



We Must Keep Widening the Circle of Inclusion

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Given the outcome and aftermath of the recent presidential election, you might expect that to be the focus of this column. I will address the moment we are in, but in an unconventional way, by starting with why more than half of the articles in this edition of *American Educator* concern LGBTQ issues in schools. It's not uncommon for this journal to publish multiple articles focused primarily on a single theme, but why LGBTQ issues, and why now? Because the country is at an inflection point. The last 10 years, culminating with the marriage equality decisions in the U.S. Supreme Court, have seen a tidal wave of changes in public opinion in this country, from vilifying to affirming people who are gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning.

These victories and protections for LGBTQ people, including students, tragically but perhaps predictably have been met with a backlash, notably the rash of so-called bathroom bills restricting the rights of transgender and gender-nonconforming people. And we stand at the outset of a new presidential administration, about which many supporters of LGBTQ rights have grave concerns.

Our obligation as educators is to make schools safe and welcoming places for every member of the school community—whether for LGBTQ students and staff, immigrants and refugees, students with special needs, or any other student who for whatever reason feels vulnerable. I feel that very personally. While I am a lesbian who is openly gay and now leads a major labor union, the American Federation of Teachers (and the United Federation of Teachers before that), I was quite closeted as a child and young adult. We must build on the progress we have made toward recognizing and protecting the rights of all people, and that is even more important given the results of the presidential election.

As Michael Sadowski writes in this issue, educators and policymakers must do more than simply ensure that schools are safe for LGBTQ students and staff. The school environment should also be such that everyone feels affirmed and respected. The articles in the following pages about Gay-Straight Alliances and other forms of faculty and peer support

people, others in his administration have expressed antigay views. Indiana Governor and Vice President-elect Mike Pence last year pushed through legislation that allows businesses to refuse to serve gay customers and enables corporations to deny insurance coverage to LGBTQ people. Trump's choice to head the Education Department, Betsy DeVos, and her family have given

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show effective ways schools can promote the social, emotional, physical, and academic well-being of LGBTQ students. Public schools often lead the way for the broader society in modeling inclusiveness and pluralism.

We cannot mandate or legislate tolerance and acceptance. But we can pass laws and policies that prohibit discrimination, and, as history has shown, attitudes will begin to shift. The Office for Civil Rights in President Obama's Education Department has urged schools to extend antibullying policies to cover LGBTQ students. The office cited Title IX, the federal law that prohibits discrimination based on gender, to protect the right of transgender students to use the bathrooms and locker rooms that correspond to the gender they identify with. The Supreme Court ruling that the Constitution guarantees a right to same-sex marriage stated that "No longer may this liberty be denied" to gays and lesbians. But they are denied other liberties, and comprehensive federal nondiscrimination protections still must be put in place.

Many people are worried that recent progress could be reversed in Donald Trump's administration. While Trump is not known for personal antipathy for gay

hundreds of thousands of dollars to groups that push "conversion therapy" and other antigay views. Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions, whom Trump has selected to serve as attorney general, the nation's top law enforcement official, has a record so hostile to gay rights that the Human Rights Campaign gave him a zero percent voting record. And when Trump's chief strategist, Steve Bannon, headed up *Breitbart News*, the website ran articles with headlines like "Gay Rights Have Made Us Dumber, It's Time to Get Back in the Closet."

The recent presidential election exposed troubling fault lines and unleashed alarming demonstrations of hatred and bigotry. But the story of America, at its best, is one of an ever-widening circle of inclusion, with each generation showing a greater openness to communities once excluded. Trump said he will be president for all Americans, millions of whom are LGBTQ and many millions more of whom are people who love and support them. Trump and his administration must protect the rights of all people—regardless of their race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity—and help everyone feel safe and welcome as they go about their lives, particularly in our public schools.