



Supporting LGBTI children and young people

Case Study: Ellenbrook Secondary College

This case study provides an example of the practical strategies schools can implement to create inclusive and supportive school communities for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) students, as well as other students with diverse gender identities or sexualities.

Overview

Ellenbrook Secondary College (Ellenbrook SC) is an independent public school for years 7–12, located in Ellenbrook, Western Australia.

Background to LGBTI inclusion at the school

"[The specific focus on LGBTI inclusion] became important when it was clear that our LGBTI+ students were looking for support, a forum to collaborate with both the staff and with each other, as well as finding a voice for themselves." Staff member

In 2015, the school undertook a review of a range of key internal policies, positions and procedures. To inform the development of new core values for the school, a whole of staff survey was conducted to get feedback on the current values and current and ongoing priority areas for the school. The survey identified a need and priority for the school to formally recognise and address the diversity needs of LGBTI students at the school.

As a result of the staff surveys, the school leadership team initiated discussions to better understand why formal recognition of LGBTI students in the school was important. The school reflected on the particular vulnerabilities that LGBTI students face in terms of their mental health outcomes, and the fact that LGBTI students did not receive the same kind of dedicated resourcing, recognition, or specialised supports that other diverse groups of young people did.

The school leadership team ultimately felt that all students, including LGBTI students, had the democratic right to express, be recognised and validated for their identity, and that this specific focus on LGBTI inclusion was an important step to recognising this for students at their school.

Overview of the school's LGBTI inclusion strategies

Ellenbrook Secondary College has implemented a range of strategies to promote and support the inclusion of students who are LGBTI, including:

- clear and public commitment from the school
- inclusive policies and processes for LGBTI students
- staff training and education around diversity
- visibility, safe spaces, and support for students.

"Make procedural changes, make curriculum changes and make personal changes. The students see this and appreciate your endeavours!" Staff member

Clear and public commitment from the school

Ellenbrook Secondary College's Code of Values focus on the areas of engagement, success and community. One of the core values linked to community states *"Respect others in our community for their culture, gender, sexuality and heritage, understanding that we learn from supporting diversity."*

"It has been incredibly important to not simply pay lip service to this statement, but to hold true to it and ensure that our diversity is celebrated, including that of our LGBTI community members." Staff member

Ellenbrook SC is a member of Inclusive Education WA, a resource and support for schools in Western Australia to be safe and inclusive for LGBTI students, staff and families.

As the school grew its strategies to be more inclusive of LGBTI students and acknowledging LGBTI diversity, some concerns were raised by parents and community groups about this direction for the school. These concerns were raised in the context of the public debate regarding the marriage equality vote, and were largely related to queries about the content of any education or information being provided to students. The school developed a response, which provided a clear explanation from the school on their stance on supporting all students and their right to express themselves and receive an education.

Inclusive policies, processes and procedures

"Both LGBTI students and allies have worked on embedding [LGBTI inclusive] curriculum within the school, developing a support group, consolidating great relationships with key staff members and working directly with the Executive Team." Staff member

The school has worked to better reflect the needs and experiences of LGBTI students in school policies and processes, including:

- Developing a school uniform policy that allows for gender neutral uniform items.
- Ensuring school reports and forms reflect the student's preferred names and pronouns.
- School enrolment processes for all trans and gender diverse students being undertaken by the Student Services Manager, to ensure that there is a comprehensive and consistent approach to supporting these students and reflecting their needs.
- The school value around respecting and supporting diversity being reflected in student behavioural management plans.

Where an individual student identifies as trans and gender diverse, the school will:

- Work with the individual student to identify their support needs and develop a plan for them at school (e.g. use of bathrooms, participation in gendered activities or classes).
- Offer the student additional supports, including whether they would like to be connected to other trans or gender diverse students at the school, or have involvement in the student groups such as the Wellbeing Committee (which will be discussed in detail later in the document).
- Make sure the student is aware of the people or allies within the school that they can speak to regarding their diversity needs.
- Ensure consultation occurs within the Student Services team so that students are provided with tailored support.

