



## Including Transgender Students in School Physical Education

John T. Foley, Court Pineiro, Dan Miller & Melissa L. Foley

To cite this article: John T. Foley, Court Pineiro, Dan Miller & Melissa L. Foley (2016) Including Transgender Students in School Physical Education, Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 87:3, 5-8, DOI: [10.1080/07303084.2016.1131544](https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2016.1131544)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2016.1131544>



Published online: 18 Feb 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1549



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

# Including Transgender Students in School Physical Education

John T. Foley

Court Pineiro

Dan Miller

Melissa L. Foley

This article developed out of conversations with preservice teachers and elementary school teachers. Many of the preservice teachers did not realize that there were students who identified as transgender at the elementary school level. The elementary school teachers seemed to fall into two groups — those who have had a student who identified as transgender and those who did not realize children identified as transgender as early as elementary school. Unfortunately, research suggests that many teachers and school personnel are not educated in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) issues, nor are they familiar with how to create the best learning environment for LGBTQ students (de Jong, 2014; Payne & Smith, 2014). The purpose of this article is to provide information for successfully working with students who identify as transgender from two different perspectives: (1) an elementary school physical educator, Dan Miller, who has had students who identified as transgender in his classes, will provide a teacher's perspective, and (2) a preservice teacher, Court Pineiro, who will draw from his experiences as a person who identified as transgender early in elementary school, will provide a student's perspective.

There is a trend toward more acceptance of transgender issues. California recently passed the School Success and Opportunity Act (AB 1266, California Code 221.5 [f]), which allows student athletes to play in sports based on their gender identity (Mahoney, Dodds, & Polasek, 2015). A person's *gender* is a



John T. Foley



Dan Miller

social construct with which they identify, and it encompasses certain mannerisms, clothing and physical characteristics. Often these items are labeled masculine or feminine by society at a given point in time. A person's *sex* is the biological assignment of male or female given at birth based on anatomical characteristics, which is often identified by a healthcare professional. *Cisgender* is a term used to describe when sex and gender identity align for a person; when sex and gender identity do not align, then a person can be *cross-sexed/transgender* (see Figure 1).

It is important to understand the fluidity of gender identity and that some students might travel between identifying as male or female when they are strictly one gender or another. It is not



Court Pineiro



Melissa L. Foley

uncommon for teachers to assume that gender identity issues occur in adolescence or later; however, students often explore their gender identities at a young age. Although this article gives a very brief introduction to transgender issues, a more thorough treatment of the topic can be found in Krane and Barak (2012).

Determining what is right for all children can be tricky. What is fair and appropriate for a student who identifies as transgender might be in conflict with some school personnel and community members' beliefs (Kaiser, Seitz, & Walters, 2014). The response from a community, at a personal or institutional level, can range from supportive to hostile. This can be the same in schools

where parents sometimes receive mixed responses, ranging from full support by the school team to a superintendent who “wasn’t comfortable with being part of the ‘deception’” (Kovalanka, Weiner, & Mahan, 2014, p. 371). Payne and Smith (2014) found that many schoolteachers, administrators and professionals had an initial reaction of fear to the presence of a student who identified as transgender. Because of this fear, educators can inadvertently limit opportunities to support students who identify as transgender, and they may limit opportunities for other students to socialize and engage in discussions about gender diversity.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) has indicated that students who identify as transgender are at a higher risk of committing suicide and being victims of bullying. The increased likelihood of bullying may be caused by some students who are uncomfortable with gender diversity and/or perceive students who identify as transgender as nonconforming. Block (2014) suggested that physical educators are in an ideal position to address the negative views

		Assigned Sex at Birth	
		Male	Female
Gender Identity	Male	Cisgender	Cross-sex male/ Transgender
	Female	Cross-sex female/ Transgender	Cisgender

Note: Cisgender is a term used to describe a match between sex and gender.

**Figure 1.**  
**Gender – sex identification**

toward LGBTQ students that can lead to negative psychosocial and health outcomes. A teacher may choose to ignore the fact that a student is LGBTQ simply because he or she is not familiar with LGBTQ issues. Barber and Krane (2007) reminded teachers that their inaction or

silence toward a student who is LGBTQ can send a strong message to the student and their classmates that the teacher either does not care or does not support them. It is important that physical educators help youth connect to themselves and their classmates.

