify with them. This list should serve as a starting point and not as the end-all-be-all.*

The Gender Unicorn

Graphic by:
TSER
Trans Student Educational Resources



Gender Dysphoria - Distress caused by the incongruence of one's sex and gender. This can range from mild frustration to severe distress that can result in depression and/or suicidal thoughts/attempts. This is the "diagnosis" trans individuals who are wanting to transition are required to receive.

"The server, an apparent young, White, ponytailed woman with a spritely smile bounces toward our table: "Hello, Ladies!" Startled, I exchange a look with my friend. Ouch. This hasn't happened for a while. My jaw is tight. I feel like I am not really there. Invisible and unrecognized. I feel like a monster. Alienated. And humiliated. Again. I hold the feelings like they are a plate of 20 candles burning, hot wax dripping onto my hands and pooling on the floor. I don't know how to not hold the feelings, the candles, the fire. I am used to it. A lifetime of learning how to hold burning candles. Not knowing how to put them down, how to ask someone else to hold them, how to put them out." (Nordmarken, 45)

Potential Triggers of Gender Dysphoria:

- Misgendering (referring to an individual as a gender they do not identify with) or incorrect pronouns
- Dead naming (using a trans person's name they were given at birth that they no longer use or associate with)
- Bodily features that might not match their gender identity (ex: facial hair on a transwoman, or the appearance of breast tissue on a transman)
- Gendered expectations based on one's assigned sex at birth.(Ex: "Men should help move the chairs")
- Bathrooms, locker rooms, or other spaces that are typically segregated by sex.
- Speech that separates or divides a class by sex (ex: "Girls go over here; boys go over here")

A Student Came Out to Me as Trans...Now What?

1. Thank or acknowledge them for their vulnerability and express your support.
2. Privately and respectfully gather a little more information from them.
3. Remember that not every student will know everything about themselves yet.
4. Know that every situation is different and contextual.
5. Educate yourself! It is your responsibility.
6. Have resources at the ready.
7. Develop a plan with the student and use it.
8. Know that it's okay to make mistakes!

Names and Pronouns:

- Speak with your student privately about which name they wish to be called/what pronouns they want to go by.
 - Masculine: He, Him, His, Mr.
 - Feminine: She, Her, Hers, Ms./Mrs.
 - Non-Binary: They, Them, Theirs, Mx.
 - Neo-Pronoun examples: Ze, Zir, Hir
- Dead Name: A name given at birth that is no longer used.
 - If a student asks you not to use the name, don't use it.
 - Course Management Systems (ex: eSchool, Moodle, etc.) often will only show the dead name, especially on rosters/class forums.
 - When leaving rosters for substitutes, make sure to leave one with the correct name of your trans student.

Challenge: Tell a story about a choir member without using gendered pronouns.

Uniforms:

- Allow students to wear what makes them comfortable
 - Speak to them privately about what they would be most comfortable wearing.
 - It is okay to remind them that uniforms are what are worn in front of parents, community members, friends, etc. Make sure to do so in a way that doesn't come across as unsupportive.
- Provide gender neutral alternatives
 - Concert black (all back tops/bottoms) is the easiest formal option.
 - Avoid choir robes for school settings due to the religious undertones/connotation.
- Make uniform requirements in handbooks gender-neutral:
 - Ex: Instead of "Ladies: Jewelry is limited to non-distracting earrings", just write "Jewelry is limited to non-distracting earrings."

Sections/Standing Arrangements:

- Speak with student privately about their preference

- Each situation will be different , some students won't mind singing where their natural voice belongs, others will feel dysphoric.
- Be empathetic and find ways to support your student, even if it means what isn't necessarily "vocally best" – you teach the whole human, not just the instrument.
- Remove gendered language for sections
 - Refer to Sopranos/Altos or Treble/Higher voices instead of "Ladies"
 - Refer to Tenors/Basses or Lower voices instead of "Men"
 - Not all transwomen sing tenor/bass, not all transmen sing soprano/alto
- Blend standing arrangements to help with sections, so trans people can intermix easily.

Effects of Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) on the Voice:

Note: Not all trans people decide or want to medically transition. Not every trans person will decide to take hormones, though many do. Every situation is different and contextual. The following is in reference to those who want to medically transition or take hormones.

