



Focus: Student Voice for the New School Year

We are pleased to share this edition written entirely by high school students on education issues they care about. The students are members of IDRA's Youth Advisory Board.

LGBTQ+ Inclusive Education is Not Dangerous, Nor is it a Difficult Feat

by Manav Lund, High School Senior

If proponents of equity in our schools have learned anything in the past year, it is that the spotlight is not always a good thing. Vitriolic fear mongering at the hands of far-right politicians has resulted in a nationwide campaign to censor curricula with any analyses of inequity. LGBTQ+ topics, in particular, have faced unfair scrutiny.

Critics purport that LGBTQ+ inclusive lessons are inappropriate and would distract from essential curricula, when in reality, creating affirming lessons to enrich history, social science and language arts curricula can be incredibly beneficial and fairly easy. The callous and wildly misinformed effort to censor LGBTQ+ topics in our classrooms represents a dangerous trend of the government-sanctioned repression of progressive ideas.

As of late, the political right has whirled up various intertwining narratives that serve to oppose curricula with LGBTQ+ topics. Notably, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed the "Parental Rights in Education" bill dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" bill by critics for targeting discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade classrooms, and many states launched similar bills (Fuller, 2022; López, 2022).

If age-appropriate lessons are the concern, trained elementary educators are more than

aware to stray away from topics better left in a secondary sex education course. But of course, this is a moot point as so-called "parents' rights" factions have consistently demonstrated their belief that any curricula or books remotely mentioning individuals with non-heterosexual, non-cisgender identities are fair game for removal, even in grades 4 to 12 (Price, 2022).

To deprive any student access to inclusive, affirming education is far more dangerous than curricula that dare mention the facts that (1) LGBTQ+ people exist, and (2) they deserve basic human dignity.

Through some informal surveying and observation, I found that many people, including my high school-age peers, do not have a "problem with LGBTQ+ inclusion," but simply find it "unnecessary" to discuss in school and it would "take up time from the actual lessons." These individuals, all of whom are heterosexual and cisgender, do not understand how affirmation and representation in classrooms can improve the self-esteem of LGBTQ+ students (Lloyd, 2021). Teachers can simply mention queer
(cont. on Page 8)



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School Support Systems Help Students Succeed

by Shreya Selvaraju, High School Junior

A myriad of factors play into student success. Not all students have the same time, money and resources available to them. Infrastructure, such as study halls, peer tutoring groups, and teacher office hours, provide students with a level of support that gives a more equitable learning experience. This also gives students the opportunity to fare better in their courses.

These opportunities are integral to the growth of students, especially those in marginalized communities. Students who work two jobs to support their family may not have extra time to spend self-teaching and catching up after missing a class. Students without access to a car or reliable transportation may not be able to come to school early or leave late to take a test. The ability to receive help from a peer who has previously taken the class or to retake a test during school hours helps to mitigate the disadvantages these students face.

I personally have benefitted greatly from student support systems. My high school offers a system called Flextime, which is a dedicated 40 minutes of each school day during which students can “flex out” to a class of their choice to study, catch up or meet with an interest group. Flextime is built into the schedules of every student, so no student must make the decision between taking an additional course and missing out on Flextime.

During my sophomore year, I missed four

consecutive math classes due to a string of visits to the dentist. Precalculus was already a class I struggled with and missing these classes only pushed me farther behind. Thanks to Flex, I was able to ‘flex into’ my math class every day for a week, allowing me to catch up without falling farther behind.

When forming these resources and making them available to students, it is imperative that they be accessible to all students. When such resources are not easily accessible, they only further disparities between students. By providing all students with access to materials that can help them succeed in class, all students are able to excel.

When students progress in a class, it gives them a sense of accomplishment that lets them feel more invested in their education. These students are likely to work harder in their classes and are more engaged in learning. Student engagement is critical to effective learning, and as students budget their time between school, extracurriculars and their personal lives, support systems are integral to success.

A high school junior, Shreya Selvaraju is a member of IDRA's 2022 Youth Advisory Board from Austin.



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The IDRA Newsletter (ISSN 1069-5672, ©2022) serves as a vehicle for communication with educators, school board members, decision-makers, parents, and the general public concerning the educational needs of all children across the United States.

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Portions of the contents of this newsletter were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and endorsement by the federal government should not be assumed.

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Policing Students Through Dress Codes Needs to Stop

by Ryan Cyrus, High School Senior

As the current school year approached, many students were concerned about the impact of dress codes on their school life. Dress codes have been and always will be a concern for many students, more specifically for female students. Looking at the actions and reactions of many administrators and teachers, female students are disproportionately affected by dress codes in our schools.