### Teacher Perspective

*Over the years I have had students who have identified as transgender and a few others who remained stealth (did not choose to come out publicly). I am fortunate to be in a school that works as a collaborative unit to create a safe and comfortable environment for every student. My experience has been very positive with this team approach that includes the classroom teacher, social worker, art teacher, music teacher, physical education teacher and building administrators all working together with the parents and the student. Some of the questions that came up from the student are: Am I more of a boy or a girl? Which bathroom do I use? Who do I play with? What do I wear?*

*As a teacher, I have learned to avoid picking teams or having students grouped by male or female. This includes lining up at the end of class. It is important to pass on this knowledge to student teachers, volunteers or others who may be helping out in the gym and who may inadvertently group students by sex. One of the biggest issues we had to address was bathroom use. This was resolved by the school installing a universal bathroom (accessible/unisex) that was available if the student was not comfortable using the bathroom for their assigned sex. Other schools have addressed this issue by providing access to a faculty bathroom.*

*The playground can be a tough place for kids. While we cannot dictate what happens during recess, we can work on teaching respect for one another in our classes. And, hopefully, that will carry over to the playground. I make sure to connect with the kids as much as possible and relay the importance of respecting one another and ourselves. We discuss how important it is to accept each other and appreciate individual differences. The concept of respect is not only a concept I teach students but a motto I use when working with parents. It is important to understand that this can be a stressful time for parents, and they only want what is best for their child. They are their child’s advocate, and we need to respect them for that. Building a trusting relationship with the parents can take time and should include communication between all members of the educational team. As a teacher I try to embrace the following guidelines:*

1. Communication is vital to a successful outcome for the student
2. Work as a team so the school is sending a unified message
3. Teach respect and show respect
4. Show all students that you respect and care about them
5. Provide a gym in which kids feel safe and comfortable
6. Empower students to speak up against bullying and/or gender discrimination
7. Have an open-door policy for parents and caregivers

## Student Perspective

*I am a 20-year-old physical education and health major and have known I was trans since a very young age. It was about kindergarten or first grade when we (my family and I) discovered that there was actually a term for how I was feeling. At that time I identified as female-to-male transgender, meaning I was born a female but identify as male. I now identify as female-to-male transsexual — the difference being, I am going through the process of transitioning to male as well as identifying as it.*

*Many people who are trans do have a name that they prefer to be called. An easy way to figure this out is on the first day of class when you take attendance, before going through the list, simply say, “If you have a nickname or preferred name you would like to be called, let me know when I call your name, and I will change it on my sheet. Or you can also come up to me after class.” This will give the student the option to tell you in front of the class if they are comfortable doing so, or tell you in private. A benefit of saying that before taking attendance is that it shows the students that you are open, accepting and willing to listen to them.*

*Calling someone by their preferred pronoun can be a tricky topic. From the time I was born through my senior year of high school I was called a she/her/hers/girl etc. It never felt right. It is important to remember that everyone is different. What I mean by that is, there are trans people who are timid and afraid to speak up, so they will let you call them by the pronouns they do not prefer. In those cases call them what everyone else calls them because if it turns out that they are not trans and you call them by what you think would be their preferred pronoun, that may insult them. To stay safe from insulting anyone, I would wait and see if they come up and tell you what to call them. Then there are the students who are the complete opposite and will go up and tell the teacher exactly what they want to be called. That is the easy part. The tricky part is making sure you actually call them by the pronouns they prefer. There will be slips! Don't worry, it happens. My mom still calls me “she” by accident sometimes and switches to “he” as fast as she can. The other tricky part is how the person will react if you call them by the pronoun they do not prefer. Some people let it pass. Some people, like me, just stay calm and correct them. Some people get really upset. The best bet when dealing with any of these reactions is to try to correct yourself as fast as possible and say a quick “sorry.” Correcting yourself and apologizing is enough because you are not making a huge scene over it, and it shows the individual you did not mean to insult them and that you are trying your best.*

*When I was in elementary school, teachers always divided the class into girls and boys. They would even do it when it came to smaller groups. They would have an equal number of boys and girls to a group. This is a big mistake. Doing this can send a trans student into a full-blown panic — at least it did for me. At that time I was still being called “she,” so that made me think I was supposed to go with the girls. I mean, they always put me in the girls’ line. I had to use the girls’ bathroom. To the teachers, I was always counted as a girl even though I had short hair, played with boys’ toys, dressed like a boy, and, most importantly, I felt like a boy. I would be left standing in the middle for a few extra seconds trying to decide which side to go to as everyone watched. An easy solution to this is to divide the class in other ways.*

