



promoting sCHOol environments
InClusivE of diversity based on SOGI

Making Schools Safe for LGBTI Students





Partners

KMOP Social Action and Innovation Centre - Greece

Colour Youth Athens LGBTQ Youth Community - Greece

Bilitis Resource Center Foundation - Bulgaria

Lithuanian Gay League Association - Lithuania

Association ACCEPT - Romania

Editors

Spyros Boviatsis, Colour Youth, Greece

Thanasis Theofilopoulos, Colour Youth, Greece

Authors

Monika Pisankaneva, Bilitis, Bulgaria

Philippos Paganis, Colour Youth, Greece

Contributors

David Rama, KMOP, Greece

Eglė Kuktoraitė, LGL, Lithuania

Theodora Ion-Rotaru, ACCEPT, Romania

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1. About the CHOICE project

CHOICE is a European initiative, sequel to Hombat.eu, which aims at promoting more inclusive school environments and combating intolerance on the grounds of gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation and/or sex characteristics in Greece, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania.

CHOICE is also based on the online platform LiveWithoutBullying¹ that offers support by trained experts to children and teenagers who are victims of bullying, as well as to parents and school staff.

These Policy Guidelines will assist schools in Greece, Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Romania to become safe and inclusive places where all students, regardless of their sexuality or gender, are equal and respected members of their school community. Research has shown that where schools have inclusive and supportive policies in place, students do not drop out and perform better.

The Guidelines are developed on the basis of research conducted in the participating countries which reviewed the existing policies and practices on enhancing diversity and preventing/addressing bullying at school, and collected qualitative information from primary stakeholders in the school environment: students, teachers and parents. The research report can be accessed at the project's website².

In developing the Guidelines, the project partners also researched other policy documents and guidelines on inclusive education for making schools LGBTQI+ inclusive and for addressing anti-LGBTQI+ bullying developed by international organizations (IGLYO), governments (Ireland) and NGOs (GALE).

¹ livewithoutbullying.com

² <https://www.itsyourchoice.eu/index.php/library>



2. Why are these Guidelines needed?

Research findings of the CHOICE project

National school climate surveys conducted in Greece (Iliopoulou et al., 2020), Bulgaria (Dragoeva et al., 2020), Lithuania (LGL, 2019) and Romania (Costache, I., 2016) in the last 5 years show high levels of homophobic and transphobic bullying. Over 80% of students in all of the countries who self-identify as LGBTQI+ report that they hear homophobic and transphobic remarks very often at school, more than 50% report that the latter are sometimes made by teachers. About one-third of LGBTQI+ students report being physically attacked because of their perceived gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Far too often teachers and school administrative staff do nothing in response. It is also a worrying fact that more than half of all LGBTQI+ students who have taken part in the national surveys report that they have never shared with anyone about the homo/transphobic bullying experienced by them at school.

2.1 Research findings in Greece

In 2017, a National School Climate Survey was conducted in Greece by Colour Youth with a sample of 1963 students who identified as LGBTQI+ (Iliopoulou et al., 2020). The main findings of the research showed a worrying picture of the situation LGBTQI+ students face at school. The vast majority of students reported hearing sexist (74.4%), homophobic (84.9%) and transphobic (74.4%) remarks in their schools. Incidents of violence and harassment were also reported in high numbers: one in three students had faced some form of verbal harassment on the basis of their sexual orientation (32%) or their gender (31.1%), and one in two (50.3%) on the basis of their gender expression. Almost one in seven had faced physical harassment and/or violence due to their sexual orientation (14.6%), gender (12.6%), and/or gender expression (19.3%). Even more worrying is the finding that one in three (33%) LGBTQ students had been sexually harassed.

The importance of the role of teachers (and school staff in general) was also highlighted. Students reported that, in their majority, teachers either actively participated in the creation of a hostile environment or did not intervene in cases of bullying and harassment. More than half of the students (58.1%) mentioned that they had heard homophobic remarks from teachers and that they had heard negative references to LGBTQI+ people or issues in the classroom (54.4%). Even when teachers were present in cases of harassment, one in three times (34.3%) they did not intervene. One third (27.9%) of the students who had experienced violence did not report it to the school and those who did mentioned that the way the school handled the situation was a little (30.8%) or not at all (26.6%) effective. In general, 57.7% of the students who participated in the survey felt that it was hard to talk about LGBTQI+ issues in the classroom and that they felt a little or not at all comfortable to talk to their teachers (71.9%) and hardly at all comfortable to talk to the school management (83.1%).



It is worth mentioning that while the majority of the schools (59.2%) were implementing awareness campaigns on bullying, only 11.9% of the campaigns explicitly mentioned issues of gender identity, sexual orientation or gender expression. This finding highlights the need for focused action when tackling anti-LGBTQI+ bullying.

2.2 Research Findings in Bulgaria

The field research under the CHOICE project in Bulgaria (Pisankaneva, M., Atanasova B. 2020. *CHOICE National Report Bulgaria*) demonstrated that LGBTQI+ students feel generally insecure at school because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics, and they cannot rely on support structures developed by schools. Most students did not know of specific national policies addressing anti-LGBTI+ bullying, and those who have heard of such policies did not believe that they were effectively implemented by schools. More than 75% of all students taking part in the research who self-identified as LGBTQI+ reported of being bullied and/or being verbally attacked because of their gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or sex characteristics. This high rate confirms the results of wider national-level studies (Dragoeva et al., 2020) which have shown that over 80% of all LGBTQI+ students are witnesses of anti-LGBTQI+ hate speech at school, while about one-third have been physically harassed.

Non-LGBTQI+ students taking part in the research showed lower level of awareness of the challenges experienced by LGBTQI+ students on daily basis in the school environment, but in general, they agreed that discrimination and mistreatment of minority groups is common at school. All students, both LGBTQI+ and those who self-identified as non-LGBTQI+, recognized the high levels of hate speech and bullying. Students mentioned very few examples of supportive practices, and most of them related to actions taken by individual teachers or by youth NGOs working in collaboration with schools.

Parents taking part in the focus groups and the online survey in general demonstrated higher levels of concern about aggressive homo/transphobic behavior and bullying at school than the teachers and other school staff, and there was a general feeling that schools were not doing enough to address these negative phenomena.

On the other hand, the teachers and other school staff demonstrated low levels of awareness of anti-LGBTQI+ bullying at school and a tendency to shift the responsibility for such incidents to perpetrators' families. Most teachers agreed that schools were doing whatever they could to deal with the problem. The teachers also believed that all students were treated equally in the school environment, regardless their sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics.

The focus groups and online survey results demonstrated that there is little collaboration between school staff and parents in addressing the problem of bullying, and most schools are generally unprepared to deal with "sensitive issues" which intensify the problem. Issues related to sexual



orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics were perceived as “sensitive issues” which were not in teachers’ prerogatives to address. There was a very low level of awareness of the actual traumatic experiences which LGBTQI+ students had at school. Some teachers talked with vexation about minorities, referring mostly to Roma, and made hints that the latter were given “special” rights compared to other students.

The massive impact of the anti-gender movement³ which hit Bulgaria in 2018 was felt in all discussions. Some of the teachers and parents made comments that talking about gender and sexual orientation should not happen at school, as it was a “dangerous” topic. Barriers to the visibility of sexual and gender minorities were clearly established during the discussion, although the teachers stated that these students were not treated differently.

2.3 Research findings in Lithuania

In summarizing the results of focus groups and survey, it is clear that homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in Lithuanian schools is a very common problem (Kuktoraitė, E. 2020, *CHOICE National Report Lithuania*). Most students, parents and teachers had very limited knowledge of the terminology and the legal framework in Lithuania. Most focus group and survey participants could not say whether there were specific national policies and action plans on tackling homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying or whether their school had an anti-bullying plan. Therefore, even if such a plan existed, it would have a very limited impact.

Teachers who took part in the field research tended to downplay the phenomenon of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying. Teachers did not acknowledge the fact that it was their duty to discuss LGBTQI+ issues and prevent bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identity in school. In some cases, a teacher’s reluctance to discuss these issues together with a class might result in a very negative effect on students’ wellbeing (for example, biology teacher would only discuss the possibility of HIV/AIDS transmission in same-sex relationships in case students specifically inquired about it.)

While most students who took part in the field research claimed that homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying was a very serious problem in Lithuanian schools and teachers would not address it in an adequate way, parents questioned the fact whether students should be free to disclose their sexual orientation within school settings. With no support to come out from teachers and parents,

³ Mobilizations and campaigns against gender and sexual equality, which have appeared since the late 1990s in several European and some other (Latin American) countries; whose origins are traced to fundamentalist-religious groups. In Eastern Europe, the anti-gender movement became increasingly more powerful after 2012.



students tended to hide their sexual orientation at school. This tendency was echoed by the claim of all research participants: there were no openly LGBT students or teachers in their school.

