

Toward Safe Space What Choral Teachers Can Do

- **Post a rule or policy regarding hate speech, bullying, or harassment in a prominent place. Specifically include sexual orientation and gender expression in a list of protected groups of people.**

57% of survey respondents stated that their junior high/middle schools had no rules or policies relating to hate speech. 51% made the same statement about their high schools. Furthermore, an open-ended question revealed that many schools or choral programs had rules or policies, but that they were vague, lacking specificity about what people were being protected. The singers' impression was that the schools were, in this case, continuing to avoid the issue of LGBTQ protection.

"It seemed as though a "no bullying" policy was implied but never broken down as to what constituted bullying, harassment, and discrimination."

"Everything that was taboo was swept under the rug and not discussed. There was a blanket 'no bullying/zero tolerance policy' with no specifics. Talk about the issue. Generally, if people don't talk about it, I assume they won't be friendly toward us."

Here is an example of a policy demonstrating specificity, from Tim Estberg of New Trier High School.

This is a Safe Zone. Learning is an adventure. It involves not only mastery of information, but the ability to risk and experiment with what is being learned. We all come to this class as unique individuals. Behavior based on courtesy, respect, and an appreciation of our differences and similarities will create an environment in which each of us can grow and learn. If any student feels that our classroom is in any way uncomfortable, he or she is strongly encouraged to speak with me as soon as possible. Together, we will create an environment in which each of us can grow and learn in a safe place for everyone, regardless of gender, gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation, class, level, or physical or mental ability.

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) has a more robust document detailing issues of policy and policy language here:

<http://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/GLSEN%20model%20district%20policy.pdf>

- **Come out to your students...as LGBTQ or as an ally.**

Many survey respondents who experienced support with regard to LGBTQ issues in their secondary school choral programs stated that their safety was facilitated simply by the fact that their teacher said things that conveyed an attitude of support and/or empathy.

"Our teacher had a no-tolerance policy and let us know that she had gay friends."

"One of my high school choral teachers had a gay son."

"My high school choir director was gay and tried to make sure we didn't go through what he did."

- **Post “Safe Space” stickers or signs outside all entrances to your classroom.**

Numerous survey respondents revealed that “safe space” stickers contributed to their sense of support, even when LGBTQ issues were not discussed in the context of their choral programs.

“It might sound silly, but the safe space sticker makes all the difference in the world. Even if you don’t talk about it, knowing your teacher won’t tolerate hate makes a world of emotional difference.”

You can download safe space stickers from the GLSEN website here, printable on Avery sticker 5163: <http://glsen.org/download/file/MzE3MQ>

- **Mention when composers are LGBTQ. This can be as routine as mentioning when composers are women, Afro-American, Asian, Irish, etc.**

This was a recurring theme in our survey. One respondent was particularly eloquent:

“When a piece by a queer composer is done, or if the text is written by someone queer, mention it. Show queer youth that, yes, this beautiful work was written by someone who is queer. Allow their dreams to be as infinite and indestructible as non-queer kids.”

A long list of LGBTQ composers is available on Wikipedia. Some composers whose music is commonly performed by choruses are Samuel Barber, Benjamin Britten, David Brunner, Paul Caldwell (of Caldwell and Ivory), Aaron Copland, and Stephen Sondheim.

- **Make an It Gets Better video. If possible, have your chorus make one to support LGBTQ students. Let your students know that the video is posted on itgetsbetter.org.**

itgetsbetter.org is a library of user-created videos offering support to LGBTQ youth. The project was started in response to the startling number of LGBTQ teen suicides in the fall of 2010. The site currently hosts over 50,000 videos posted by celebrities, organizations, activists, politicians, parents, teachers, and media personalities.

Making a video can be as simple as recording a statement of support (including your classroom’s policy on harassment, even) on your phone or computer. Post the video to YouTube, then submit the URL to itgetsbetter.org.

Paul Caldwell has created an It Gets Better video, which he considers required viewing for anyone performing his music. It features a performance of *Hope for Resolution* sung by his chorus, with the kids speaking candidly about LGBTQ issues. Do a Google search for It Gets Better Paul Caldwell.

- **Say things that encourage an atmosphere of inclusivity.**

Our gender non-conforming and trans* respondents raised the issue of addressing groups of singers with language which is based on a notion of gender identity as a binary distinction.

But another respondent told a story that we wish reflected the experience of every adolescent singer:

“One time in our select women’s choir, we were singing a love ballad and he was trying to get us to feel the music better. He said ‘Just imagine how you feel when you’re with that person you love. Think about how much you feel about that guy, or girl, or whomever you love. Just imagine the emotions.’ For him to not go to that automatic, hetero-normative idea of girls liking guys almost made me cry. I felt so safe there.”

- **Examine requirements mandating gender-specific concert attire**

If a trans* tenor now identifies as female, recognize that her journey has been arduous in many ways. Forcing her into “male” attire is a public devaluing of her identity. Similarly, forcing all sopranos and altos into long dresses communicates unilateral indifference to the spectrum of gender expression embraced by many singers who are lesbian, non-conforming, gender-questioning, or trans*.