- **Transfeminine Individuals:**
 - Estrogen
 - Estrogen produces more feminine effects on the body (ex: softer skin, things/reduces facial and body hair, makes one more sensitive to temperatures due to the thinning of skin, development of breast tissue, redistribution of fat around hips/thighs, etc.)
 - Does not have much of an effect, if any, on the vocal folds.
 - Anti-androgen
 - Typically used in combination with estrogen to suppress testosterone levels, thereby reducing more masculine developments in the body.
 - Does not have much of an effect, if any, on the vocal folds.
- **Transmasculine Individuals**
 - Testosterone or "T"
 - Testosterone produces more masculine effects on the body (ex: skin becomes more oily/thicker, increasing of body hair thickness and amount, development of facial hair, potential frontal scalp hair thinning, etc.)
 - Testosterone will elongate the vocal folds causing a drop in the pitch/fundamental frequency.
 - Those taking "T" may experience voice cracks, vocal fatigue, breaks in the voice, a decrease in access to the passaggio, similar to (but not the same as) a cisgender male adolescent.
 - Check out "Teaching Lucas" by Dr. Loraine Sims for a more detailed look at T's effects on the voice.
- **Adolescents/People under 18**
 - Those who are considered a minor more than likely will not be on feminizing or masculinizing hormone therapy. This is done for a variety of reasons, including

doctors wishing to give their trans patients more time to “be sure” of their identity before making sometimes permanent changes, or because it requires parental consent that may not be given, the list goes on.

- If a trans adolescent is prescribed anything it is typically gonadotropin hormone releasing analogues (GnRH). These are pubertal blockers, which basically press pause on puberty.
- These typically don't have much of an effect on the voice beyond the prevention of vocal fold elongation for somebody who was AMAB.

Alterations of Gender Expression That Can Affect Vocal Pedagogy

- Altering speaking/singing pitch to be higher/lower than “standard” range
 - Can result in extra laryngeal tension or fatigue
 - “Standard” speaking range can cause dysphoria in the singer
- Chest Binders
 - Worn by transmasculine individuals to minimize the appearance of breast tissue
 - Don't ask if a singer is wearing them (we don't typically ask about underwear do we?)
 - Potential Health Outcomes (Peitzmeier et. al, 2016)
 - These are self-reported outcomes that other trans individuals who have worn binders have experienced. Almost all reported that the major mental effects were worth the minor physical discomfort.
 - Not all of those who wear a binder will experience all of these.
 - **Pain** (chest, shoulder, back, abdominal)
 - **Respiratory** (cough, respiratory infections, shortness of breath),
 - **Musculoskeletal** (bad posture, rib or spine changes, rib fractures, shoulder joint ‘popping’, muscle wasting)
 - **Neurological** (numbness, headache, lightheadedness, or dizziness)
 - **Gastrointestinal** (digestive issues, heartburn)
 - **General** (fatigue, overheating, weakness)
 - While a transperson should seek medical advice from their doctor always, Dr. Peitzmeier et. al do state that to assuage symptoms, those wearing binders can find times in the day to “take a break” from wearing their binder.
 - Corsets/Waist-Trainers
 - Occasionally worn by transfeminine individuals to shape/train the waist.
 - Can cause similar effects as binders, but more research is needed!

Singing Strategies for Trans Singers:

- Strive for a healthy, resonant tone per usual, but ensure that it is comfortable for the student. Minor adjustments may be needed.
- Relax the larynx!
 - Yawn sighs into the chest voice

- Brief returns into the “natural” speaking voice
- Semi-occluded vocal exercises (especially on descending lines)
- V’s or other voiced consonants
- Lip Trills
- Humming
- Ingo Titze’s Vocalizing through a Straw technique
- Vocal rest and water are highly underrated!
- Range Extension Exercises
 - Strengthen the “outer edges” of the voice
 - Assigned Male at Birth (AMAB)
 - Work on strong and clear falsetto
 - Focus on passaggio strengthening exercises
 - Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB)
 - Develop the chest voice
 - Work on eliminating the husky/breathy sound.

Remember that achieving pitch is important, but so is resonance!

