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A Guide for LGBTQ Inclusion for Jewish Day Schools

*Below you will find several suggestions for how to make your Jewish day school a more inclusive, welcoming, and safe environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students, and those who have LGBTQ parents and family members. These suggestions are organized around the frame of exploring three areas of your school—**Culture, Policy,** and **Programming**. Under these headings you will find more specific aspects and action to help you achieve your goal. This list is neither exhaustive, nor does it apply to every school.*

CULTURE

What is the culture of your school?

The first step towards creating a fully inclusive culture and environment is a commitment to a vision and the values of equality and respect for all people—and cultivating the language necessary to communicate those values and put them into action. Culture is also influenced by policy, which will be discussed in a later section.

Make inclusion of LGBTQ students a core value of your school.

Change comes from many directions including the grass roots, the grass tops, and the senior leadership. As you spread the value of LGBTQ inclusion from wherever you stand, developing a commitment from the senior leadership of the school and buy in on the part of educators, staff, parents, and students is essential in order to enshrine this belief as a core value of your community. It is also crucial that this value be discussed openly and expressed explicitly. Even in communities where there seems to be agreement that inclusion of LGBTQ Jews is essential, it is still important to state this explicitly. You may also find that not everyone is ready for this change and that is also part of the process. Long-term dialogue and on-going communication work to create buy-in and each school community will progress at its own rate.

Start with the Jewish values that are the basis for your work. Do these values that you have already committed to, also support LGBTQ inclusion? Then, ask what additional Jewish values could be incorporated to strengthen your school's commitment to inclusion. See Keshet's poster of [Seven Jewish Values for Inclusive Community](#) for some suggestions.

How will people know that your school places value on LGBTQ inclusion?

If you have already established the values that support LGBTQ inclusion, make sure that they are prominently displayed in classrooms, on your website, and in print materials. If you are starting the process of re-examining your values, open up public and communal discussions about LGBTQ inclusion at the beginning of the school year or in specific forums to review the

vision and values of your community. By publicly stating this as a core value, potential and current LGBTQ students and families will know that their school values equality and that they will be protected against discrimination. Saying "we welcome everyone" is not enough.

Educate yourself and others on LGBTQ terms.
Often, one of the greatest challenges for non-LGBTQ people in talking about LGBTQ issues is uncertainty regarding language and vocabulary. As many terms are new, or are used differently by different groups and in different contexts, people are sometimes uncertain and embarrassed to enter a conversation for fear of being wrong, looking ignorant, or of inadvertently hurting someone's feelings. Educating yourself, being respectful, and taking responsibility if you make a mistake goes a long way to making LGBTQ people feel welcomed and safe. Visit the Keshet website for a list of [LGBTQ terminology](#).

Do not assume the sexual orientation or gender identity of your students.
When we as educators make incorrect assumptions about the sexuality or gender identity of students, we risk rendering gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals invisible, and may cause deep pain. When we fail to see our students as their full selves, we risk alienating them from our community and discouraging them from participating fully, or at all. For example, when talking to a student about dating, don't automatically assume that they are interested in the opposite sex.

Ensure your facilities are inclusive.
Everyday actions like using the bathroom are complicated and often dangerous for transgender and gender non-conforming people because our world often only offers two options: "male" and "female." Consider whether all of your facility's restrooms must be gender-specific or whether one could be made available to everyone. Depending on the existing facility, this need not be complicated; covering the "men" or "women" sign with "all-gender restroom" sign could be sufficient. Remember to do this for temporary, shared, or rental facilities also.

This step towards inclusion might also mean making renovations so that every stall has privacy. If an all gender bathroom is not possible or appropriate for a given setting, think creatively for how a transgender or gender non-conforming student can have a safe bathroom space such as access to a faculty bathroom. You can find the explanatory text that Keshet uses to accompany [all-gender restroom signs](#) on our website.

Create a safe school environment by prohibiting abusive and homophobic language.
The positive and non-homophobic or transphobic language used by educators is an important model for students of how to treat each other with respect and greatly influences school

culture. One of the most important things an educator can do to ensure that LGBTQ students feel safe and welcome in your school community is to make sure that harassing language is strictly and proactively banned. Words like "faggot" and "dyke" and phrases like "that's so gay" both deeply offend and also create an environment that is not only uncomfortable, but unsafe for LGBTQ students. Creating a "Safe Zone" program—displaying posters, stickers and other literature encouraging acceptance—is a great way to communicate that your school is a safe environment for all.