It is obvious that the absence of openly LGBT students and teachers would create a chilling effect within the school community. Most teachers and parents believed that if there were no openly LGBTQI+ students at school, there was likewise no problem of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in their school.

This could not be further from the truth. Both the focus groups and the survey revealed that homophobic, biphobic and transphobic tendencies prevail in Lithuanian schools. School professionals do not know how to properly react to these incidents, or they even contribute to homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying, and students are left to deal with this problem with no support from parents or school staff.

Making school communities aware of existing problems is one of the most important goals in the current situation. Encouraging an open dialogue on LGBTQI+ issues within school settings between students, school staff and parents is essential. And while the Lithuanian government is lagging behind with their support on the issue, it is up to NGOs and school communities to make the first step towards a more LGBTQI+ inclusive school environment.

2.4 Research findings in Romania

The research undertaken in Romania as part of the CHOICE project (Costache, I., 2020) clearly shows that schools are far from being safe spaces for LGBTQI+ students. Homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying occurs on a daily basis in educational settings, while schools are not equipped to adequately handle the problem. Teachers and other school staff have a very limited knowledge of terminology and legal frameworks that apply in Romania in the field of nondiscrimination and bullying prevention, and for this reason, their actions often fall short when dealing with cases of sex, sexual orientation or gender-based bullying.

In spite of formal mechanisms set up in schools to combat school violence, LGBTQI+ students do not feel safe. This is both due to the fact that this type of institutional mechanisms is not flexible enough to be of use in cases of bullying (committees have no specific track record of efficiently handling bullying cases or consistent monitoring, reporting and evaluation) and to the fact that LGBTQI+ students are invisible to schools. As one participant noted, school didn't care about students' gender, desires or sexuality, school only cared if a student reached the performance standard or not. Students' lives and experiences with violence while at school are completely ignored by school managers. Bullying situations are assigned to school counselors or left for parents to handle individually.



A recent legislative proposal adopted in 2019 created a legal framework to prevent and combat bullying, and schools must take action and counter sexual orientation and gender identity-based bullying (Legea nr. 221/2019). The best option and one that this study tested is to have a community approach to tackling sexual orientation and gender identity-based bullying – to include teachers, students and parents in preventive programs.

As focus group interviews and survey data show (Costache, I., 2020), there is a lack of information related to sexual orientation and gender identity-based violence, and a lack of information related to sexual orientation and gender identity. This lack of science-based info, together with pervasive homophobia and transphobia present in society, leads to perpetuation of ignorance related to LGBTQI+ persons and their rights. Schools are, nonetheless, places that should be providing solid science-based information and that should also raise the bar in instilling values in students – values attuned with contemporary society such as empathy, respect and value for diversity, curiosity, inclusion of various individuals. This is a mission that some teachers participating in our focus groups also resonated with and further trainings on the matter should use this approach.

This research builds on data gathered from LGBTQI+ ignorant participants. The overall problem is a lack of awareness and a lack of contact with the LGBTQI+ community. Nonetheless, as illustrated in the desk research and in the online survey, Romania has also strong and influential homophobic groups. They monitor the activities of NGOs focusing on LGBTQI+ rights, react, try to disrupt or block initiatives and use a variety of tactics to discourage an LGBTQI+ friendly agenda. This is an objective obstacle, yet it should not prevent action but rather shape strategies for action. Teachers, parents and students have interest in broadening their understanding but in order to efficiently target them, one needs to think of ways to bypass and/or respond to homophobic and transphobic attacks.

Our study also shows that sexual orientation and gender identity-based bullying does occur in Romanian schools. It also shows that it is often the adults (teachers) who openly discriminate against LGBTQI+ students. Schools must be prepared to handle these cases and to respect existing legislation by implementing comprehensive awareness raising campaigns and training programs.



3. What can be done to improve the situation?

Our theory of change

Our suggested approach is based on the following theory of change:

- Schools play an important role in disseminating norms and values that regulate the acceptance of diversity and non-discrimination in society. Making schools more inclusive of diversity and free from discrimination, prejudice and mistreatment of different minority groups requires a multilevel approach, i.e., simultaneous changes in school curricula, school climate, teacher education and administrator training, school- family-community partnerships, and collaborative leadership by other organizations (for example, LGBTQI+ NGOs).
- Prevention of bullying at school requires a norm-critical approach which addresses prejudices, stereotypes and the power dynamic that leads to mistreatment, harassment and even physical bullying against some students. It requires a multi-level approach and creation of support structures at school that work both with victims and with perpetrators, and collaborate with external support service providers and parents.
- Victims of anti-LGBTQI+ bullying should not be viewed as separate and apart from other identifiable persons and groups, particularly since they often belong to other socially vulnerable (or often discriminated against) groups as well – namely Roma, persons with disabilities, and members of national and/or religious minorities.
- Strategies do not always have to be LGBTQI+-specific to be successful. Some broad, general approaches which are applicable to all students can help address many LGBTI needs.
- School internal regulations (school policies) play a significant role in regulating unwanted behavior, as long as they are developed in line with the national anti-discrimination policies, acknowledge the needs of vulnerable groups and are systematically reinforced. Explicit mentioning of aspects of vulnerability in school policy documents is recommended because it will help raise the awareness on these aspects of students, teachers, administrators, and parents.
- LGBTQI+ rights defenders can be a valuable resource in disseminating information on the actual needs of LGBTQI+ students, and in professional-development settings. Collaboration between schools and NGOs that promote the human-rights centered approach in education should thus be encouraged and sustained.
- Openly LGBTQI+ teachers, coaches and school-site administrators can play a central and highly positive role in this respect as well. School workplace policies should create safe environment for coming out and non-discrimination of LGBTQI+ teachers and staff.
- Talking openly and without shame about issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics is important for the creation of an LGBTQI+-inclusive school environment. Even when not enough space is dedicated to these issues in the school



curriculum, the school faculty and administration should be able to discuss the topic openly, in a courteous, respectful, and professional manner, and in all possible settings. Schools should create safe spaces in order to introduce the subject of LGBTQI+ identities, in an age-appropriate way. The discussion on this topic should be led by sensitive and well-prepared teachers or external consultants. Collaboration with LGBTQI+ organizations and other experts in the field is strongly recommended.

- Every school staff member should be instructed how to recognize hate speech and how to react appropriately in such cases, as well as how to encourage intolerance of such cases among students. Prevention of hate speech is very important for prevention of other forms of harassment and bullying at school. Hate speech refers to (according to most definitions) speech that can promote or incite violence; it is not just abusive language. “The term “hate speech” shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin”. (Council of Europe, 1997).

Building on the above theory of change, the partners in the CHOICE project researched existing policy recommendations for making schools safe for LGBTQI+ students developed by international organizations working in Europe or by the educational departments of some national governments in EU countries. The next sections present:

- Policy context for the present guidelines;
- Policy recommendations based on international comparative research of best practices;
- Practical steps in implementing these policy recommendations;
- Suggested activities and tools for improving three interrelated aspects of the school system that are of critical importance for making schools safe for LGBTQI+ students: school climate, school anti-bullying policy, and the often-overlooked sphere of school sports.

4. Policy context

The policy context for the present guidelines for schools is the EU legislation and policy on LGBTQI+ rights. Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (legally binding for the EU since the Treaty of Lisbon, 2009) provides a guiding principle for EU legislative and policy measures to support non-discrimination on the basis of a variety of characteristics, including sex and sexual orientation. This is reflected in the non-discrimination legislation of the Member States. Other strategic documents at the EU level that call for non-discrimination and equal treatment of LGBTI people are:



- Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)5 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity, adopted on 31 March 2010;
- Guidelines to promote and protect the enjoyment of all human rights by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons adopted by the Council of the European Union at its meeting of 24 June 2013;
- EU Roadmap against homophobia and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, adopted on 4 February 2014,
- the European Commission's List of Actions to advance LGBTI equality, December 2015.

In February 2019, the European Parliament adopted a new text on The Future of the LGBTI List of Actions (2019-2024). It recommends (among other measures) the implementation of high-quality comprehensive sexuality and relationship education programs that provide information and education on sexual and reproductive health and rights in a way that is non-judgmental, framed positively and inclusive of LGBTQI+ people. LGBTQI+ rights are a high priority in the Commission's programs for the period 2019-2024, with a special focus on areas in which these rights are to be maintained: education and health.

Schools play a key role in the formation of informed attitudes towards LGBTQI+, in enhancing non-discriminative social norms, and in reinforcing acceptance of diversity in society, including diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The present guidelines will help schools address:

- The high rate of anti-LGBTQI+ bullying at school, often with faculty complicity,
- The resulting harm to school climate which becomes hostile to diversity and discourages openness for many students, not only LGBTQI+,
- The failure to implement the existing national-level anti-bullying policies (where they exist) in a way which recognizes the specific vulnerability of some groups of students, and to provide targeted support to such students,
- The need for teacher training and other professional education programs based on the human-rights centered approach which will enhance awareness of LGBTQI+ issues in the school environment and make teachers and school administrators more prepared to deal with homophobic and transphobic bullying, as well as with bullying in general.