We, as students, are told that dress codes are in place to protect us and our well-being when, in reality, they limit our freedom of expression while also protecting the teachers who may be subjective in deciding which student's attire to check. This unnecessarily invasive policing of female students' attire has the potential to create extreme destruction of female students' confidence in their bodies, personality and style (Zhou, 2015).

Taking another look at the actions of those with authority, they fail to treat the male students with the same rigor and hypersensitivity that they do with female students. Many male students in school dress much more inappropriately compared to their female counterparts with attire that is much more revealing and completely disregarded.

Although there are many examples of unfair treatment among male, female and gender nonconforming students, recently there has been a lot of student activism in search of better alternatives for dress codes. There have been many instances where students of color have been mistreated and harassed based on their appearance specifically regarding their hair. For many Black individuals, our hair is an extremely big part of our identity. We use our hair as a form of self expression, and many draw confidence from our hair. Knowing that we can go to school and have teachers cut our hair or get us removed from the learning environment with no discussion or consequences is very disheartening.

While the dress code, as far as clothing is concerned, promotes body image issues, especially with our female students, as well as continuing sexism within the school system, it also allows for the continued discrimination of our Black and Latino students and their hair. Statistically speaking, there have been many cases where Black and Latino students received much more harsh treatment and disciplinary action compared to their white counterparts, which makes school a lot harder for them. In one example, Black girls were suspended for dress code "violations" approximately 21 times more than that of white students (Hartnett, 2022).



Actions like this continue to teach our students of color that their natural appearance is not good enough, or pretty enough or beautiful, leading to increased mental health issues related to their appearance.

As a result of these extremely disproportionate levels of dress code discipline within schools, the environments created for our students are not safe mentally or emotionally. As teachers and administrators, you must create a space where your students feel comfortable and are not treated where their natural appearance is wrong, dirty or unclean. There must be a change, and it needs to be soon.

Resources

Hartnett, H. (January 11, 2022). School Dress Codes Perpetuate Sexism, Racism, and Transphobia. Planned Parenthood.

Latham Sikes, C. (February 2020). Racial and Gender Disparities in Dress Code Discipline Point to Need for New Approaches in Schools. *IDRA Newsletter*.

Zhou, L. (October 20, 2015). The Sexism of School Dress Codes. *The Atlantic*.

A high school senior, Ryan Cyrus is a member of IDRA's 2022 Youth Advisory Board from McKinney, Texas.

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Learn about our
IDRA Youth Advisory Board
www.idra.org/youth-advisory-board

The graphic includes a photo of four diverse youth members and stacks of books at the bottom.

Equip Schools to Support Student Mental Health

by Tatiana Martínez Alvarez, High School Junior

Mental health is critical to a person's social and emotional well-being. Feelings of inadequacy, misery or discontent are examples of what poor mental health can look like. It is probably one of the most challenging things a person can struggle with. Teenage students face mental health issues the most. One out of six teenagers deal with anxiety and depression, but only half receive adequate treatment for their problems (Whitney & Peterson, 2019). Inadequate or untreated mental illness can lead to increased substance abuse, inflated incidence of depression or even early death (NAMI, nd).

Because students' mental health goes untreated, students disengage in classroom settings, fail throughout the academic year and drop out. However, the numbers are much higher in different racial and ethnic groups. Suicide is the third leading cause of death in this country. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), reported attempts at suicide rose by almost 50% among Black students in 2019. In 2019, 23 out of 100,000 American Indian or Alaskan Native youth between the ages of 15 to 24 died by suicide compared to only six out of 100,000 white youth (Ramchand et al., 2021). For LGBTQ+ youth, nearly one-third of students reported seriously considering suicide which was far more than their hetero-normative peers (CDC, 2022).

Despite these grim statistics, superintendents, teachers and policymakers have the decision-making power to lower these numbers by making mental health services readily available in schools. There are multiple ways to do this. For example, they can enforce mandatory mental health training for teachers and school counselors with the goal of learning to prevent suicide and teaching coping skills to students. And they can increase students' access to vital mental health resources in schools, such as suicide prevention hotlines and self-care apps.

Support received from adequately trained counselors, teachers, school nurses and other campus staff is fundamental to students' overall well-being and success in school. Many mental health resources are available for educators. For example, the Mental Health Center Network offers a free training package on mental health literacy (MHTTC, 2022). Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is another program that offers essential wellness training.