Staff training and education

"My advice would simply be to listen to your students. They are an absolute wealth of knowledge because they are experts in their own lives! Being passive doesn't achieve anything, so ask questions, admit if you're not sure, listen and then help action what you've learnt." Staff member

The Student Services team have delivered whole of staff training about LGBTI diversity, and how to develop a more inclusive and supportive school environment. This has included discussions around the school working to address all instances of homophobic or transphobic language that they witness between students, which sends a clear message to students that this type of language is not acceptable.

"If negative comments are made to a student on their sexuality, there are consequences in place, because our school does not tolerate this kind of behaviour at all." Student

As the school is a member of Inclusive Education WA, staff have access to training and development opportunities through the seminars and presentations that Inclusive Education WA run.

Visibility, safe spaces and support

The school has implemented a range of initiatives to increase LGBTI visibility and representation within the school, and ensure students have access to safe spaces and support when they need it.

"Our school is a safe school, who accept anyone for who they are. The school wants to make sure students are happy with who they are and completely comfortable with themselves...It has a huge impact because it shows how much we support the LGBTI community, and we want to do as much as we can do to make any students...as comfortable as possible." Student

Visibility strategies

The school participates in a range of LGBTI-related activities in recognition and support of the LGBTI community. The school participates in Wear it Purple Day - an annual day which celebrates LGBTI young people - by inviting all school members to wear purple, and get involved in celebrations such as DJs, music and stalls on the day. The most recent Wear It Purple Day event also included a craft activity where students and teachers could sign their own declaration of support for LGBTI people. The school have also held events and activities in recognition of other important days on the LGBTI calendar, including the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOBIT), and Trans Day of Remembrance.

The school has also used themes of LGBTI diversity in other activities, including inviting the Freedom Centre to run an information and educational stall at the school's wellbeing day, as well as using the rainbow flag as inspiration for a student fashion design event that the students participated in for the school's annual arts event.

The Student Services office displays a number of LGBTI posters and resources, and a number of school staff wear rainbow badges to show that they are allies and supportive of LGBTI students. Each classroom in the school also has the school Code of Values poster, which includes the value around respecting diversity (in gender and sexuality).

Some curriculum areas have also implemented activities or information in their subjects to improve understanding and awareness about LGBTI people, for example, information about LGBTI diversity being included in health classes, as well as the English Department using LGBTI-relevant content in their classes to help students understand different perspectives and experiences.

"Even hearing stories from staff about how much they support and say how awesome their friends/family who are LGBTI can be really comforting and helpful." Student

There are a number of LGBTI students and LGBTI allies, both within the Wellbeing Committee, and in other student leadership roles across the school, who are proactive in supporting LGBTI issues, and comfortable and confident to express their identity openly. This has provided important visibility for other students at the school.

"Our Wellbeing Committee support LGBTI students by running wellness activities and games, going on excursions and meeting other LGBTI people, communicate with each other and hear about the stories they have to tell."
Student

"I honestly couldn't be more proud of what the students have achieved in a relatively short space of time, in terms of creating visibility, safety and more understanding. The students have found confidence and connections, which is, in my opinion, invaluable." Staff member

Safe spaces

The school established a Wellbeing Committee for Year 9 – 12 students, who are interested and wanting to improve the wellbeing of the school community. When the Wellbeing Committee was initially set up, the students brainstormed the areas that the Committee should focus on. One of the key areas that was identified by the group was around LGBTI issues and advocacy, with all students indicating either that they identified as LGBTI themselves, or didn't identify as LGBTI but wanted to work on or support LGBTI inclusion at the school.

The Wellbeing Committee have undertaken visits to the Freedom Centre, a drop-in space for young LGBTI people (under 26), as well as undertaking educational activities on LGBTI diversity, and then delivering this to other Committee members.

Support

The school is recognised as being inclusive for trans and gender diverse students, and often has students being transferred from other schools in the area who have, or are in the process of, transitioning. As discussed earlier, individualised and student-led support is provided to all LGBTI students at the school.

"Having a supportive school can have a big difference because a LGBTI person will be getting support from adults as well as classmates...Knowing that you can talk to a teacher about any problems or about sexuality and feelings, etc can have a huge impact." Student