

EDUCATORS AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERS: COMMIT TO SUPPORTING LGBTQ PEOPLE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN 2023

On November 19th 2022, Anderson Lee Aldrich opened fire in Club Q in Colorado, killing five people and wounding another 25. In the wake of this devastating tragedy, which echoed the June 2016 attack on the Pulse nightclub in Florida, many responded with shock, dismay, and disbelief. How could a mass shooting targeting the LGBTQ community happen again?

The horrific violence at Club Q unfolded against the backdrop of rising anti-LGBTQ sentiment in the United States, particularly in the nation's public schools and libraries. As scholars in the field of education, we are profoundly concerned by these recent attacks on LGBTQ youth and educators, which place them – and all LGBTQ people – at risk of harm. Unless we actively address anti-LGBTQ sentiment in public space, we are likely to witness further acts of aggression against this community.

What is the context surrounding anti-LGBTQ violence?

In 2021, several of the authors of this statement wrote a [letter to President Biden](#) outlining ways that his administration could support trans youth in public schools. Since then, LGBTQ people in the United States have only experienced increased hostility. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has noted there have been [a record 162 proposed anti-LGBTQ bills in 2022](#) alone, with [86% of the laws targeting trans youth](#). Anti-LGBTQ bills have been proposed in nearly 75% of states, and most “[target transgender and nonbinary people, with a particular emphasis on trans youth](#).” These measures attempt to restrict teaching about gender, sexuality, and racial injustice; restrict trans youth's access to healthcare; bar access to gender-affirming facilities such as bathrooms; and prohibit trans youth participation in gendered extracurricular activities such as sports. [Groups like the white nationalist Proud Boys have targeted Drag Story Hour](#), a celebrated literacy initiative in which drag performers promote themes of LGBTQ acceptance and joy by reading to children in schools and public libraries.

Who and what is behind the recent attacks on LGBT-inclusive education?

Attacks like these are not new, nor are they separate from the recent targeting of Critical Race Theory. These recent bills are largely funded and organized by a coalition of far-right think tanks, advocacy groups, and political action committees, including the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), Family Resource Center (FRC), and the Council for National Policy. The ADF and the FRC have been [identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center](#) as extremist anti-LGBTQ hate groups. In the 1980s, ALEC [opposed divestment from apartheid South Africa](#) at the same time as it demonized “[the homosexual movement](#),” focusing particularly on the pernicious idea that children should not be exposed to gay and lesbian people. Political movements like these have long sought to privatize education by using anti-LGBTQ and anti-Black fearmongering to deliberately sow discord and distrust in public education.

We must not fall for these divide-and-conquer tactics. Those who scapegoat Critical Race Theory and LGBTQ people in schools benefit when we treat these attacks as separate and loosely connected. In fact, they are fueled by the same groups. We must build strong coalitions to fight white supremacist ideology and the privatization of education. These coalitions are crucial to ensuring that public education serves all children and families, particularly those who are targeted in political attacks based on their race, gender, and/or sexuality.

What can we work toward instead?

As scholars of education and history, we are keenly aware that schooling in the United States has always been structured by inequality. Historically, most schools in the U.S. have contributed to a narrow vision of the ideal American citizen, one that is often rooted in racism and confining beliefs about gender. At the same time, for as long as public schools have existed, people have fought to ensure that they equitably fulfill the nation's commitment to free public education for all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, disability, and/or citizenship status. We seek to continue that fight.