For educators in Texas, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) provides an eight-hour, face-to-face course on crisis intervention and how to help an individual who is faced with mental health challenges.

Such training enhances techniques and skills for someone in a mental health crisis. It gives educators a better understanding of personal mental health status and a heightened sense of achievement and comprehension. If teachers, school nurses and counselors were required by law to receive mental health training, students could feel more secure and would be more likely to reach out for help if either themselves or someone they know is suffering from suicidal thoughts, substance abuse or self-harm.

Providing mental health services to students is crucial. Policymakers and school board members can make a difference in improving students' access to mental health services. For example, lawmakers passed Texas Senate Bill 279 (87R) to prevent suicide by making the national suicide prevention phone number available on all student school-issued IDs.

Policymakers can enact policies that protect vulnerable student groups to decrease suicide incidents and psychiatric ward visits, increase student engagement and improve students' connection to their schools.

Proposed legislation like U.S. Senate Bill 1795 and U.S. House Resolution 7666, the *Restor-*

ing Hope for Mental Health and Well-Being Act, can serve as guidelines and criteria templates for future bills, school board meetings and community awareness.



Policymakers must also prioritize connecting historically marginalized student groups to specialized resources for mental health. Some apps designed for students of color include:

- **The Safe Place** – a mental health app geared toward the Black community;
- **Liberate** – a community to heal, create and share;
- **Trevor Chat** – a suicide and crisis line specialized for LGBTQ+ teens and young adults; and
- **Therapy for Latinx** – a directory of verified therapists, psychiatrists, community clinics, emergency mental health, life coaches and support groups for the Latinx community.

Increasing mental health awareness and improving students' access to mental health resources is critical. Whether through hosting a mental-health awareness class once a month or designing digital fliers with links to these resources, such strategies would encourage students to reach out for help and know where to connect.

Policymakers, teachers, and school board members all share the same responsibility: to learn more about mental health via mandatory mental health training and connect students to relevant wellness services, such as self-care apps, call lines or websites. We as a community can rise and make mental health available to all, no matter their race, gender or sexual identity.

(cont. on Page 8)

Mexican American Studies is American History

by Josué Peralta de Jesús, High School Senior

When people think of U.S. History, their minds often jump to the founding fathers, the American Revolution, the British Empire and many more events that one can consider “white history.” Although these pieces are undeniably crucial to our story, the term “U.S. History” often tends to overlook the role non-white populations or immigrants played in the advancement of our nation.

As a second-generation American with a strong bond to my Mexican heritage and identity, I never really found history in high school enriching. I learned about the American Revolution and the birth of our nation over and over, but I always wondered how my ancestors were doing and what role they had in the development of our country.

I remember looking at my schedule where it says “American History” and questioning why people like me or other Mexican Americans were never taught about, as if we are not Americans ourselves.

Luckily, over the years I have taken a big interest in the expansion and accessibility of ethnic studies, which includes Mexican American Studies (MAS). It can exist in every educational level, from elementary to university and post-graduate studies. With such a large Mexican American population in our country and with high concentrations of Mexican people in many parts of the southwestern United States, it is important to be able to give historical perspectives and experiences that are apart from typical “white history.” Doing so enables young populations to build a better connection to their heritage and can put their relatives’ experiences and memories in this country into context. Often, the only connections to our people’s past are through our elders’ stories and tales, rather than historical documents.

However, this isn’t to say that MAS is designed only for Mexican Americans. I strongly believe that offering these courses to everyone, especially non-Hispanics, plays a key role in

dissolving some barriers that currently divide ethnic groups by offering a deeper understanding of students and the people around them. The same logic applies to all ethnic studies, including Asian American Studies and African American Studies, as they all supply essential bits of the American story that a typical “American” history class, unfortunately, tends to censor or not cover.

Ethnic studies are incredible ways to unite large populations through education and supply enriching learning opportunities in order to diversify perspectives and communities.

A high school senior, Josué Peralta de Jesús is a member of IDRA’s 2022 Youth Advisory Board from San Antonio.



School Safety Requires Listening

by Hawaii Guerin, High School Senior

A huge issue that U.S. students face is the fear of violence with no productive action taken to ensure our security. Beginning with things like gun control, racial tension and sexual assault, there is no effective protocol made to protect students from these attacks. There is a consistent pattern of administration and government officials not taking these experiences seriously and brushing them off.

I personally can vouch for this. Recently, my school district reintroduced a dress code in response to the Uvalde tragedy. This has raised questions among students and teachers as to how this is a step toward safety. I have a friend

who experienced sexual assault within the school, and she did not notify the school because she didn’t feel that she would be heard or believed. This is a common occurrence, and progress has not seemed to be made. Dress codes are heavily enforced, especially toward teenage girls, but often no real repercussions are given to their abusers.