5. Policy recommendations

How to make schools safe and inclusive for LGBTQI+ students

Specific policy recommendations on making schools safer and more inclusive for LGBTQI+ students were developed by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Youth and Student Organization (IGLYO) in collaboration with OBESSU, based on research conducted in several EU countries. The next section presents the key policy recommendations from the report “Guidelines for Inclusive Education: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression” (IGLYO & OBESSU, 2014).

The guidelines developed by IGLYO respond to the identified need for school systems across Europe to implement inclusive policies and activities which will help reduce the rate of school bullying, including anti-LGBTQI+ bullying. The latter is perceived as a violation of the right to education and a widespread phenomenon that needs to be taken seriously by all stakeholders in the education system.

The main recommendations drawn by IGLYO are the following:

Human rights education: Students throughout Europe should receive comprehensive education about their fundamental rights through human rights education. Such an educational component is crucial to raise awareness about the rights to equality, freedom from discrimination, and freedom from harassment. In some national curricula, citizenship or civic education already includes human rights education.

Sex and relationship education: Sex and relationship education should be mandatory and should explore the emotional side of sex in addition to the physical aspects. Lessons should focus on relationships rather than only on reproductive functions and health risks.

Curriculum and learning materials: All curricular materials should include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer perspectives and contain inclusive materials for all students regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, both as part of generic materials and, if possible, as standalone materials which specifically deal with LGBTQI+ issues.

Anti-bullying & other inclusive policies: Homophobic and transphobic bullying should be dealt with in the same way any other identity-based bullying would. IGLYO’s minimum standards to combat homophobic and transphobic bullying serve as a starting point with regards to combating bullying based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. The Minimum Standards should be used in parallel with these guidelines. IGLYO’s minimum standards are summarized below.



Access to information and support: There are several areas where it is important that students can access both information and support on issues regarding sexual orientation, gender identity and expression.

Safe and inclusive environment: Schools must be safe and inclusive spaces for all students. Intimidation or discrimination of any sort, including homophobia and transphobia, should not be tolerated, with penalties for those who do not respect school safety. Parents and all members of the school community should be informed about safety.

Visibility and participation: Visibility and participation means recognizing the existence and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people in society. Within a school, participation is achieved through ensuring that people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities are included and represented in all school structures.

School democracy: Schools should encourage students to take initiatives and be involved in the development of their policies. Students should be empowered to be involved in all decision-making, policy matters and activities that concern them.

The implementation of the above guidelines requires profound changes in the education systems across the EU and especially in the countries of Eastern Europe which lack a tradition of human rights-based approach in education. In Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania, sex and relationship education are not part of the curriculum and there are strong public sentiments against the introduction of sexual education at schools. In Greece, reactions against the introduction of sex education come from the powerful Greek Orthodox Church, some conservative politicians and media. "This leads to the deafening absence of sex and relationship education and the tendency for this kind of education "to be subsumed under other curricular areas, such as biology, and personal and social education" (Mac an Ghail, 1991: 294-295)." Considering this, the present guidelines for schools focus on what can be done in the absence of centrally coordinated efforts to reform the education system in line with the international best practices of teaching about human rights and diversity. These guidelines will help schools in taking practical steps towards improving school climate and providing an adequate response to bullying which can be implemented immediately, without waiting for the government or any other external entity to influence the broader context. In our school-centered approach, individual schools which start applying the guidelines will become paragons of best practice and will help trigger a bottom-up change in the education systems of the counties included in the CHOICE project.



6. Practical steps for making schools safe for LGBTQI+ students

6.1 Step one: Commitment

Building the commitment of the school staff and board to embrace a diversity policy is a very important first step before other practical steps are introduced. Initiative should come from the principal, unless there are already active students and teachers or other staff/parents who have initiated a discussion on this topic. Commitment of the school board is very important. No matter which side takes the initiative, a joint meeting or a series of meetings with the school board, the students council and the teachers will be needed to raise awareness on the benefits which an effective diversity policy brings to a school, and to build commitment to develop and start implementing such policy. These benefits should be clearly formulated in the policy so that every student, parent and teacher/school staff is able to understand them when reading the policy.

School principals can make use of the following systematic approach to a diversity policy developed by GALE (Global Alliance for LGBT Education), presented in their Toolkit Working with Schools 1.0 (Dankmeijer, 2011). “This participatory approach emphasizes the involvement of all stakeholders from the school community. The balanced involvement of school authorities, school staff/teachers, students and parents is a prerequisite for increasing the effect of the policy.” (Dankmeijer, 2011).

Research shows schools with an effective diversity policy have the following characteristics:

- The school has a gender balance⁴,
- The school sets clear rules on how to behave right at the beginning of the school year and the whole staff enforces the rules⁵.
- The school cultivates an open attitude towards each other and on social themes.
- The school offers explicit information about gender, diversity and discrimination, including LGBTQI+ issues.
- There is a procedure open to everybody for handling complaints, and preferably an independent committee to judge the complaints.⁶

⁴ The term “gender balance” means that the school guarantees equal treatment of women, men, and other genders, and equal access to resources and opportunities for girls, boys, and students with other gender identities, which concern their individual growth and self-realization.

⁵ The school policy has explicit statement of rules that guarantee the non-discrimination of diverse identities and prevention of identity-based bullying.

⁶ The procedure should be based on the relevant national policies, where available, for prevention preventing and dealing with school bullying.



- There is a school counselor who knows how to support students and staff who have complaints about discrimination and other negative behavior.
- Student and teacher initiatives to combat discrimination and to improve the school climate are welcomed.”

(Dankmeijer, 2011)

Familiarizing the school staff, board, and the students’ council with the above core elements of a diversity policy is essential for building commitment towards action on such policy. It is important to underline that LGBTQI+ issues should not be addressed separately during joint discussions on the need of diversity policy. The focus should be on the shared values of non-discrimination, respect for differences, and support for the ones who are more vulnerable.

6.2 Step two: Actions to meet the commitment

GALE presents the so-called DEES model for systematic action on building a school diversity policy. The model integrates four streams of action. After reviewing these suggested actions, we adapted them to the specific needs of schools in the CHOICE partner countries. The main changes concern the third element, education, where the focus is shifted from education about LGBTQI+ issues in the classroom to educating teachers/school staff about their role in creating safe and inclusive school environments.

Below are the four streams of action which will help schools meet their commitment to implement an effective diversity policy.

Diagnosis: exploration of the situation and aims couples

The school adapts its strategy for citizenship and tolerance by periodically making a fresh diagnosis of the situation. Based on such a diagnosis, the management can develop a renewed strategy vision which integrates attention for LGBTQI+ issues (among other issues that stir debate and cause tension among students and staff).

Environment and school climate

Strategies to improve the school environment include agreements on how the staff sets rules for behavior and how they implement these rules. They also include how the staff deals with bullying, name-calling, and with coming-out of other staff and students. It also involves screening and improving a range of school procedures, like the complaints procedure and disciplinary guidelines. It is necessary that the school team agree on strategies that are feasible to all.

Education



LGBT issues should be embedded in the curriculum and need to be flanked by school policy. However, when the state-induced curriculum does not provide space for discussion of LGBTQI+ identities, nor for sex and relationships education in general, the school should look for other ways of addressing these important topics. In the context of the CHOICE project countries, it is very important to start with teacher training which will equip teachers/school staff with in-depth understanding of diversity issues and practical knowledge on how to promote diversity in the school environment.

It is important that teachers and school staff are supported in knowing how best to role model behavior, such as intervening to challenge discriminatory actions, and that they understand their important role in creating safe and inclusive spaces. Whole-staff presentations, specialized training modules and workshops delivered by external experts which draw on current national and international research and provide best practice examples are good ways to improve teachers' knowledge and confidence.

Student counseling and care

Students who are confronted with problems need some counseling and sometimes professional care. School counselors should talk openly on issues around sexual orientation or gender identity, showing students that they can openly talk to them, and know the referral opportunities to LGBTQI+ friendly professional care. Homophobic and transphobic students should not only be disciplined after negative behavior but also be adequately counseled on how to develop pro-social behavior.

GALE also suggests four stages of implementing a school diversity policy which are more thoroughly presented in the following chapter.



