

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.

Anti-LGBTQ opponents have been introducing legislation seeking to ban transgender youth from participating in K-12 school sports. They have also argued that LGBTQ people should be denied nondiscrimination protections at the federal and state levels because these protections would allow transgender youth to participate in sports.

This guide provides four layered approaches for elevating conversations 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

Start by elevating the values of school sports—teamwork, sportsmanship, leadership, self-respect, self-discipline, relationship-building, perseverance, fitness and more—that are at the center of this conversation. These lifelong benefits and educational priorities are what make sports so important to young people.

- *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, deserve the same chances to learn teamwork, sportsmanship, leadership and self-discipline, and to build a sense of belonging with their peers. 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 important childhood experience and all the lessons it teaches.*

APPROACH #2: HELP PEOPLE NAVIGATE THEIR UNFAMILIARITY AND CONCERNS

In their attempts to create statewide bans on transgender youth in sports, anti-LGBTQ opponents seek to turn people against transgender youth—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. This can result in fear-based reactions from conflicted audiences, which we can help them navigate.

Start with an acknowledgement of the initial unfamiliarity many people have when it comes to transgender youth. This

allows people to focus less on their own discomfort by helping them realize that the unfamiliarity they may feel is normal, and that others may feel the same:

- *It can be hard to understand what it means to be transgender, especially if you've never met a transgender person. And it's common to have questions at first. But we can all agree that transgender kids should be treated with dignity and respect, just like everyone else.*

For some, it may also 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.*

Elevate inclusive policies to soothe fears created by opponents. Anti-LGBTQ opponents often claim that if transgender youth are able to play sports, other students (e.g., non-transgender girls) are harmed. In fact, thousands of schools across the country have successfully implemented policies that treat all youth, including transgender youth, fairly—and these policies work:

- *Local schools and athletic associations across the nation are already creating policies that protect transgender youth and ensure a level playing field for all students, and they're working. Banning transgender youth from participating in school sports undermines those efforts.*

Opponents also stoke fears that best practice health care for transgender youth creates an unfair advantage in sports. **If you need to address this concern, do so simply and factually by pointing out that such health care, like health care for other student athletes, is conducted under the supervision of a physician:**

- *Transgender students undergoing medical care like hormone therapy are doing so under the supervision of a physician. When playing sports, they would have to abide by the same rules as everyone else and should be allowed to participate just like any other student who has been prescribed medicine by their doctor is allowed to do.*

It may also be necessary to address opponents' efforts to fuel anti-transgender sentiment through false claims about transgender youth and Title IX:

- *Title IX is vitally important when it comes to girls' sports. If we want to support girls' sports, we should be providing more funding and more opportunities to play, and also creating stronger laws to protect female athletes from harassment and abuse—not banning transgender youth from participating in school sports with their peers.*

Some opponents argue that transgender youth—and potentially all youth—should be subjected to invasive testing in order to play sports. **When needed, remind audiences that everyday K-12 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 test, for example, a 13-year-old transgender girl who simply wants to be part of her school's badminton, volleyball, or archery team.*

It can also help to remind people that the overwhelming majority of transgender youth don't even play at elite levels:

- *We all want to ensure a level playing field when it comes to youth sports. The truth is, every child is different in different ways—which is why some girls excel at gymnastics, others at volleyball, some at basketball, and others at soccer. Success in school sports is really about practice, self-discipline, access to good coaches and facilities, and even money to pay for outside training. The overwhelming majority of transgender youth, like most kids, don't even play at elite levels. They just want to play everyday school sports and participate with their peers.*

APPROACH #3: ILLUSTRATE THE HARMS OF BANNING TRANSGENDER YOUTH FROM SPORTS

At the end of the day, anti-transgender sports bans aim to harm transgender children and deny them the chance to thrive and learn. They also seek to overturn school policies across the country that are helping ensure that transgender students are able to learn in an environment free from discrimination.

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 opportunity 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 because they're transgender.*
- *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 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.*

- *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, prepare for their future, and thrive.*

APPROACH #4 (WHEN NEEDED): REINFORCE WHAT NON-DISCRIMINATION PROTECTIONS ARE REALLY ABOUT

In some cases, attacks on transgender youth in sports aren't about statewide bans, but rather about anti-LGBTQ opponents trying to defeat non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ people at the state and/or federal level. **When talking about this issue in a non-discrimination context, we can close the conversation by reinforcing the urgent need to protect LGBTQ people from discrimination in housing, public accommodations, and health care—while reaffirming the core values at the heart of this discussion.**

- *But let's remember what this is really about: making sure LGBTQ people are treated fairly across all areas of life, not unfairly kicked out of a restaurant, denied an apartment, or refused the health care they need—just because of who they are. All of us, including LGBTQ people, deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.*

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.

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.