

# CONNECTIONS ORGANIZATION SCHOOLS

## **Transgender & Gender Nonconforming Students Policy**

### **PURPOSE**

1. to foster an educational environment within the Connections Organization Schools (COS) that is safe, welcoming, and free from stigma and discrimination for all students, regardless of gender identity or expression
2. to facilitate compliance with local, state and federal laws concerning bullying, harassment, privacy, and discrimination
3. to ensure that all students have the opportunity to express themselves and live authentically

**A Note on Terminology:** Transgender and gender nonconforming youth may use different words to describe their lives and experiences of gender. Terminology and language can differ based on region, language, race or ethnicity, age, culture, and many other factors. Examples of terms used by some youth include: trans, trans girl, trans boy, non-binary, genderqueer, gender fluid, and Two Spirit. These terms often mean different things or refer to different experiences of gender. All COS staff will use the terms that students use to describe themselves and avoid terms that make these students uncomfortable.

### **DEFINITIONS**

These definitions are provided not for the purpose of labeling students, but rather to assist in understanding this policy and the legal obligations of the Connections Organization Schools (COS) staff. Students may or may not use these terms to describe themselves or their experiences.

**Bullying:** Any severe or pervasive physical or verbal act or conduct, including communications made in writing or electronically, directed toward a student or students that has, or can be reasonably predicted to have, the effect of one or more of the following:

1. placing the student or students in reasonable fear of harm to the student's or students' person or property
2. causing a substantially detrimental effect on the student's or students' physical or mental health
3. substantially interfering with the student's or students' academic performance
4. substantially interfering with the student's or students' ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or privileges provided by their school

Bullying can take various forms, including one or more of the following: harassment, threats, intimidation, stalking, physical violence, sexual harassment, exclusion, sexual violence, theft, public humiliation, destruction of property, or retaliation for asserting or alleging an act of bullying. This list is meant to be illustrative and non-exhaustive.

This also includes bullying that is based on a student's actual or perceived race, color, national origin, sex, disability, size, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, religion, socioeconomic status, or another distinguishing characteristic. This also includes conduct that targets a student because of a characteristic of a friend, family member, or other person or group with whom a student associates.

**Gender Expression:** The manner in which a person represents or expresses gender to others, often through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, activities, voice, or mannerisms.

**Gender Identity:** A person's deeply held knowledge of their own gender, which can include being female, male, another gender, or no gender. Gender identity is an innate and largely inflexible part of a person's identity. One's gender identity can be the same or different than the gender assigned at birth. The responsibility for determining an individual's gender identity rests exclusively with the individual. Children typically begin to understand their own gender identity by age four, although the age at which individuals come to understand and express their gender identity may vary based on each person's individual, social, and familial development.

**Gender Nonconforming:** A term sometimes used to describe people whose gender expression differs from stereotypical expectations. Most gender nonconforming people are not transgender. For example, a non-transgender girl who has short hair and likes sports might be considered gender nonconforming. The term "gender nonconforming" is also sometimes used to refer to people whose gender identity is neither male or female.

**Nonbinary/Genderqueer:** These are terms often used to describe people whose gender is not exclusively male or female, including those who identify with a gender other than male or female, as more than one gender, or as no gender.

**Sexual Orientation:** A person's romantic and/or physical attraction to people of the same and/or another gender, such as being straight, gay, bisexual, or asexual. Transgender and gender nonconforming people may have any sexual orientation.

**Transgender:** An adjective describing a person whose gender identity is different from that traditionally associated with the gender they were thought to be when they were born. A transgender girl is a girl who was thought to be male when she was born. A transgender boy is a boy who was thought to be female when he was born. Some transgender people have a gender that is neither male nor female, and may use terms like non-binary to describe their gender.

**Transition:** The process in which a person begins to live according to their gender identity, rather than the gender they were thought to be at birth. Transition is a process that is different for everyone, and it may or may not involve social, legal, or physical changes. There is no one step or set of steps that an individual must undergo in order to have their gender identity affirmed and respected.

## **SCOPE**

This policy covers conduct that takes place in the school, on school property, and on school buses or vehicles, during a student's commute to and from school. This policy also pertains to the use of electronic communication that occurs in the school, on school property, on school buses or vehicles, and on school computers, as well as any electronic communication that is directed at a student and substantially interferes with the student's ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or privileges provided by the school. This policy applies to the entire school community, including school staff, students and parents.

## **BULLYING, HARASSMENT & DISCRIMINATION**

Discrimination, bullying, and harassment on the basis of gender identity or expression is prohibited within the Connections Organization Schools (COS), and it is the responsibility of each school and their staff to ensure that all students, including transgender and gender nonconforming students, have a safe school environment. The scope of this responsibility includes ensuring that any incident of discrimination, harassment, or bullying is given immediate attention, including investigating the incident, taking age- and developmentally-appropriate action, and providing students and staff with appropriate resources and supports. Complaints alleging discrimination or harassment based on a student's actual or perceived gender identity or expression are taken seriously and handled in the same manner as other discrimination, bullying, or harassment complaints.