All of these, along with so many more problems are the exact thing that instills a very understandable sense of panic in the school community. Parents are scared of sending their kids, teachers are afraid to go to work, and the students feel like there are too many unsafe

possibilities that could reach them while they are trying to learn.

Texas lawmakers have been adamant about ignoring how the people feel, and they actively make laws in favor of the people who are actively harming us. It is important to know that your vote and voice within your local community matter. Vote, or start with registering, for every election you are eligible for.

(cont. on Page 6)



We Need a Well-Rounded Education – An Open Letter to Lawmakers

by Kennedy Moore, High School Senior

Over the last couple of years, the buzzword “CRT” (critical race theory) has been circling the political stage due to propagandized fear of indoctrination. Many people, including several policymakers, have deemed CRT as a political agenda aimed to corrupt the minds of students to be anti-white and anti-American.

The fault of this argument lies in the question of what they fear is “anti-American.” Is it realizing that this country has oppressed and participated in heinous acts that they need to actively take accountability for? Or, is it the realization that this country is rooted in a system that works off the backs of people of color since the original constitution was made?

If lawmakers are truly concerned about the well-being of students in their school system, then this teaching needs to be embraced. A well-rounded education is a critical part of being a successful student and being human. With the implementation of classroom censorship, we have to remain cognizant and remind students that this is yet another worldview and another lens to view history and systems.

Equipping students with several paradigms, including the Eurocentric view that has been maintained as a textbook staple, allows for students to come to their own opinions on their terms. Many perspectives develop contextual thinking, agency and individuality – traits that all educators can agree are prominent in world changers! With this inclusion, we are pushing the rigor of learning consistently upward.

Though CRT is primarily used for collegiate-level legal theory, it doesn't mean that K-12 students and teachers have to be censored from learning about key concepts in history and current events.

The consistent underestimation of students hinders them from embracing their agile minds that are malleable and hungry for knowledge

and information.

The current state of the digital world – from the creation of Facebook to the monetization of social media platforms to breaking the glass ceiling of the stock market and investment firm exclusivity – are all testaments of this hunger. Depriving students of an expansive education is a disservice to every single person on Earth. With the proper prioritization of culturally responsive teaching, teacher re-education, and well-run training, the possibilities are endless for the young minds of this country.

Take the action now to push the envelope, create an education that feeds and grows students' cravings for knowledge, and sit back and watch. It truly boils down to if you are willing to take the initiative to start it.

A high school senior, Kennedy Moore is a member of IDRA's 2022 Youth Advisory Board from Frisco, Texas.



Take the action now to push the envelope, create an education that feeds and grows students' cravings for knowledge, and sit back and watch.

(School Safety Requires Listening, continued from Page 5)

Citizens make a large impact on the laws made in this country, which directly ensure the safety of students. As parents, it is also important that you strongly educate children on their rights, consent and wellness as this may also help prevent harm. As a whole, we should be focused on nurturing and putting school communities in the best positions to succeed.

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Dress Codes: A Racist, Sexist History and Why They Must be Changed

by Adam Shelburn, High School Junior

Many school districts have the same or similar rules about dress codes: skirts and shorts must be below fingertip length, no leggings, no tank tops, no midriff can be shown, must have a modest neckline, no facial piercings, no hoodies or jackets, no hats, no colored hair.

When students try to stand up against these sets of rules, we are told they are in place to “promote school safety, promote discipline, and enhance the learning environment for all students and staff.”

In reality, school dress codes are a way for a school administration to legally be racist and sexist to students.

Many schools prevent gender expression among students by adding gendered rules into the policies, like policies that state that girls must wear dresses for formal occasions and boys must wear button-down shirts. This gendering causes mental health issues among transgender and gender non-conforming students (Hartnett, 2022).

Additionally, these policies promote gendered stereotypes and, by association, perpetuate sexist ideologies that sustain rape culture (Serena, 2018). This protects the assaulter by using what a student is wearing as an excuse for someone else’s actions against them. Policies that promote gendered stereotypes and sexist ideologies allow blatant sizeism and body shaming of students.

These policies also target students of color. Bringing gender into how students can wear their hair, for example, affects students by preventing them from taking part in certain cultural and familial traditions (Salam, 2021). Native American students are forced to cut their hair short and go against their cultural and familial values (Indian Traders, 2020). Black students are forced to cut off braids or twists in their hair, cutting these students off from their

culture dating back over 5,000 years (Allen, 2022).