7. Four stages in implementing diversity policy

7.1 “Single teacher action”
<p>“Before planning an integrated approach, often one or more teachers do something with the subject of sexuality. They may offer support to LGBTI students, or include attention to LGBTI issues in their classes. This individual involvement must be appreciated, but needs to be followed up by a systematic approach. Diversity policy must not remain a personal 'hobby'.”</p> <p>(Dankmeijer, 2011, p. 41)</p>
7.2 “Principal action”
<p>“A next stage is the school management commissioning a diagnosis of the situation of the school. This can be done for example by doing a survey, interviews or by convening a small committee of interested teachers and students to discuss the challenges. Based on the results, the principal proposes a coherent action plan to the staff team or to a core staff group.”</p> <p>“(Dankmeijer, 2011, p. 41)</p>
7.3 “Team action”
<p>“A third stage is to involve the entire staff team, otherwise the impact of the strategy will remain too limited. There will be teachers who feel unable to deal with some kinds of diversity, like traditions of non-mainstream cultures, religions, or with LGBTI issues, or with sexuality in general. Divergent opinions should be respected, as long as others are not damaged by intolerant personal opinions. Divergent opinions should not lead to undermining the diversity policy as a whole.”</p> <p>“(Dankmeijer, 2011, p. 41)</p>
7.4 “Student action”
<p>“An integrated approach finally gets implemented effectively when students start to commit themselves to the diversity policy. This implies they have a real stake and influence in the development of such a policy. Examples are students starting gay/straight alliances or school clubs, inviting LGBTI people to parties, offering suggestions for classes about citizenship and diversity or staging inclusive events themselves.”</p> <p>“(Dankmeijer, 2011, p. 41)</p>



8. Some practical suggestions

Following up on the above, we recommend special attention to be devoted to the following actions in the context of the school systems of Greece, Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Romania.

There are many things that schools in our countries can do to create safe and inclusive environments for all students, including LGBTQI+ students. Below are some examples of what to prioritize in improving school environment.

Review your policies and procedures

Does your school have anti-discrimination, anti-bullying or diversity policies? Do these policies acknowledge and sanction identity-based bullying?

Identity-based bullying refers to any form of bullying related to characteristics considered unique to a student's identity, such as their race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or physical appearance. These forms of bullying do not only target an individual but also reflect negative attitudes towards a wider sub-community or group which that individual identifies with (or is believed to identify with). Young people in such groups may be more vulnerable to or at risk of experiencing bullying and can benefit from more targeted support (Tippett, Houston, Smith, 2010).

Do these policies clearly name abusive and discriminatory language against LGBTQI+ students and signal the school's commitment to using appropriate and inclusive language? Do the policies explicitly mention and support vulnerable groups in your context, and are LGBTQI+ included?

Does the above policy include sanctions against teachers who make anti-LGBTQI+ comments? According to our research findings, some teachers in the participating countries make homophobic and transphobic remarks. These remarks are highly impactful because of the student-teacher power dynamics, as well as the overall influence teachers have on students. Schools need to have strict policy and sanctions on such behavior from teachers. They can adopt a procedure (for example, a special mail account/mailbox) for accepting anonymous complaints from students (or school staff) who have witnessed such remarks and who would otherwise feel uncomfortable to share their experiences with the principal.

Establishing and implementing school anti-discrimination, anti-bullying and diversity policies and procedures sets up a strong foundation for further activities. Research shows that these policies in schools are one of the strongest protective factors for same-sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse young people.

Once your school policies are introduced or updated, be sure to 'launch' them and make sure the whole community is aware of any changes.



Support student-led action

Student-led action is a very effective way to create cultural change at school. Few schools in Greece, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania have gay-straight alliances and other internal student-led groups supporting gender and sexual diversity. Establishment of the latter should be encouraged and supported. Another way to encourage student-led action is to support students in organizing days of awareness, such as the annual International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT), or Stand Up Week (a good practice tip from Ireland, explained in detail in the following section of the guidelines). Students can be initiators of other extracurricular activities, such as inviting guest speakers from LGBTQI+ rights organizations, organizing “living libraries” in which LGBTI activists talk about their lived experiences at school, etc.

Encourage professional learning

Encourage staff in-service training that will equip teachers and other school staff with the necessary knowledge and skills to become role models of appropriate and non-discriminatory behavior.

Get in touch with the [CHOICE project partners](#) in your country to organize a teacher training with teachers from your school.

Challenge discriminatory language

Encourage school staff to make a commitment to challenge all abusive and discriminatory language or behavior every time they hear or see it. This can include not only homophobic, biphobic and transphobic language and insults but also sexist language (e.g., “you act like a girl” jokes, etc.). Encourage staff to organize targeted discussions with students, in an age-appropriate way, and raise awareness among students on the dangers of anti-LGBTQI+ hate speech. By consistently challenging discriminatory language that uses gender identity, sexual orientation, gender expression or sex characteristics as an insult, or any other slang terminology which aims to insult LGBTQI+ students (and others who are perceived to be LGBTQI+), teachers can have an immediate impact on school culture and provide positive role modeling for students. Being a safe school means that everyone has zero tolerance to and actively addresses any offensive language or behavior. Anti-LGBTQI+ language should be treated as seriously as racist, anti-Roma, anti-Semitic, or anti-Muslim hate speech.

Involve informal student leaders in the process

It is useful to know about the attitudes to diversity of informal student leaders in the school environment. Their influence on peers is usually very strong. If such informal leaders can be attracted as supporters of the diversity policy, chances of success are higher. The principal should check with school staff if there are already student leaders interested in getting involved. It is a good idea to ask staff for their thoughts and start conversations with leadership teams.



Include diversity in extracurricular activities

Use interactive learning activities to introduce students to sexual and gender diversity and intersex topics. These topics should be ideally presented during activities which focus on other aspects of diversity as well, such as religious, ethnic diversity, diversity of body shapes and physical abilities, etc. Examples of good practices are screening a queer movie, writing an article on LGBTQI+ issues in the school newspaper, hosting discussions on such issues, or hosting a living library event. If school administration staff/teachers initiate such events and show their support, students would feel more empowered to do something in support of LGBTQI+ inclusion themselves.

Staff leadership

Form a staff working group/team to work on the development and implementation of becoming a safe school. You could also create a special role for a staff member to support diversity (and collect signals for inappropriate behavior) in your school.

Make the support visible

Do you have clear signs of support for sexual and gender diversity around the school? The use of posters and stickers to display that around your school, which is a common practice in many schools in Western Europe and other states that uphold LGBTQI+ rights, might be a problem in the countries of the CHOICE project. Whenever possible, encourage students to create their own posters that celebrate diversity and inclusion in general. In some contexts, visibility of LGBTQI+ students may instigate more violence. In such contexts, what should be made visible are the specific support structures for LGBTQI+ and other students from vulnerable groups, for example, student counselor/school psychologist, student self-support groups (not exclusively dedicated to LGBTQI+) or links with external support service providers which can help students in need of additional psychological support. The possibility for anonymous reporting by victims of anti-LGBTQI+ bullying and other identity-based bullying should be clearly communicated and made visible to students.

Ensure access to resources

Make sure staff and students have access to resources that provide appropriate information about gender and sexual diversity. Ensure that relevant books, videos and other resources in the library and other suitable locations are up-to-date, appropriately labeled and easy to access. In order to avoid any accusations of proselytizing “gender ideology”, make sure to provide resources that do not focus exclusively on LGBTQI+ issues. Some general resources on diversity and anti-discrimination which familiarize students with challenges faced by different minority groups (Roma, Muslims, Jews, people with disabilities, and LGBTQI+) will work better in a context that is particularly sensitized against talking about gender identity and sexual orientation at school.

You can also find some useful resources on the CHOICE project’s [website](#).



Look for local support

It is important to know about local youth services that are available and open to work with young people from vulnerable groups. Find out about other youth and community service providers that work with LGBTQI+ young people in your region. National LGBTQI+ rights organizations are the first to contact for help.

9. Strategies and activities for inclusive school climate

Building a positive school climate

A positive school climate is characterized by collaborative and optimistic working relationships among all members of the school community. Research strongly indicates that proliferation of such relationships will go a long way toward preventing school bullying and enhancing visible diversity in the school environment.

The conscious focus on a positive school climate in day-to-day planning, implementation and evaluation of activities will effectively lead to prevention of marginalization of individuals and groups. The efforts to build a positive school climate should be based on inclusive policies and shared values that encourage diversity and non-discrimination.

A positive school climate encourages diversity and openness of students with diverse backgrounds and unique personal characteristics, including those associated with LGBTQI+ identities. School policy and practice should be responsive to and inclusive of that diversity.

The school administration should communicate its efforts in building a positive school climate to students and not just to teachers. Working with young people to build social and emotional skills informed by the research literature is an important element of the upbringing that takes place at school. School curricula in Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Lithuania provide limited space for working on interpersonal skills. Nevertheless, schools may find a way to dedicate time to such work, for example, by organizing discussion on the topic with the school psychologist or by inviting guest speakers who will address the topic during elective subjects or extracurricular activities.

