

TALKING ABOUT



Transgender Youth Participation in Sports



INTRODUCTION

Young people learn many important life lessons in sports: leadership, confidence, self-respect, self-discipline, what it means to be part of a team, and much more. Sports and athletics are an important part of education—something no child should be denied simply because of who they are.

As anti-LGBTQ opponents seek to ban transgender youth from participating in K-12 school sports, this guide provides layered approaches for elevating conversations with conflicted audiences about sports participation, addressing unfamiliarity and concerns, and showing why banning kids from the educational benefits of sports is harmful both to transgender youth and to all young people.

Note: The approaches in this guide are intended for general use. If speaking about a particular case or proposed ban, contact the relevant organizations for more details.

APPROACH #1: EMPHASIZE SHARED VALUES

Sports are an important part of many people's lives and communities. Ground your conversations in key values people associate with sports broadly—*fairness and safety*—and with school sports in particular: *teamwork, sportsmanship, leadership, self-respect, self-discipline, relationship-building, perseverance, and more*. These lifelong benefits and educational priorities are what make sports so important to young people.

- *We all want sports to be fair and student athletes to be safe.*
- *Kids learn a lot of important life lessons in sports: leadership, confidence, self-respect, and what it means to be part of a team.*
- *Transgender kids, like other students, should have the same chances to learn teamwork, sportsmanship, leadership and self-discipline, and to build a sense of belonging with their peers.*

APPROACH #2: HELP PEOPLE NAVIGATE THEIR UNFAMILIARITY AND CONCERNS

With their bans on transgender youth in sports, anti-LGBTQ opponents seek to target transgender youth for discrimination, harassment, and exclusion—arguing that transgender girls must not be allowed to participate in sports with other girls, or that transgender boys must not be allowed to participate with other boys. These attacks can result in fear-based reactions and zero-sum thinking in conflicted audiences.

This is why our conversations are so important. We have the opportunity to help people sort through the complicated feelings they often experience when it comes to transgender youth and sports participation. People want to do right by both transgender and non-transgender young people, and we can point toward solutions that allow them to do both.

It's often helpful to start with an acknowledgement of the initial unfamiliarity many people have when it comes to transgender youth and sports. Acknowledging this unfamiliarity can allow people to focus less on their own discomfort by helping them realize that the unfamiliarity they may feel is normal—and that it is not a reason to support policies that hurt transgender kids:

- *A lot of people aren't sure what they think when it comes to transgender youth and sports—and when something's unfamiliar, it's natural to have questions. But we can all agree that transgender kids should be treated with dignity and respect, just like everyone else.*

Next, we can emphasize how blanket bans undermine efforts by school districts and sports associations to navigate these complicated questions. Politicians should not be allowed to take these decisions away based on their desire to harm transgender youth.

- *When it comes to transgender youth and sports, some people want a simple solution. But this is a complicated issue, and a blanket ban on transgender youth isn't what we want or need. School districts and sports associations are already making rules about participation in different sports at different levels, including for transgender youth—but the politicians behind these bans are trying to stop that from happening. We can work toward policies rooted in fairness at the same time as we reject these sports bans that are designed to hurt transgender kids.*

It can also help to remind people of the wide range of sports that young people play—and how bans violate common sense by forcing schools to treat every sport, every grade level, and every kind of participation the same:

- *This ban would force schools to treat archery, badminton, and e-sports the same as football and rugby—and treat middle school intramural sports the same as championship-level high school athletics. We all want sports to be fair, which is why there are different rules for different sports at different levels and ages. Those rules should be based on fairness, not a desire to discriminate. We can keep sports fair and safe without discriminating against kids and banning them from playing because they're transgender.*

When needed, we can also remind audiences that everyday school sports are not, and should not be, regulated the same way as the Olympics and similar elite athletic fields:

- *Applying regulations meant for elite athletics to all students is unnecessary. Local schools and athletic associations across the nation have already created policies that both protect transgender youth and ensure a level playing field for all students—and they're working. And they've done it without blanket policies that would require schools to subject a 13-year-old transgender girl to invasive harassment simply because she wants to be part of her school's badminton, volleyball, or archery team.*

APPROACH #3: ILLUSTRATE THE HARMS OF SPORTS BANS

Sports bans aim to harm transgender young people and deny them the chance to thrive and learn—but the harms of these bans also go well beyond that. Enforcing a ban opens the door for all girls, including girls who are not transgender, to face invasive scrutiny of their bodies. These blanket bans create a license for accusations, humiliating investigations, and suspicion of any girl who doesn't conform to stereotypes, making sports less safe and less accessible for everyone:

- *This ban would invite anyone to call for a “gender check” on any girl who wants to play sports if they think she is “too tall,” “too strong,” or “too good.” It would require young girls to answer invasive personal questions or even undergo physical inspections by strangers just because they want to play sports. What girl is going to work hard to excel in sports if it means she could be publicly harassed and accused of being male or transgender?*

The politicians behind these bans are also trying to overturn school policies across the country that help ensure transgender students have the ability to learn in an environment free from discrimination:

- *Schools across the country know that transgender students, like any student, thrive when they're treated with dignity and respect. When school officials recognize that a transgender girl is a girl during the school day, but then are forced by politicians to treat her as if she's a boy when sports practice starts, it's hurtful to the student and disrupts the school's policy of treating all kids fairly.*

We can close our conversations about sports bans by reminding people of the shared values at the heart of allowing transgender kids to be part of sports, while also establishing how hurtful it is to deny kids the chance to participate in such an important part of their education:

- *Transgender kids want the chance to play sports for the same reason other kids do: to be a part of a team where they feel like they belong. We shouldn't discriminate against kids and ban them from playing simply because they're transgender.*
- *When we tell transgender girls that they can't play girls' sports—or transgender boys that they can't play boys' sports—they miss out on this vital childhood experience and all the lessons of teamwork, sportsmanship, and self-discipline it teaches.*
- *As a nation, we decided long ago that discrimination is wrong and that everyone should have the same opportunities to succeed in life. That includes ensuring that transgender youth have the same opportunity as their classmates to fully participate in school, thrive, and prepare for their future.*

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Emphasize the values of sports—especially teamwork—for all youth. Talk about the ways in which transgender students are parts of sports teams—part of a group of students who are learning important lessons about sportsmanship, collaboration, relationship-building, friendship, and teamwork. Avoid examples where transgender students are isolated from their teammates or not part of their team; such examples do less to highlight why participation in school sports is so vital for young people in the first place.

Elevate transgender youth alongside their non-transgender teammates and/or coaches. People want and need to hear from transgender youth. Storytelling that shows transgender youth and their teammates working together, navigating initial unfamiliarity, and ultimately embodying the values of teamwork that sports are meant to instill can be especially helpful to audiences who are less familiar with these issues. Coaches of teams that include transgender youth can also be important voices alongside those students.

For some unfamiliar audiences, it may be important to clarify what being transgender means. When needed, describe what it means to be transgender with accessible, easy-to-understand descriptions and concepts that build on people's own lived experience of gender—and also emphasize the vital importance of family support for transgender youth.

- *Transgender youth grow up knowing deep down that their sex at birth doesn't match who they know they are inside. With the love and support of their family, they can thrive and transition to living as the gender they know themselves to be.*

Don't descend into name-calling. Calling opponents of protections for transgender students “bigoted” or “hateful” can alienate those who are honestly wrestling with the issues. Using measured, relatable language does more to create empathy and a sense of how opponents' efforts hurt transgender youth and broader school communities.