Rooming During Trips:

- Every situation is different and contextual
- Take multiple factors into account:
 - Gender identity of the student
 - Who the student feels comfortable rooming with
 - Administrative/District policies
 - Comfort level of other students
 - Potential parental pushback
- These concerns could make the trans student so uncomfortable they might a voice the trip altogether.
- Decision usually needs to be made at the administrative level, because it can become a legal issue for the school district.
- Before speaking to admin, talk to your student.
- Privately let student know that you may need to disclose their identity to administration in order to discuss the best course of action. GET CONSENT FIRST. If the student does not give consent, it is not okay to out them.
- Admin might have to consult higher ups.
- If the student is okay with being roomed with people based on their ASAB, nothing more needs to be done.
 - Private/unmonitored rooms can cause issues for the trans student.
- Finding a group of students who will room with the student based on gender can help, but some parents might not be on board. Disclosing student’s gender identity externally can violate FERPA.
- Other options that don’t require admin notification:
 - Solo room (Have the program pay for the difference in cost)

- Have student's parent chaperone and then the student can room with the parent.
- Advocate for your student so they can enjoy the trip.

Unsupportive Parents/Administration:

- Every situation is different and contextual
- Lack of parental support can look like:
 - Overusing the student's dead name/incorrect pronouns
 - Forcing the student to be more masculine/feminine
 - Derogatory language towards the student
 - Abuse
 - Complete rejection from the family unit

"...One in five transgender individuals have experienced homelessness in their lives. Family rejection and discrimination and violence have contributed to a large number of transgender and other LGBTQ-identified youth who are homeless in the United States – an estimated 20-40% of the more than 1.6 million homeless youth." (NCTE, 2020, para 2)

- Lack of administrative support can look like:
 - Inconsistent disciplinary procedures
 - Inconsistent enforcement of school policies
 - Deeming a student to be a "trouble kid"
 - Hyper-fixation on a student/student's behaviors

Jonathan Escobar, a 16-year-old Georgian male, wore feminine clothing to express dissatisfaction with rigid gender expression. He was told by school officials, citing dress code policy, that to return to school, he needed to dress more manly or consider homeschooling. (Farber, 2009)

- Be an advocate for your student, even when nobody else is. Find out what your student wants primarily and try to find ways to honor it to the best of your ability.
- Do not out students to parents/administration/others without their consent. The only exception is if they are planning on hurting themselves or others, in which case it can become a legal requirement to get the student help.
- Be willing to respectfully stick up for your student with administration. Be ready to provide examples of how other districts or schools handled similar situations.
- Provide a safe classroom environment for your student no matter what, so at the very least they have somewhere to go.
- If a student's parents are unsupportive, you can use the name/pronouns the student would like for you to use with the student, while using the legal name with their parents.
- Have a plan for what name trans students would like to use in concert programs.

- Possibilities include: the name they go by, their legal name, a first initial with the full last name, an accidental “omission” of the name from the program, or not including student names in programs at all.
- Educate yourself on your school district policies as well as city, state, and federal policies/laws to better understand the situation.
- Have resources available for administrators and parents as needed. They might be unsupportive, but open to learn. Not every individual is going to be open to learn— know when to stop trying to push the issue with that person, otherwise there could be negative blowback for you.
- Be respectful and kind as much as possible, and always relate that your main purpose is doing what is best for your student, so they are as comfortable as possible. Ideally, that’s everybody’s goal.

Real World Scenarios:

Scenario 1:

“One of my students does not have the musicianship skills to join the varsity mixed choir. He has been a member of our treble choruses, has plenty of good friends, and his voice works well in an alto range (we attempted tenor, but it forced his larynx down and caused discomfort). He expressed an interest in singing in the tenor-bass chorus, and I told him it was definitely an option.

At the end of the year, we revisited, and ultimately decided to keep him with his good friends in the treble choir since the non-varsity tenor bass choir would not be enjoyable socially. Is there a way I can help him develop a lower range without injuring his voice?”

Scenario 2:

“What do you suggest for uniforms, especially in Texas where formal dresses/suits are encouraged? We have uniforms already, and I’m totally comfortable with a student wearing the uniform that makes them the most comfortable, but I don’t want them to feel like they’re the odd person out by not wearing the “right” uniform. I’ve seen a lot of suggestions to switch to concert black, but I have students who can’t afford to get a “nice” outfit.”