We believe that public education should serve the entire public – indeed, it is the cornerstone of a functioning democracy. We believe in public education that supports people learning together in shared space, free from the threat of violence. We believe in public education that is honest with children about the world as it is while working toward a more just and caring society. We believe that public schools should be places where young people can safely play with and learn from each other. Rather than narrowly prescribing who children can be, schools should be places where students can explore who they are without fear. We emphasize these points because we believe that the fight for LGBTQ justice in schools must go hand-in-hand with strengthening public education. Below, we present recommendations for actions you can take to support these dual goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Commit to evidence-based practices and policies to support LGBTQ youth. In moments like those after Club Q, many make familiar calls to strategies that might sound intuitive but can cause more harm. For instance, some may react by calling for increased connections with police and other modes of surveillance. There is ample evidence that shows these changes do not live up to their intended reality. In fact, [systems of policing increase vulnerability for LGBTQ people](#), especially LGBTQ trans women and people of color. We instead encourage individuals and organizations to lean into anti-violence approaches in response to these incidents. Rather than expanding policing and surveillance in schools, we urge you to:

- **Support LGBTQ-inclusive school policy and practice.** Many taken-for-granted school practices like gendered classroom groupings, dress codes, and honorifics [contribute a culture of inflexibility around gender](#). Support LGBTQ-inclusive [policy](#) and practice in all school activities, including in the classroom, on school trips, and in [athletics and other extracurricular activities](#).
- **Invest in LGBTQ-inclusive books and curricular materials.** In addition to teaching students basic knowledge and skills, schools also socialize youth [to participate in democratic societies](#). To help youth develop more empathy and connection with experiences that may not be their own, including the lives of LGBTQ people, young people need opportunities to connect with and relate to one another in school. Instead of book bans and similar restrictions, LGBTQ people's voices and lived experiences must be [reflected in the curriculum](#).

- **Resist increasing police presence and guns in schools, including School Resource Officers (SROs).** The [increased presence](#) of police has not been shown to improve safety outcomes in education. In fact, [the presence of SROs in schools](#) has been more often linked to disparities in discipline that lead more youth into [the school-to-prison pipeline](#), particularly youth of color, disabled youth, and LGBTQ youth.
- **Resist individualist reforms to bad actors.** Like clockwork, many called for increases to mental health resources following the Club Q shooting and other instances of violence against LGBTQ people. Although it is important for young people to have comprehensive mental health support in schools, [there is little to no rigorous evidence](#) that people facing mental health challenges are more likely to engage in violence. This rhetoric has two harmful effects. First, it makes mental illness something to fear and demonizes those facing it, including those who frame gender or sexuality as a mental illness. Second, this framing individualizes the problem to a few rather than analyzing the structures that support and encourage violent actions.
- **Support LGBTQ community-based education programs like Drag Story Hour.** We need schools that actively collaborate with NGOs and community-based education programs that serve marginalized young people. Furthermore, programs like [Drag Story Hour](#) and other LGBTQ community-based education programs create opportunities for young people to connect with LGBTQ cultural production, and promote an appreciation for diversity, self-expression, consent, and friendship, all of which are important to a thriving democracy.

Improve working conditions for educators. The recent teacher shortage might be better characterized as a failure to support and retain teachers. We need a well-supported, well-resourced workforce in public education at all levels, including LGBTQ staff. Public school teachers and other workers must be prepared to support the entirety of the public, which includes LGBTQ young people and their families. Although providing this support is the collective responsibility of all school workers, LGBTQ school workers are especially crucial to supporting LGBTQ youth and families by informing policy, curriculum development, as well as family engagement and community relations. The following suggestions are designed to accomplish these goals:

- **Create supportive pathways for LGBTQ people to enter into the teaching profession.** As we continue to navigate the impact of COVID-19, we need talented and energetic public school educators more than ever before. Rather than demonizing LGBTQ educators [as some legislatures have done in the past](#), we should *increase* supportive pathways for LGBTQ people to enter the teaching profession, similar to the powerful examples of recruitment and retention programs that have been created for [Black](#) and [Indigenous](#) educators, recognizing that these are all overlapping groups that have each faced unique barriers to entering the teaching profession. Such programs might include recruiting educators from gender and sexuality studies programs or a range of LGBTQ organizations, as well as providing mentorship opportunities, professional development, peer networking programs, and other resources.
- **Organize for change in teachers' unions.** We call upon labor union leaders and members to advocate for LGBTQ members and protection for all members in teaching about gender and sexuality in ways that are inclusive of LGBTQ experience. Labor unions may be especially valuable for marginalized workers, as they offer the power of collective bargaining for better working conditions, including a safe and respectful workplace and comprehensive, LGBTQ-inclusive healthcare options. When we fight for structurally marginalized workers, *all* workers stand to benefit.