Initiatives that address such areas as bullying, hate, violence and at-risk youth generally play an important role in raising awareness on vulnerable groups. Such focused initiatives which are not generally LGBTQI+-specific help build a culture of acceptance of diversity that prevents anti-LGBTQI+ and other types of mistreatment. In addition to them, one or two LGBTQI+-specific initiatives per year will help raise awareness on the specific issues faced by LGBTQI+ students and will help build sympathy and acceptance. School administrations should provide open support to interested staff and students



to enable a bottom-up initiative for organizing LGBTQI+-specific events and actions. A bottom-up approach in these initiatives is strongly advisable.

Practical tips for building a positive school culture and climate

Following are some practical tips by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST, n.d.) for immediate actions that can be taken to help build a positive school culture and climate and to help prevent and tackle bullying behavior.

- Model respectful behavior to all members of the school community at all times.
- Explicitly teach students what respectful language and behavior looks like, acts like, sounds like and feels like both in and out of school.
- Display key respect messages in classrooms, in assembly areas and around the school. Involve students in the development of these messages.
- Publicly acknowledge and endorse respectful behavior by providing positive attention.
- Consistently tackle the use of discriminatory and derogatory language in school – this includes abusive and discriminatory language on the grounds of gender identity, sexual orientation, sex characteristics, as well as other characteristics such as race, nationality, health status and/or disabilities.
- Give constructive feedback to students when respectful behavior and respectful language are absent.
- Have a system of encouragement and rewards to promote appropriate behavior and compliance with school rules and routines.
- Teach students about the appropriate use of the internet, social media and all electronic and online means of communication and interaction, and inform them about the different forms and effects of cyberbullying.
- Follow up and follow through with students who ignore the rules.
- Actively involve parents and/or Parents' Associations in awareness raising campaigns regarding the appropriate and safe use of social media.
- Actively promote the right of every member of the school community to be safe and secure in school.
- Highlight and explicitly teach school rules in student friendly language in the classroom and in common areas.
- All staff can actively watch out for signs of any kind of abusive behavior.
- Ensure there is adequate playground/school yard/outdoor supervision.



- School staff can get students to help them identify bullying “hot spots”⁷ and “hot times”⁸ for bullying in the school.
- Support the establishment and work of student councils to come together, discuss and prevent violent and/or discriminatory incidents.

Best practice tip: Stand Up Week

In Ireland, “the Stand Up Awareness Week⁹ is a time when schools take a stand against homophobic, transphobic, and biphobic bullying that many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) students experience.”

By marking Stand Up Awareness Week in your school, you can help to create a friendlier, safer school for LGBTQI+ students.

Each year, the Irish Department of Education sends resource packs to second-level schools and youth services around Ireland. The resources are also downloadable. The Stand Up Week resources include: Activity Pack with cross-curricular activities, an introduction to LGBTQI+ terminology and information on supporting trans students; Stand Up Poster for Schools, and LGBTQI+ Terminology Poster.

⁷ “Hot spots” tend to be in the playground/school yard/outdoor areas, changing rooms, corridors and other areas of unstructured supervision.

⁸ “Hot times” again tend to be times where there is less structured supervision such as when pupils are in the playground/school yard or moving classrooms.

⁹ <https://www.belongto.org/professionals/standup/resources/>



10. Adopting or improving a school anti-bullying policy

There is a growing body of evidence on the importance of effective anti-bullying policies as a mechanism to improve safety at school and support vulnerable groups, including LGBTQI+. A school's anti-bullying policy must be made available to school personnel, as well as to all parents (during teacher-parent meetings), published on the school website (or where none exists, be otherwise readily accessible to parents and students on request).

The authorities/management of each school, in developing its anti-bullying policy, must formulate the policy in co-operation with both teaching and non-teaching school staff under the leadership of the principal and in consultation with parents and students.

An effective anti-bullying policy should cover all areas of school life; it should relate to all individuals who are part of the school community: teachers, school administrators, other school staff, volunteers, students, parents, school trustees, contractors, and partners implementing activities at the school. The policy needs to be updated regularly to reflect changes in the lived practice and in the context where the school is operating. An anti-bullying policy should include a concise definition of bullying and clear guidance on appropriate behavior. It should envision specific measures for making all of the aforementioned stakeholders – and most of all students and school staff – confident to report and address bullying. Prevention strategies should include awareness raising measures for all members of the school community, inclusive school climate and clear instructions on the procedure that needs to be followed when bullying occurs. The accountability of the school staff in ensuring supervision of students and prevention of incidents should be clearly described, and the specific responsibilities of teachers and the school management should be listed.

The procedures of an anti-bullying policy should address:

- Reporting (to whom, how, is anonymity guaranteed to ensure the safety of the reporter);
- Recording, investigation and follow-up on bullying behavior: how are cases of bullying addressed, who is involved?
- Support structures for victims as well as for perpetrators: special attention should be paid to ensuring support mechanisms for students from vulnerable groups.
- Collaboration with other agencies (e.g., external support service providers) in cases which require such collaboration (as per national law and policies).
- Review and updating mechanism: Is there an annual review? Who is involved?

The Irish government has published templates for school anti-bullying policy (see Annexes), for reporting of incidents of bullying, and for a checklist for annual review of the anti-bullying policy on its Department of Education website (Ireland Department of Education, 2013). We find these templates very useful because they help schools maintain common human rights-based standards for addressing bullying, looking at all aspects of the problem and mobilizing all relevant stakeholders. A



very important element in these templates is the attention given to identity-based bullying. The research of the CHOICE project showed that schools in Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Lithuania do not usually pay attention to the identity-based triggers of bullying; consequently, no targeted support is provided to victims from vulnerable groups such as religious, ethnic, LGBTQI+ or other minorities. At the same time, there is no consistent work with perpetrators and the school community in general to raise awareness that identity-based bullying is a type of hate crime and it has a profound negative impact on the school culture and climate. The lack of these important elements makes the existing anti-bullying policies (where they exist) highly ineffective.

We recommend the templates to be used by schools in Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Lithuania which do not yet have a written anti-bullying policy, as well as by those who have one but have not yet engaged in annual reviews for improving the policy. The templates are provided in the Annexes section with some adaptation to the needs of our country contexts.



11. Facilitating the needs of LGBTQI+ students: issues that may arise in everyday school life

11.1 Coming out & privacy for LGBTQI+ students

Every student has the right to express themselves openly, without fear of violence or discrimination, and participate fully in school life. Students who may wish to share their sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex variation in school (i.e. to “come out”) have the right to do so if they want to. Teachers and other school staff should keep an encouraging stance and in no case should they suggest that being LGBTQI+ is something that can/should be “changed”. International health and mental health associations state that a person’s sexual orientation and gender identity cannot be forcibly changed and have taken a clear stance on such efforts (also known as “conversion therapies”), warning that not only are they not effective but they constitute a serious threat to a person’s mental health (APA 2012, 2015; PAHO, 2012). Sometimes the prospect of a student coming out as LGBTQI+ may make teachers and school uncomfortable – especially if they are not well-informed on LGBTQI+ issues or are afraid of the possible harassment such student may face, which can result in discouraging the student from sharing their identity. However, students should not be discouraged from coming out when they wish to do so. Schools should be prepared to deal with such situations, support their students and ensure their safety.

Teachers and other school staff can assist students in this process by offering their support, informing other teachers and/or facilitating discussions with other students (in a way that does not stigmatize the specific students). However, it is up to the students to decide if, when and what information they will share and with whom. School staff should not share information regarding a student’s sexual orientation, gender identity and/or intersex status to other personnel, students or parents without the student’s consent. Unwanted sharing of a person’s LGBTQI+ identity with others (also called “outing”) will break the trust between the student and the school’s staff and jeopardize the efforts made to create an inclusive environment. Given the negative attitudes towards LGBTQI+ people, outing a student can possibly expose them to harassment and abuse by peers or school staff.

For transgender students, the levels of privacy the school can ensure will depend on the situation. If a student that has attended the school for some time and is already known with the gender they were assigned at birth comes out as transgender, the option for privacy may be limited. In this case, teachers and school administration should work with the student to find ways to ensure their safety and protect (further) violations of their privacy. To achieve this, teachers could have general discussions that inform the rest of the students on LGBTQI+ issues (without stigmatizing the specific student), emphasizing on acceptance and respect. In case a trans student enrolls to a school and wants to be private about their gender transition, the school should take the appropriate measures to ensure their



privacy is not compromised. Living as their gender but without being out as trans is something some students may want in order to decrease their chances of facing harassment while being able to fully participate in school life.