However, more than any program or sticker, it is essential to be proactive. When an educator overhears a student using homophobic or abusive language, it is important that this is pointed out, discussed, and stopped. Incidents like these negatively affect the recipient, the one who perpetrates, and the bystander who witnesses it. Depending on the setting and the situation, the educator may offer a short or a more involved intervention. If you are only able to provide a limited intervention for whatever reason, you can always revisit the issue after consultation with trusted colleagues. Training for educators on how to do this is vital so that they feel comfortable and equipped to make it happen. Visit Keshet's website for some ideas on how to respond to campers who say "that's so gay", and order or print your own Safe Zone stickers. Keshet is able to provide further training in this area.

Share your culture and let the world know about your commitment to LGBTQ inclusion.
Even if you think it is obvious, explicitly state in marketing materials, on your website and other communications that your school is welcoming of LGBTQ students and families. For many, this is the first introduction to who you are and it will go a long way in letting potential students know that the school is a safe space for them, and letting all other constituents know the values of your institution. Keshet has many statements of LGBTQ inclusion and welcoming to share with you.

Inclusion is a journey, not a destination.
Every school is different, and no one knows your school better than you. No matter how many trainings you hold, safe space signs you put up, or anti-bullying policies you put into place, the only true way to create a fully open and supportive community is to be committed to values of equality and respect all the time, every day. Have your educators check in regularly and discuss how your school is meeting its goals and achieving its values. This time for reflection does not necessarily require special meetings, but can be incorporated into your regular staff meetings and check-ins. Bring your students into the conversation, particularly teens. Brainstorm new ways to encourage greater equality and respect, address any issues and make it an ongoing conversation in your community. A school that cares deeply about the safety and happiness of their LGBTQ students will undoubtedly be a wonderful place for them to learn and grow.

Make sure your institution is in Keshet's Equality Guide.
Keshet has a searchable Equality Guide, an online guide for finding LGBTQ inclusive clergy and institutions. Be sure to register your school as soon as possible.

POLICY

Policies that explicitly include LGBTQ families, students, faculty, and staff are the foundation of LGBTQ inclusion in your school. Inclusive Human Resources policies, documents, and guidelines are a way of demonstrating a commitment to LGBTQ inclusion from the highest levels of organizational leadership. They are also crucial to creating environments for learning and working that are safe for all participants.

Create inclusive policies.
Both current and potential LGBTQ students and their families, as well as LGBTQ staff and faculty members, need to know that your school values equality, and is committed to protecting them from discrimination and harassment. By mentioning this commitment in your existing policy documents or by creating new language, you will communicate a commitment to equal treatment for all.

The necessary documents include a comprehensive anti-bullying statement for students, inclusive anti-harassment Human Resources policies for faculty and staff, and a non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. These statements should be easily available on your website, printed in your parent and student handbook, and available upon request.

Visit Keshet's website for sample language for different non-discrimination policies.

Ensure inclusive documents.
Make sure your forms including admission, registration, and permission slips are inclusive of LGBTQ families and students. When crafting such forms, be sure that they are welcoming to a spouse or partner of any gender. Rather than listing "mother" and "father," write "parent/guardian 1" and "parent/guardian 2." Depending on the form, if it is not necessary, take out the question on gender. When you do actually need to know the gender of a student, write "gender" and leave a blank space to be filled in. This allows parents and students to fill-in how they want to be identified which may be outside of the two binary genders (male and female).

Create an LGBTQ or Diversity Task Force.
Consider convening an LGBTQ or Diversity Task Force charged with strengthening your school's organizational policies and practices. This group can consist of leadership, staff, and parents. This will insure that your school has the infrastructure and leadership to effectively respond to issues as they arise, and to proactively identify areas for improvement.

PROGRAMMING

In order to achieve your goals, your values of equality and inclusivity must be imbedded in the everyday life of your school, which is embodied in all programming, curriculum, and activities in which your students participate. Here are a few examples of the many possible ways to teach about LGBTQ and Jewish topics.

Reassess your curriculum.
Our commitment to the inclusion of LGBTQ Jews is not just a secular value, but a Jewish value. When appropriate, integrate LGBTQ issues and topics into your programming in order to demonstrate how inclusivity is interwoven with our Judaism. In Jewish history, Holocaust studies and on Israel, there are many ways to include Jewish LGBTQ sources and material. For programs on Bible, look at the prohibitions in Leviticus from a new lens using Jay Michaelson's book, *God vs. Gay? The Religious Case for Equality*. Also, Judaism says much about positive sexuality, gender and how to treat all people with respect. When discussing Jewish ethics around love and sex, do not just refer to heterosexual dating and marriage. For certain denominations and in pluralistic settings, acknowledge and include a full spectrum of relationships and ways to experience human love. When studying Torah, add an LGBTQ lens to your understand and examination of the text. There are now many resources for this such as the book *Torah Queeries* which provides LGBTQ readings on each *parsha* and for holiday. The book came out of an online series but developed all new submissions so now there are two unique sets of readings on each *parsha* from an LGBTQ perspective. The *Torah Queeries* database can be found [online](). You can also introduce or bring in LGBTQ scholars who interpret Torah from a LGBTQ perspective (Here is an example from [Dr. Joy Ladin]().)