Enforcement of the COS anti-bullying policy focuses on education and prevention, rather than exclusionary discipline.

## **PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY**

The Connections Organization Schools (COS) shall ensure that all personally identifiable and medical information relating to transgender and gender nonconforming students shall be kept confidential in accordance with applicable state, local, and federal privacy laws. School staff shall not disclose any information that may reveal a student's transgender status to others, including parents or guardians and other school staff, unless legally required to do so, or unless the student has authorized such disclosure. In the rare instance that a school is legally required to disclose a student's transgender status, the COS will provide the student an opportunity to make that disclosure themselves, where practicable. This would include providing the student with any support services they need to make the disclosure in a safe and supportive environment.

Transgender and gender nonconforming students have the right to discuss and express their gender identity and expression openly and to decide when, with whom, and how much to share private information. The fact that a student chooses to use a different name, to transition at school, or to disclose their transgender status to staff or other students does not authorize school staff to disclose a student's personally identifiable or medical information. When school staff interact with parents, guardian, district representatives, or other collateral contacts, school staff

will ask the student whether to use their chosen name and the pronouns that correspond to their gender identity, or whether to use their legal name and corresponding pronouns. (See “Student Transitions” below.)

## **NAMES, PRONOUNS & SCHOOL RECORDS**

Every student has the right to be addressed by the name and pronouns that correspond to the student’s gender identity. Regardless of whether a transgender or gender nonconforming student has legally changed their name or gender, the Connections Organization Schools will allow such students to use the chosen name and gender pronouns that reflect their identity. School staff will privately ask transgender or gender nonconforming students how they would like to be addressed in class and in the school’s communication with the student’s parents or guardians.

If the student has previously been known at school by a different name, school staff will use the student’s chosen name and appropriate pronouns when asked to do so by the student. If the student would also prefer consistency within their school records, every effort will be made to immediately update student education documents and records (such as attendance reports, class and therapist rosters, report cards, electronic records, etc.) with the student’s chosen name and appropriate gender markers. This information will also be communicated to the student’s hometown school so that similar changes can be made to the student’s school records held in that location. Finally, with the student’s permission, this information will also be shared with the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) via phone, in order to ensure that the student’s name is changed in their Student Information System (SIS) to ensure continuity. Within this ISBE system, there is only a binary (male/female) option for identifying gender, and it is mandatory to choose one. Therefore, the student will determine which option they prefer.

## **ACCESS TO GENDER-SEGREGATED ACTIVITIES & FACILITIES**

**Restrooms:** All restrooms in the Connections Organization Schools (COS) are gender neutral, meaning, they are accessible to all students, regardless of their identified gender. When COS students leave school grounds and only have access to gender segregated restroom facilities, students will use whatever restroom they prefer. Any student who is uncomfortable using a gender-segregated facility, regardless of the reason, shall, upon the student’s request, be provided with staff support and/or accompaniment to ensure the student’s comfort and safety when off school grounds. Under no circumstances shall a student be required to use a single-user facility because they are transgender or gender nonconforming.

**Morning Check-In:** Any student who identifies as transgender or gender nonconforming will be given the option to stand in the check-in line of their choice, or receive a private check-in with two staff members. If the student chooses a private check-in, they can also identify their preference for male or female check-in staff members.

**Physical Education Classes and CAAEL Activities:** All students shall be permitted to participate in physical education classes and Chicago Area Alternative Education LEague (CAAEL) activities in a manner consistent with their gender identity.

## **DRESS CODE**

Students have the right to dress in accordance with their gender identity and expression, including maintaining a gender neutral appearance, within the constraints of the Connections Organization Schools' dress code.

## **STUDENT TRANSITIONS**

The Connections Organization Schools (COS) recognize that each student has a unique process for transitioning. As such, COS will accept the gender identity that each student asserts. There is no medical or mental health diagnosis or treatment threshold that students must meet in order to have their gender identity recognized and respected. Students ready to transition will be fully supported in their process of changing their name, pronouns, attire, and access to gender-related programs, activities, and facilities consistent with their gender identity as it develops.

## **TRAINING & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The Connections Organization Schools conduct training for all staff members on their responsibilities under applicable laws and this policy. This policy will also be incorporated into the training provided for all new COS employees.

## **PUBLICATION**

This policy will be distributed to all new students upon entrance into their school, and annually to returning students, parents/guardians, and staff at the beginning of every school year. It is also a part of the Connections Organization Schools Student & Parent Handbook, Faculty Handbook, and each school's website.

## **SCHOOL CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you would like further information, or have any questions or concerns, please contact the Principal at your student's Connections Organization School.

**Resource Utilized for the Development of this Policy:** “Model School District Policy on Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students – Revised September, 2018” developed by the National Center for Transgender Equality - NCTE - (<https://transequality.org/>) and the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network - GLSEN - (<https://www.glsen.org/>) - nationally recognized LGBTQ advocacy organizations.

In addition, this policy was graciously reviewed by representatives from: Equality Illinois, Illinois Safe Schools Alliance - LGBTQ advocacy/support organizations within the state of Illinois.