Intersex students may have slightly different needs when it comes to coming out. In their vast majority, parents are aware about their child's intersex status and are involved in discussions with the school principal. Intersex students may require some additional levels of privacy such as asking for access to single-stall bathrooms or more private changing rooms. Schools should ensure that intersex students have access to such facilities. In some cases, intersex students may need to take medication during their school day and ask for a place where they can do so safely. Schools could provide access to empty classrooms, private offices or other alternatives. Whether a student will be out as intersex, to whom and what kind of information they will share is something that they will decide. As with non-heterosexual and trans students, school staff should not share any information they have with others if they do not have the student's permission.

11.2 Unsupportive parents

For many students that live with an unsupportive family, school can be the only place they feel comfortable expressing themselves, and therefore can have an important role in alleviating the distress they experience at home. Schools should ensure that a student's safety is not compromised by outing them to their parents/caregivers. Teachers are not required by law to share any information that comes to their knowledge about a student's sexual orientation or gender identity with such student's parents without the child's consent. Many families may not be supportive and sharing such information may expose the student to possible conflict and/or violence. Teachers should discuss with the students whether their parents are aware of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, what information should teachers share with them and how they would like teachers to approach different situations: for example, for transgender students, this can include whether a teacher refers to them using the name they use or the one on their official documents when communicating with parents.

Teachers can also help students with unsupportive parents by offering the parents information on LGBTQI+ issues and referring them to specialized support services and programs such as psychological support services, parents support groups or organizations that work with LGBTQI+ issues.



11.3 Relationships between students

It is possible, especially if the school environment is more open and inclusive, for relationships between students of the same sex to exist. In such cases, teachers should respond in the same way and impose the same regulations that exist for heterosexual students. “Requiring that such students are not open about their relationships or forcibly separating them while heterosexual students are allowed to be open about theirs is a form of discrimination”

11.4 Transgender and gender non-conforming students

According to the American Psychological Association (2015), trans people are more likely to experience positive life outcomes when they receive social support or trans-affirmative care. Creating a supportive environment that allows transgender students to be open about their gender identity can have a tremendous effect on their experience in school and their mental health. Being able to socially transition and live as their true gender while being supported and validated by educators and school staff can allow them to fully participate in school activities, progress academically and develop connections with peers.

11.5 Documentation

Schools’ registration systems are based on students’ birth certificates. This can pose a challenge for transgender students whose name and gender differ from those they are registered under. A student’s legal name and gender may appear on attendance lists, grades, participation in after-school activities, library and lunch cards, yearbooks and class pictures. Being forced to be addressed by a name and gender they do not identify with is a very distressing experience which can have an impact on their mental health, engagement in school activities, and academic achievement, but can also pose a threat to their safety by outing them to other students and/or school personnel. This is especially important for students who may wish to transition privately.

In many countries – including the countries participating in the CHOICE project – minors have limited or no access to procedures that would allow them to change the information registered on their legal documents. Such procedures, when available, may be expensive, time-consuming and/or have specific requirements such as medical interventions or parental approval, making it very difficult for trans students to have documents that reflect their gender identity.

Although legal requirements for record-keeping may create certain obstacles in listing trans students under their chosen name and gender, school should strive to find alternatives and minimize the (public) use of the students’ legal name and gender in order to ensure their safety and privacy. The suggestions mentioned below are some examples of ways that a school could do this. The degree to



which each school will be able to enforce such actions depends on the country's legal requirements for record-keeping and the school's procedures.

Use the student's chosen name and gender in the student information system but switch it to the student's legal name and gender just before uploading the information to the national department of education's database.

Use the student's chosen name and gender in publicly available documents (e.g. attendance lists, library or lunch cards, etc.) and their legal name on other databases that are not available to students and/or all staff.

11.6 Use of names and pronouns

While there may be issues that cannot be fully resolved when it comes to documentation for transgender students that are listed under a gender that doesn't match their gender identity, everyday use of trans students' names and pronouns is easy. Teachers and other personnel of the school are not legally obliged to use the name on a student's official documents when addressing them. There are already many occasions in which you use different forms of students' names or only one of the two names that they may have on their ID – this is no different. Using the name and pronouns for a transgender student makes them feel seen, respected and safe while it also sets an example for other students. Especially for students that may not be publicly transitioning, using the official name could "out" them to their classmates, thus exposing them to potential harassment.

11.7 Dressing

For transgender students, expressing their gender through their clothes, accessories and hairstyle can be a very affirming act. Transgender students have the right to dress according to their gender identity, regardless of the gender listed on their official documents. Do not discourage students from dressing in a way that expresses their gender and do not force them to change their clothes. This should also be applied to cisgender students that may dress in way that is not typical for their gender. Ensure that students feel comfortable and safe to express themselves, of course, within the schools' regulations.

In case your school has different dress codes for girls and boys in place, explore the possibility to remove such codes or at least allow trans students to dress in a way that corresponds with their gender identity. Forcing trans students to dress according to their assigned gender can be a very distressing experience and gives the message that their gender identity is not respected.



11.8 Use of gender-segregated spaces

The use of gender-segregated spaces such as bathrooms and changing rooms is one of the most difficult to deal with and often heated issues when it comes to creating a more inclusive school for transgender students. Opposition to allowing students to access gender-segregated spaces most commonly includes fears that this will open the possibility for students to take advantage of this policy and harass other students. Disagreements may rise between school staff, and even schools that want to introduce such policies may be afraid of negative reactions from parents. However, such fears are based on harmful misconceptions about trans people (and specifically trans women) and are not supported by evidence. In 2015, Media Matters for America contacted officials in schools in 12 states (with more than 600,000 students) that allowed students to use the facilities according to their gender identity, and none reported having incidents of harassment or inappropriate behavior as a result of these policies (Percelay, 2015). Furthermore, sexual harassment is something that can happen anywhere, regardless of the existence of trans-inclusive policies, and schools should already have in place procedures to prevent and deal with such incidents.

The use of the appropriate facilities is important not only for validation of the students' identity but also to ensure their safety. Forcing trans students to use facilities designated for their assigned gender increases the chances of them facing bullying and harassment. Allowing trans students to use bathrooms and changing rooms that correspond with their gender identity, if they wish so, is a crucial measure in fostering a safe and inclusive environment. In case there are concerns regarding the safety of trans students when using gender-segregated facilities, other options could be explored such as using a single-stall bathroom or the teachers' bathroom (if available), or using the facilities in times when there are fewer students (during classes). It is important to remember that such options should be considered only in case a transgender student feels unsafe and should not be imposed on the student instead of granting them access to the facilities that correspond to their gender. Whenever possible, schools should strive to have some private enclosed changing areas, showers and toilets for use by any student who wants to do so.

This measure should also be applied to school excursions and trips where students are usually required to share rooms based on their gender. Again, transgender students should be assigned roommates based on their gender identity. Schools should in all cases ensure the safety of students when making room arrangements. If a student has concerns regarding their safety, other options could be explored with them and their family (when possible).

11.9 Participation in sports and physical education

When schools engage in systematic efforts to improve school culture and climate, they should make consistent efforts to address sports culture as well, including both physical education classes and



competitive sports. School sports are often the terrain where the most severe cases of bullying occur. Ranging from mocking and using insulting language which comments one's body shape, sex characteristics or other physical features, to pushing, kicking and other forms of physical aggression during sports classes and school extracurricular sports, bullying in sports is not always sanctioned in an appropriate way. Sports are considered as the single most important factor in the climate of many high schools, being located at the very center of the school's culture.

Some sports are often linked to particular gender(s), thus facilitating the reproduction of gender-based stereotypes and norms regarding roles and/or abilities. It is very possible for people who may choose to be involved with a sport that does not "fit" with their gender – according to these dominant gender-based perceptions – to face sexist or homo/transphobic behaviors. Furthermore, some sport environments often become promoters of "traditional" male-focused perceptions – namely, that of the exclusively cis-straight, thus "real" men. Such environments can become hostile towards LGBTQI+ people. Defamatory myths and negative stereotypes regarding LGBTQI+ people are particularly prevalent in sports settings, such as the myths that gay men are weak and unreliable athletes, or that all LGBTQI+ people are hypersexual predators who cannot be trusted in sports changing rooms. This is especially relevant for trans students that may need to access gender-segregated facilities according to their gender identity. For example, in 2018, the canard that "transvestites dressed as women will rape other women in women's changing rooms" was actively disseminated in Bulgaria as part of the communication strategy of the anti-gender movement. It created fear and repulsive rejection of gender diversity in sports among the mainstream population. However, such misconceptions, as discussed above, are not supported by evidence and access to facilities that coincide with students' gender identity covers sports' facilities as well.