*Bathrooms and locker rooms can be some of the worst places for trans students. Through my senior year in high school I used girls’ bathrooms and locker rooms because everyone knew of my situation. I hated using girls’ restrooms, especially in public, and felt uncomfortable in the locker room. In middle school the PE teachers at the school let me change in a bathroom by the gym, which helped some, but it was still a touchy subject. When it comes to having a trans student, I would try to make them feel as comfortable as possible in terms of bathroom/locker room use. Allowing them to change in the bathroom is a great solution, even if it is the bathroom they do not prefer, because it does take a lot of anxiety away when there are no people watching. If there is a unisex bathroom, like in the nurse’s office, that is another alternative. If you are in a school where it is okay for them to use the bathroom they prefer, that is even better. It is important to note that bathrooms or locker rooms can be a place of bullying.*

*Fortunately, I have not been bullied. However, I know of many trans people who have been bullied at school, especially in the locker room and bathrooms, and who have had very little support. When it comes to bullying, the best thing you can do is stop it. I know students who get bullied and the teachers say nothing or just say, “stop.” That might stop the students for that brief moment, but then they continue the minute you turn your back to them again. Teachers should talk to the kids who are bullying and follow their school bullying policy. The majority of the bullying cases I have heard about, especially with trans students, happened because the teachers and administration failed to take appropriate action. The most important thing you can be to a trans student is someone they can come to. If they need support, someone to listen, someone to be a role model, someone to accept them, someone to stick up for them, then be that person. If you can be that for them, then you will change lives.*

## Conclusion

Teachers have a responsibility to provide a safe environment and quality educational experience for all students. This article has provided information that can

help educators working with students who identify as transgender. It is hoped that, at the very least, the fear factor has been removed. This in turn should have a positive effect on psychosocial

health outcomes of at-risk students who identify as transgender. In the long term, teachers are building a community of acceptance for all individuals that will go beyond the schools. More resources for

educators and school administrators can be found at the following CDC website: <http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm#school>

Also, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network has resources for educators on inclusion and respect: <http://glsen.org/educate/resources>. Finally, to help address bullying, the following resource is recommended for teachers: <http://www.stopbullying.gov/what-you-can-do/educators/index.html>

## References

Barber, H., & Krane, V. (2007). Creating a positive climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youths. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 78(7), 6–7, 52. doi:10.1080/07303084.2007.10598047

Block, B. A. (2014). Supporting LGBTQ students in physical education: Changing the movement landscape. *Quest*, 66, 14–26. doi:10.1080/00336297.2013.824904

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender health*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>

de Jong, D. (2014). "He wears pink leggings almost every day, and a pink sweatshirt...": How school social workers understand and respond to gender variance. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 32, 247–255. doi:10.1007/s10560-014-0355-3

Kaiser, M. M., Seitz, K. M., & Walters, E. A. (2014). Transgender policy: What is fair for all students? *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 17(1), 3–16. doi:10.1177/1555458913518538

Krane, V., & Barak, K. S. (2012). Current events and teachable moments: Creating dialog about transgender and intersex athletes. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 83(4), 38–43. doi:10.1080/07303084.2012.10598761

Kuvalanka, K. A., Weiner, J. L., & Mahan, D. (2014). Child, family, and community transformations: Findings from interviews with mothers of transgender girls. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 10, 354–379. doi:10.1080/1550428X.2013.834529

Mahoney, T., Dodds, M., & Polasek, K. (2015). Progress for transgender athletes: Analysis of the School Success and Opportunity Act. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 86(6), 45–47.

Payne, E., & Smith, M. (2014). The big freak out: Educator fear in response to the presence of transgender elementary school students. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 61, 399–418. doi:10.1080/00918369.2013.842430

*John T. Foley (john.foley@cortland.edu) is a professor in the Department of Physical Education, Cort Pineiro is a preservice physical educator, and Melissa L. Foley is the field experience coordinator at the State University of New York at Cortland in Cortland, NY. Dan Miller is an elementary physical education teacher at Ithaca City School District in Ithaca, NY.*





**Let's Move! Active Schools**

**Be a Champion.**  
Lead a movement for 60 minutes of physical activity a day for your students.

Sign up at [letsmoveschools.org](http://letsmoveschools.org)