- ***Provide meaningful professional development on gender and sexuality in education for all teachers.*** Rather than restricting teaching about gender and sexuality to a particular age or banning it altogether, educators should be supported to talk openly about gender and sexuality (including LGBTQ topics) with children of all ages in ways that are accessible to them. For this to happen, education workers need [meaningful professional development](#) that can help them understand the role of gender in schools as well as to develop the pedagogical content knowledge that will enable them to talk about it with students. This need could be fulfilled through collaborations between K-12 and postsecondary education, with scholars in education and women & gender studies, or through professional development from NGOs like GLSEN.

Keep the public in public education. States created public schools and colleges to serve their communities, helping to invest in the ongoing upkeep of democracy while also serving as center points of commerce, culture, and learning. In a polarized world, public institutions like schools and colleges continue to serve these purposes but they require leaders willing to support and defend these ideas. Given the recent culture war panics in education mentioned above, people who wish to reshape public education in ways that exclude diverse stories and experiences have targeted local and state leaders. Those wishing to support public education must now do the same to take actions that support LGBTQ youth.

- ***Resist private sector solutions.*** In times of crisis, we can become vulnerable to solving problems with private sector solutions, like opening LGBTQ-inclusive private and charter schools. However, these proposed solutions do not strengthen public systems. We want well-funded public schools that support all students. In evaluating strategies for change, it is necessary to ask: Does this proposal strengthen public education for everyone in the long term, or does it offer a band-aid solution that expands the privatization of education?
- ***Develop relationships and coalitions to protect public education.*** Attacks on LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum and initiatives are already [pushing teachers and leaders away from education](#). Even [those charged with stewarding educational policy](#) have come under attack and threat from [those who wish to ban discussion of LGBTQ topics](#), among others. One way to combat these intimidation attempts is to build relationships with others to form like-minded coalitions, especially between leaders and community members. Speak up at school board and governance meetings if you are not in a leadership role. Organize phone or email campaigns. It is easy to intimidate an individual; it is more difficult to challenge collectives.
- ***Mobilize supportive parents and families.*** [Koch-funded organizations](#) have scaled and organized people from across the U.S. to show up at school board meetings to express grievances with everything from library books to curriculum, citing concerns that parents should have control over what their children learn about at school. Yet, most [parents report that they trust their children's teachers and are knowledgeable about what their children learn](#). Organizing with parents who support LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum can be a key way to push back against conservative narratives that frame decisions about what is taught in schools as some unseen indoctrination process. If you are a parent or family member of a K-12 student who supports LGBTQ-inclusive education, get involved with your school's parent association and/or write op-eds for your local and state newspapers.

- **Run for elected office.** Though coming off an election cycle in the United States, local, state, provincial, and national elections are coming up in 2023 and 2024. As in the case of the [Tennessee state legislature](#), political attacks on queer and trans youth are poised to continue into successive years. In this context, governing bodies require leaders who will take bold actions to protect and affirm LGBTQ students. Work to identify up-and-coming community leaders who might also take part in your team by running for office or getting on the radar of appointing officials.
- **Support public libraries and community centers.** Schools and colleges are two common organizational types commonly associated with public education. Yet, spaces like [libraries](#) and [community centers](#) also play a role in educating and supporting students' free and open access to information and community-building. Publicly thank the staff members of these organizations for the queer and trans materials and programs they already provide. These services are vital to public education and are also education spaces in and of themselves, especially for LGBTQ youth. Use these spaces and encourage their use by others. Donate your time and resources to them. Vote in local elections when their funding is jeopardized. Lobby local politics to ensure their ongoing maintenance and staffing.

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