

## Pride Month - Proud of our LGBTQ+ Students!

As the Marin County Superintendent of Schools, as a parent, and as a grandparent, I am proud that the Progress Pride Flag, recognizing LGBTQ+ communities, including marginalized communities of color, will be flying over the buildings of the Marin County Office of Education as we commemorate June as LGBTQ+ Pride Month.

It is the primary and most important responsibility of all educators to make sure that their students feel safe, healthy and secure in school. Yet, we know that for LGBTQ+ students those feelings are rare, if they get to feel them at all. Studies and survey results indicate that our schools, and our greater community, can and must do more to provide for the social emotional needs of LGBTQ+ youth.

The Trevor Project, a suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for LGBTQ+ youth recently released the results of a survey of 35,000 LGBTQ+ youth aged 13 to 24. The survey showed that 43% of the responders seriously considered suicide over the past year. The survey results were over 50% seriously considering suicide for transgender and nonbinary youth.

The Gay Lesbian Straight Educational Network has been conducting climate surveys of youth for more than 10 years. An October 2020 report of 17,000 LGBTQ+ youth revealed that nearly 60% felt unsafe at their schools because of their sexual orientation; 70% had experienced verbal harassment; 60% of those harassed or assaulted did not report the incident because they did not trust that an effective intervention would occur.

These statistics are a call to action for our community. So are the experiences of our local LGBTQ+ youth. This past week, the Marin Wellness Collaborative, a group of mental health professionals and educators working with Marin schools, heard firsthand from a group of students who presented ***Teach Pride, Reach Wide!***, the Spahr Center's Toolkit LGBTQ+ Inclusive Schools. The toolkit provides guidance on implementation of LGBTQ+ youth best practices for inclusion, how school staff and families can become active allies, lesson plans and classroom resources, and guidance for advocating for LGBTQ+ students. The toolkit is a deepening of the outstanding resources and support that the Spahr Center provides to youth and all LGBTQ+ members of our community and their families.

Resources like *Teach Pride, Reach Wide!*, along with bullying prevention initiatives and programs insuring a positive social climate underway in our schools, can help make a real difference for LGBTQ+ youth. So can statewide actions like that of the Association of California School Administrators which is designing a certification program to train school leaders on creating gender inclusive schools. These actions need to be supported and expanded. We must continue to work with our children, at home, in school, in their sports and other activities and in their places of worship to help them understand the beauty and strength of a community that does not just tolerate diversity and individual choice; but embraces, encourages and nurtures it.

Some may believe that flying the Progress Flag will cause concerns, or lead to requests from multiple causes to fly a flag or hang a banner in support. However, there is a difference. This is not just an act of support, acknowledgment and affirmation for a group of young people feeling forced to live in silence, to be invisible, and in some cases, to live in physical or emotional fear of revealing their real selves. This is in direct furtherance of California statutes that create an “affirmative obligation to combat” bias based on “gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation”.

We must be committed to doing much more. It would be naive to think that the act of flying of a flag will bring about substantive change. If, however, just one young person arrives at their school campus and sees the Progress Flag flying, and says, “I belong here, I feel supported here, I am proud to be who I am” . . . then it is an act well worth taking.

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