Scenario 3:

“My middle school choirs were always separated by gender to accommodate changing voice issues. As the world has become more open to different ideas about gender, I am concerned about that in one particular circumstance. As a long time, middle school choir director, I spent a lot of time making sure I treated the female changing voice in a healthy way.

I was very careful in how much I had young female voices singing in chest voice. If (for lack of a better term) a birth female voice identified as male, how do I have that child sing in my tenor bass choir without possibly harming his voice? I am worried about harming the child by putting him in an ensemble that does not represent his gender identity, but I am also worried about permanent vocal damage by too much chest voice singing at a crucial vocal developmental stage.”

Some words from other Trans and Non-Binary Music Educators:

*“Changing voices is hard work for cis folk. Changing voices *and* genders or changing voices when one doesn’t identify as their ASAB is HARD. Exploration and time and love and affirmation all need to be a part of that process. To make this possible, different voices need to be modeled too. For example, cis male teachers can (and should) model head voice – not only is this good practice beneficial for every gender in the room on appropriate tone and range, but it allows students to become comfortable seeing the amazing things the voice can do –and a way into various aspects of finding their own voice. Disclaimer: The example is not perfect as every voice is different and I’m not advocating for anyone to use their voice improperly or in a manner that is vocally uncomfortable or just not possible” – Puck, they/them, Texas*

“Hormones, speech therapy, and in extreme cases, surgery on the vocal folds can change your “natural” voice, but the singing voice and the person behind it must be nurtured and encouraged, ESPECIALLY in the event of trans or non-binary identities. I always like to say “make a joyful noise, because it focuses on the life and spirit of singing more than the perceptions of singing.” – Mattie, she/they

“GET RID OF GENDERED TERMS FOR HIGH/LOW VOICES! Call them by section name or by high voice/low voice. This tiny change can do wonders for a more affirming classroom culture. To add onto this, make sure to hold space and grace for kiddos struggling with this when dysphoria hits.” – Amanda, she/they, Oregon by way of Texas

“When you extend your hand to a community that’s disparaged, be prepared to attract even more rebuke than before. Anticipate the pushback and be prepared for how you might feel and respond. Hold tight to your core values and never mind the critics. Those who you’re supporting know the challenges well and can help you hang in.” – Dana, they/them

*“Just...stop *saying* you’re a safe/friendly/accommodating person/ally and start *doing* things that make it clear you are an ally. You know how we use “silent rehearsals” to jumpstart our musicality? It makes us rethink everything about our rehearsals in order to achieve our actual goals. I wish allies would think about their support of marginalized people like that. How would you show you’re an ally if you’re not allowed to talk about being an ally?”
–Max, trans man, he/him*

*“Language! Reduce needless gendering of language! Say ‘strings and percussion’ rather than ‘boys and girls,’ ‘friends and neighbors’ rather than ‘ladies and gentlemen,’ and so forth.” –
Emma, she/her*

“Our understandings of our identities evolve, and our ‘self-labels’ might change as language is discovered or changes to encompass who we know we are. Every time someone comes out with an identity, it doesn’t indicate a phase or ‘flip-flopping’, but a firmer grasp of the words we use to describe ourselves. Because not only do we come out in the same way over and over, lots of us come out for the first time in multiple ways.” –Ær Queen, they/them, VA

“I’ve been in choir throughout my life. The choir room was a home for me when home didn’t feel safe. Choral music helped momentarily quell my dysphoria and feel emotions at a new depth. But growing up as a trans choir student was hard. I was told by a choir director that people would find me disgusting. My identity has been questioned countless times by teachers and professors. Even at TMEA in 2019, I was misgendered repeatedly by a former choir director, in front of a former student who was about to start her music education career. I was courteous and smiled through the conversation, but I cried in my hotel room afterwards. The choir world has come a long way, but there’s more work to be done. Keep advocating for your students and your trans and non-binary colleagues. Keep being a refuge for others who just want to be themselves. Spread love and kindness. Push for more sessions on diversity and underrepresented groups. Thank you for being here today. It means more than you know.”

–Melanie, she/her, Houston, Texas

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