Encourage the creation of a Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) or other LGBTQ and ally organizations.
Peer support and acceptance are key to any student's feeling of belonging in the school. "Gay/Straight Alliances" (GSAs) or whatever you call the LGBTQ and ally organization encourages a sense of belonging and make schools more welcoming for LGBTQ students. Additionally, GSAs are an important venue for conversations regarding LGBTQ inclusion, and can help lead to powerful and important changes in your school environment that will foster greater equality and acceptance. You can find a general guide to starting a GSA [here]().

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Do not automatically group students by binary gender (male or female).
It is often an impulse of educators and students alike to group students based on binary gender (male or female). However, this is problematic for several reasons: it renders gender non-conforming or transgender students invisible by assuming a binary gender and it categorizes students without consent. It also encourages students to view gender as an either/or category, which reinforces stereotypes and, it discourages students from branching out and exploring friendships and experiences beyond their assigned or assumed gender. As alternatives, consider asking students to count off, or divide them alphabetically, or by birthdays when you need to create group. In an age appropriate way, ask students how they identify, and what words they use to describe themselves, or use gender neutral terms and phrases that don't make assumptions about gender identity.

Develop a *brit* for the classroom.
At the start of the year, when many classes develop and review the contract for behavior and values that the class wants to uphold, make sure that you include values that are inclusive of LGBTQ people. Review Keshet's [Seven Jewish Values for Inclusive Community](#) and if none of them come up in the natural discussion from students, make sure that you add them to the discussion.

Mark LGBTQ celebrations and days of mourning in your yearly calendar.
Like the Jewish calendar, the LGBTQ calendar has moments of celebration and moments of memorial and mourning for those who have lost their lives due to homophobic or transphobic violence. Join in on walking in an [LGBTQ Pride parade](#) most often celebrated every June. [National Coming Out Day](#), observed annually on October 11, is another opportunity for celebration and learning. November 20 is [Transgender Day of Remembrance](#), a day when we remember those transgender individuals who have lost their lives in violent attacks, and all those who have faced oppression due to transphobia. Additionally, on *Yom HaShoah,* Holocaust Memorial Day, your community can remember Jewish and non-Jewish LGBTQ victims alongside all other victims of the Holocaust.

RESOURCES
Collect and share resources on Jewish LGBTQ issues and topics.
You do not need to reinvent the wheel when introducing LGBTQ issues and ideas to your community. Full LGBTQ inclusion can be a complex process, but there is support for you on the internet and in professional development and training opportunities.

Below are a more suggestions for specific resources that will help you implement your new action steps:

Provide training for your board, staff, students and parents.
Once your school has committed to the full inclusion of LGBTQ students and families, it is important to provide your community with the skills they need to put these goals into action. Through training, all stakeholders will have the opportunity to gain tools and resources, reflect on the needs of your population and learn more about how to create inclusive community. Contact Daniel Bahner, Keshet's National Manager of Education and Training, and click here to find out more about Keshet trainings.

Make sure your library has current LGBTQ books and media.
Often times when community members are questioning their sexuality or gender identification, they will turn to the internet for information and support. They may also look for books, movies, magazines and other materials in your library. Be sure to have updated and current LGBTQ resources, and have them readily available and prominently displayed. Librarians, educators, and other administrators should be made aware of these resources and be available to help LGBTQ members find and access them. Click here for a recently published article in *Judaica Librarianship* on essential LGBTQ books for Jewish libraries as well as these other lists of LGBTQ books and media found at Keshet, the Jewish Book Council, and NFTY

Keshet provides many resources which have been described throughout this document () including videos, *Torah Queeries*, textual interpretation of Torah and Jewish holidays from an LGBTQ lens, "Wrestling with God," a collection of classical texts that deal with sexuality, gender and theology; and Trans Texts a collection of classical Jewish texts on gender in general, and non-conforming gender expressions in particular.

The following are additional resources that will be helpful for your institution:
• Trans Torah, a website that seeks to help institutions like you become more trans-inclusive, and collects excellent resources, rituals, videos and text studies
• The Institute for Judaism, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, which has many useful articles and other resources
• The "It Gets Better Project"
• "I am: Trans People Speak," a collection of trans and ally voices from a range of personal experiences
• Jewish Organization Equality Index, tools for Jewish institutions that want to be more inclusive of LGBTQ individuals

- [National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Institute for Welcoming Resources](link), resources for LGBTQ inclusion in many religions
- [Liturgy and Ritual resources for LGBTQ Jews](link)