I am not saying we should remove dress codes from schools. Dress codes can be in place so that students and faculty feel safe.

What we need is for districts to see how problematic the current dress codes are and change them to create a better and safer learning environment.

Evanston Township High school in Illinois has put in place policies that allow students to express themselves and create a safer and more equitable learning environment (Marfice, 2017). These new policies allow students to wear what they want as long as: clothing does not depict drugs, violence and other illegal activities; clothing does not contain any hate speech; and clothing covers buttocks, genitals, breasts and nipples.

These new policies promote support for students’ mental, physical and emotional health. Other school districts should do the same. To start, they should review their policies to remove all gendered regulations and terminology that reinforce stereotypes on students (Leung, 2017). Districts and schools can rewrite consequences for breaking dress codes and have actions in place so that students are not targeted.

The simplest thing that districts and schools can do, though, is just to listen to their students. Most of us will just tell you what we need from them to create a more equitable and safe learning environment for all.

Resources

Allen, M. (July 14, 2022). The Fascinating History of Braids You Never Knew About. *Byrdie*
Hartnett, H. (January 11, 2022). School Dress Codes Perpetuate



School dress codes are a way for a school administration to legally be racist and sexist to students.

Sexism, Racism, and Transphobia. Planned Parenthood.
Salam, E. (May 15, 2021). Black U.S. high school student forced to cut hair during softball game. *The Guardian*.
Indian Traders. (September 15, 2020). Why Do Native Americans Wear Their Hair Long? webpage.
Latham Sikes, C. (February 2020). Racial and Gender Disparities in Dress Code Discipline Point to Need for New Approaches in Schools. *IDRA Newsletter*.
Serena. (January 24, 2018). How dress codes reinforce systemic violence. *Anit-Violence Project*.
Marfice, C. (August 25, 2017). All Schools Should Look At This Dress Code That Finally Gets It Right. *Scary Mommy*.
Leung, C. (April 11, 2017). The dress code is unfair and vague. Here’s how to improve it. *The Lowell*.
Zhou, L. (October 20, 2015). The Sexism of School Dress Codes. *The Atlantic*.

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Focus: Student Voice for the New School Year

(Equip Schools to Support Student Mental Health, continued from Page 4)

Resources

CDC. (September 12, 2022). Poor Mental Health is a Growing Problem for Adolescents. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
MCMW. (2022). *Mental Health First Aid in Schools*. National Council for Mental Wellbeing.
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Ramchand, R., Gordon, J.A., & Pearson, J.L. (2021). Trends in Suicide Rates by Race and Ethnicity in the United States. *JAMA Network Open*, 4(5):e2111563.
Whitney, D.G., & Peterson, M.D. (February 11, 2019). U.S. Na-

tional and State-Level Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders and Disparities of Mental Health Care Use in Children. *JAMA Pediatrics*, (4):389-391.

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(LGBTQ+ Inclusive Education, continued from Page 1)

and trans historical figures; include LGBTQ+ individuals in topics surrounding civil rights, bias and human development; and not shy away from LGBTQ+ themes in literature. This provides LGBTQ+ students with a sense of belonging, and it can inform straight and cis students for the better (Russell et al., 2021).

Exposing students to a variety of backgrounds and experiences and enriching their capacity for empathy can be as simple as inserting a few bullet points to a slideshow or introducing new titles to a book list. But this capacity is signifi-

cantly hindered by lawmaker attempts to prohibit it.

It is disheartening to see nationwide attacks on LGBTQ+ inclusive education spearheaded by political actors who want nothing to do with actually improving education outcomes and everything to do with draconian censorship. Knowledge is power. It is my hope that educators and students can band together to resist the dangerous political trends that threaten the knowledge and well-being of all LGBTQ+ students and their allies.

Resources

Fuller, J. (April 5, 2022). What Florida's Parental Rights in Education Law Means for Teachers. NPR.
Price, G. (January 30, 2022). Why Book Ban Efforts Spread Across the U.S. *The New York Times*.
López, B. (January 26, 2022). Gov. Greg Abbott Taps into Parent Anger to Fuel Reelection Campaign." *Texas Tribune*.
Lloyd, C. (June 30, 2021). The Power of an Inclusive Curriculum for LGBTQ+ Youth and Families." EL Education.
Russell, S.T., Bishop, M.D., Saba, V.C., & James, I. (2021). Promoting School Safety for LGBTQ and All Students. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 8(2):160-166.

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