Trans students should also be allowed to participate in sports teams and physical education classes (which are in most cases gender-segregated) according to their gender identity, regardless of the gender listed on their birth certificate. Regarding participation, it is a common concern that allowing trans students (and specifically trans girls) to participate in sports according to their gender identity gives them an unfair advantage over their cisgender peers. These concerns are based on sex stereotypes that focus on the physical differences between people assigned male at birth and those assigned female – especially regarding the effects of testosterone on athletic performance. Although it is true that higher levels of testosterone are connected with greater muscle mass, other factors affect athletic performances. Furthermore, these concerns do not take into account the great variation of physical characteristics that exist among cisgender men or cisgender women; this includes all of their physical characteristics, not only their primary and secondary sex characteristics (e.g., arm and leg length). Even if hormone levels are used as the measure for participation in sports, trans students who are undergoing hormone treatment (hormone blockers or hormone replacement therapy) would have similar hormone levels to those of their cisgender peers. However, the number of trans athletes so far that have benefited from transgender-inclusive eligibility rules is minimal,



showing that concerns about unfair advantage do not have a foundation. Similar concerns have been used to oppose participation for intersex athletes – even when they competed according to the gender listed on their legal documents, e.g., in the case of the long-distance runner Caster Semenya (North, 2019).

In cases where the legal framework of the country or the rules of a sports association do not allow the participation of trans students, schools could try to assist in finding alternate solutions such as allowing students to participate in practices and unofficial games.

Apart from the measures schools can take to ensure the participation of trans and intersex students to sports and physical education classes, further recommendations for making sports inclusive for LGBTQI+ students are listed below:

Raise awareness among all sports coaches and external sports clubs that operate in the school environment about the needs of LGBTQI+ students engaging in sports.

Make it clear that anti-LGBTQI+ comments and actions by coaches and student athletes are completely unacceptable.

Coaches and physical education teachers should be instructed to not only put an end to their own homophobic and transphobic comments but also to make it clear to students that anti-gay (anti-LGBTQI) slurs and other forms of LGBTQI bashing are completely unacceptable on the field, in the gym, in the locker room.

School officials should seek the active involvement of the larger sports community, including student families, after-school sports programs such as soccer and other sports clubs, to reinforce zero tolerance to hate speech in sports.

11.10 LGBTQI+ families

Fostering a safe environment in school is not only beneficial for LGBTQI+ students but also for students who come from LGBTQI+ families. Different forms of families such as same-sex couples, trans and intersex parents, single-parent families or extended families should also be included in discussions with students.

In many countries, LGBTQI+ parents face increased difficulties in fully participating in school life due to the lack of legal recognition. For example, it is possible that in a same-sex couple, only one of the parents is legally recognized as a parent, or a trans parent may be registered incorrectly in their child's documents. School management should take actions to actively include LGBTQI+ parents in school life, e.g. in discussions about their child(ren), extracurricular activities, etc.



12. How to respond to negative criticism and address the myths about LGBTQI+

It is common for programs, policies and other initiatives that include or mention explicitly issues around sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics to raise negative criticism from parents, students or members of the school staff. These reactions are usually based on misinformation about LGBTQI+ identities or negative attitudes that arise from harmful stereotypes. Depending on the socio-political situation and the general level of acceptance for LGBTQI+ people, such opposition may indeed prove to be a challenge when trying to introduce and implement an inclusive policy.

Below we tried to include some of the most common misconceptions accompanied with accurate facts and information in order to aid schools in replying to possible opposition. The list is indicative, based on international experience from schools. It is possible for unique challenges to arise in each country to which schools may need to respond.

“If we allow talking about LGBTQI+ issues and/or allow students to be (openly) LGBTQI+, we will encourage the rest of the students to become LGBTQI+ too”

Sexual orientation and gender identity are core identities and cannot be affected by external intervention. This is true both for LGBTQI+ and cis-heterosexual people; talking about LGBTQI+ issues or seeing openly LGBTQI+ people cannot affect the sexual orientation or gender identity of cis-heterosexual students. However, forcing rigid gender roles and discouraging youth from expressing their identities can have a detrimental effect on their mental health. LGBTQI+ youth report alarmingly high rates of suicidal ideation, with almost half of them having considered attempting suicide (The Trevor Project, 2019).

Addressing issues around sexual orientation and gender identity can help create an affirming environment for all the students that (already) are LGBTQI+ but are afraid that they might be rejected or harassed if they express themselves. It also cultivates compassion and openness, and creates a space where all students are seen and valued. Having an inclusive stance sends the message that being LGBTQI+ is not something to be ashamed of and that LGBTQI+ students deserve the same level of protection and acceptance as their cis-heterosexual peers.

“I don’t want my kids to share a bathroom/changing room with a trans person”

Although such concerns may seem reasonable, they are based on harmful stereotypes and misconceptions about trans people. If a student feels uncomfortable sharing facilities with transgender students, schools should try to address these concerns and misconceptions and, if needed, to help them find alternatives such as using single-stalled bathrooms or the teachers’ facilities. However, it is important to remember that feeling uncomfortable is not the same as feeling



unsafe; the mere presence of a trans student does not pose a threat to other students, and complains about students feeling discomfort should not result in schools forcing trans students to use other facilities.

“If you allow trans students to use whatever bathroom they want, boys will claim to be transgender so they can enter the girls’ facilities”

Schools have the responsibility to ensure that all students are safe. This includes preventing and dealing with any type of harassment, including sexual harassment. Attempts by cisgender students to enter facilities designed for the opposite gender will be appropriately handled by the school personnel; however, such incidents are unrelated to policies aimed at protecting trans students. Schools should keep a firm stance against any kind of harassment or inappropriate behavior.

It is also important to remember that gender identity is a core human identity and that trans students face increased levels of violence, discrimination and rejection for being themselves; coming out and living their everyday in school as another gender is not something a cisgender student would do just so they could be granted access to certain facilities.

“Children are too young to learn about these things”

The criticism that LGBTQI+ issues should not be discussed with minors usually stems from the oversexualization of LGBTQI+ identities. However, LGBTQI+ identities are not inherently “inappropriate”; they are a part of the wide variety of human experiences. Discussions on human rights, bullying, loving relationships and family formations, gender stereotypes and expectations can all include LGBTQI+ issues. Discussions around sexuality and relationships (e.g., in the context of sexual education) are also important for both LGBTQI+ and cis-heterosexual students in order to help them better understand themselves and navigate relationships, especially in older ages. Of course, as with all issues, schools have the responsibility to hold discussions on sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics in an age-appropriate way.

“My child is growing up with religious values and being LGBTQI+ is against these values”

Every student has the right to their personal beliefs and values, including values that have a religious background. The fact that a school is implementing a diversity policy that includes LGBTQI+ people is not a threat to any student’s personal beliefs but a way to ensure that all students are treated with respect and feel safe and welcomed to fully participate in school life. In many countries, discrimination and violence on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics is prohibited by law. In countries where such laws apply, schools are required to comply with them; however, even if LGBTQI+ people are not specifically protected by national law, schools can take initiatives for the creation of a safe school environment for all students.



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14. ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: Template anti-bullying policy

In accordance with the requirements of the national anti-discrimination legislation (Cite here the specific name and year of the active anti-discrimination law in your country), the board of(name)..... school has adopted the following anti-bullying policy within the framework of the school's overall code of behavior. This policy fully complies with the requirements of the national anti-bullying policies (Cite here specific act or regulation, adopted in your country, if such exists).

The board of school recognizes the very serious nature of bullying and the negative impact that it can have on the lives of students, and is therefore fully committed to the following key principles of best practice in preventing and tackling bullying behavior:

- A positive school culture and climate, which is welcoming of difference and diversity and is based on inclusivity; encourages students to disclose and discuss incidents of bullying behavior in a non-threatening environment; and promotes respectful relationships across the school community;
- Effective leadership;
- A school-wide approach;
- A shared understanding of what bullying is and its impact;
- Implementation of education and prevention strategies (including awareness raising measures) that build empathy, respect and resilience in students; and explicitly address the issues of cyber-bullying and identity-based bullying including in particular, homophobic and transphobic bullying.
- Effective supervision and monitoring of students;
- Supports for staff;
- Consistent recording, investigation and follow up of bullying behavior (including use of established intervention strategies); and
- On-going evaluation of the effectiveness of the anti-bullying policy.

Definition of bullying adopted by the school (Here, accepted national-level definitions may be applied, however, review and make-sure that they include the identity-based bullying, which is often overlooked in our countries).

Bullying is unwanted negative behavior, verbal, psychological or physical, conducted, by an individual or group against another person (or persons) and which is repeated over time. The following types of bullying behavior are included in the definition of bullying:

- deliberate exclusion, malicious gossip and other forms of relational bullying,



- cyber-bullying,
- identity-based bullying such as homophobic bullying, racist bullying, Roma/Muslim bullying, or bullying of those with disabilities, or special educational needs.

Isolated or once-off incidents of intentional negative behavior, including a once-off offensive or hurtful text message or other private messaging, do not fall within the definition of bullying and should be dealt with, as appropriate, in accordance with the school's code of behavior.

However, in the context of this policy, placing a once-off offensive or hurtful public message, image or statement on a social network site or other public forum where that message, image or statement can be viewed and/or repeated by other people will be regarded as bullying behavior.

Negative behavior that does not meet this definition of bullying will be dealt with in accordance with the school's code of behavior.

Additional information on different types of bullying could be included here if appropriate.

The relevant school organ (committee) for investigating and dealing with bullying is as follows: (describe here what the specific structure for dealing with bullying is; how is it constituted; who are the members)

The education and prevention strategies (including strategies specifically aimed at cyber-bullying and identity-based bullying including in particular, homophobic and transphobic bullying) that will be used by the school are as follows: (list and shortly describe specific school strategies for prevention and addressing the mentioned types of bullying, including strategies for raising awareness, providing support to victims, and working with perpetrators)

The school's procedures for investigation, follow-up and recording of bullying behavior and the established intervention strategies used by the school for dealing with cases of bullying behavior are as follows (describe here the specific school anti-bullying procedure) :

The school's program of support for working with students affected by bullying is as follows (shortly describe the existing support program / structure at your school):

Supervision and Monitoring of Students

The board of school confirms that appropriate supervision and monitoring policies and practices are in place to both prevent and deal with bullying behavior and to facilitate early intervention where possible.

Prevention of Harassment

The board of school confirms that the school will, in accordance with its obligations under national equality legislation, take all such steps that are reasonably practicable to prevent the sexual



harassment of students or staff, or the harassment of students or staff on any of the ten grounds specified i.e. gender identity, civil status, family status, sexual orientation, sex characteristics, political or religious beliefs, age, disability, race, and national or ethnic origin.

This policy was adopted by the board of school on [date].

This policy has been made available to school personnel, published on the school website (or where none exists, is otherwise readily accessible to parents and students on request) and provided to the parents' association (where one exists).

This policy and its implementation will be reviewed by the school management once in every school year. Written notification that the review has been completed will be made available to school personnel, published on the school website (or where none exists, be otherwise readily accessible to parents and pupils on request) and provided to the parents' association (where one exists).

Signed: _____ Signed: _____

(Chairperson of School Board) (Principal of the School)

Date: _____ Date: _____

Date of next review: _____



ANNEX 2: Template for recording bullying behavior

1. Name of student being bullied and class group

Name _____ Class _____

2. Name(s) and class(es) of student(s) engaged in bullying behavior

3. Source of bullying concern / report (tick relevant box(es))*

Student concerned	
Other student	
Parent	
Teacher	
On the way to/from school	

4. Location of incidents (tick relevant box(es))*

Playground	
Classroom	
Corridor	
Toilets	
School Bus	
Other	

5. Name of person(s) who reported the bullying concern

--

6. Type of bullying behavior (tick relevant box(es)) *

Physical assault		Cyber-bullying	
Damage to property		Threat	
Isolation/Exclusion		Malicious gossip	
Name calling/		Theft	



Purposeful misgendering			
Threat		Sexual harassment and/or abuse	
Other (specify)			

7. Where behavior is regarded as identity-based bullying, indicate the relevant category:

Homophobic / Transphobic	Disability / special educational needs- related	Racist (skin color)	Anti-Roma (against specific ethnic minority)	Other (specify)

8. Brief description of bullying behavior and its impact

Details of actions taken

Signed _____ (Relevant Teacher) Date _____

Date submitted to Principal/Deputy Principal _____

*** Note:** The categories listed in the tables 3, 4 & 6 are suggested and schools may add to or amend these to suit their own circumstances.



ANNEX 3: Checklist for annual review of the anti-bullying policy and its implementation

The school board and the principal must undertake an annual review of the school's anti-bullying policy and its implementation. The following checklist could be used for this purpose. The checklist is an aid to conducting this review and is not intended as an exhaustive list. In order to complete the checklist, an examination and review involving both quantitative and qualitative analysis, as appropriate across the various elements of the implementation of the school's anti-bullying policy, will be required.

The checklist below could be completed either by the school board or the principal, depending on which governing body has the highest authority in regulating the school policy according to the national laws.

Yes / No Questions

- Has the board / principal formally adopted an anti-bullying policy that fully complies with the requirements of the national anti-bullying strategy (where such exists)?
- Has the board / principal published the policy on the school website and provided a copy to the parents' association?
- Has the board ensured that the policy has been made available to school staff (including new staff)?
- Does the board / principal agree that school staff are sufficiently familiar with the policy and procedures to enable them to effectively and consistently apply the policy and procedures in their day to day work?
- Has the board / principal ensured that the policy has been adequately communicated to all students?
- Does the policy describe in detail the prevention and education strategies that the school applies?
- Have all of the prevention and education strategies been implemented?
- Has the effectiveness of the prevention and education strategies that have been implemented been examined?
- Does the board/principal agree that all teachers are recording and dealing with incidents in accordance with the policy?
- Has the board / principal received periodic summary reports of the school committee on prevention / addressing bullying?
- Has the board / principal discussed how well the school is handling all reports of bullying, including those addressed at an early stage and not therefore included in the anti-bullying committee's periodic report to the board/principal?



- Has the board / principal received any complaints from parents regarding the school's handling of bullying incidents?
- Have any parents withdrawn their child from the school citing dissatisfaction with the school's handling of a bullying situation?
- Have any external investigations into the school's handling of a bullying case been initiated or completed (by other relevant state or local government bodies)?
- Has the data from cases reported to the principal (by the bullying recording template) been analyzed in order to identify any issues, trends or patterns in bullying behavior?
- Has the board / principal identified any aspects of the school's policy and/or its implementation that require further improvement?
- Has the board / principal put in place an action plan to address any areas for improvement?

Signed _____ Date _____

Chairperson, School Board

Signed _____ Date _____

Principal



ANNEX 4: GLOSSARY

14.1 Basic concepts

Sexual orientation: The emotional and/or sexual attraction towards other people.

Gender identity: The personal and internal way a person experiences their gender or the lack of a gender. The term “gender” in this case refers to the sum of roles, behaviors, norms and characteristics that each society, culture and/or class in a certain historical period ascribes as “typical” of men and women (based on the binary model of gender). It can coincide with the gender assigned at birth or not.

Gender expression: The ways in which a person expresses to others gendered behaviors and characteristics (such as masculinity, femininity or others). Characteristics such as haircuts, clothing, the way a person speaks and moves can be an expression of gender. We live in a society in which gender expression is expected and imposed to coincide with a person’s gender identity; a man is expected to have a masculine gender expression and a woman – feminine one. This results in people that do not conform to this simplistic model being treated in a phobic or hateful way by society.

Sex characteristics: Sex characteristics include the primary (such as internal and external reproductive organs, chromosomes and hormones), as well as the secondary (such as muscle mass, body hair, breast development and other) characteristics of sex.

14.2 The LGBTQI+ acronym

Lesbian: A person that identifies as a woman and experiences emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of the same gender.

Gay: A person that identifies as a man, and experiences emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of the same gender. The term “gay” in Greece and Bulgaria is used mainly by men, although there are women that use this term to describe their sexual and/or romantic orientation identifying as gay or gay women.

Bisexual: A person that experiences emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of two or more genders. It is often used as an umbrella term to describe various forms of polysexuality.

Transgender: People whose gender is not the same as the gender they were assigned at birth. Trans people can identify their gender within the gender binary (identifying as trans men or trans women), or not (identifying as trans non-binary).



Queer: Queer is a complex term with multiple interpretations. In the past, it was used as a derogatory term for gay people, but in the 80's, it was reclaimed from activists and academics as a positive and confrontational self-description in an effort to challenge social norms around sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity and/or other forms of normativity. It is often used by people that do not accept the traditional concepts of gender and sexuality and do not identify with any of the terms of the LGBTI+ acronym, but also as an umbrella-term for all LGBTI+ people. As a term, it also identifies with certain parts of the Queer Theory.

Intersex: Intersex individuals are born with sex characteristics that do not belong strictly to male or female categories, or that belong to both at the same time. "Intersex" is an umbrella-term and stands for the spectrum of variations of sex characteristics that naturally occur within the human species. Intersex people can have any sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

(+): The + symbol is used to include all the other identities on sexual orientation and/or gender identity that are part of the community, e.g. asexual, non-binary, pansexual, etc.

14.3 Other terms

Gender non-conforming (GNC): People who have a gender identity and/or gender expression that does not align completely with the gender they were assigned at birth.

Straight / Heterosexual: A person that experiences emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of the "other" gender. The term is based on the notion that gender is a binary, which is why the component "hetero-" is used.

Cisgender: Someone whose gender identity is the same as the gender that was assigned to them at birth. The term is used as the opposite of the term "trans".



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Project coordinator: KMOP

Address: Skoufa 75, Athina 106 80, Greece

Email: kmop@kmop.gr

Website: <https://www.kmop.gr/>



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