



Supporting LGBTI children and young people

Case Study: Bunbury Senior High School

This case study provides an example of the practical strategies schools can implement to create inclusive and supportive school communities for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) students.

Overview

Bunbury Senior High School (Bunbury SHS) is an independent public school located in Bunbury, Western Australia. In 2018, the school hosted a group of 16 LGBTI and non-LGBTI students as one of the Commissioner for Children and Young People's 2018 Advisory Committees, in order to inform the work of the Commissioner's office on the needs and experiences of LGBTI children and young people.

Background to LGBTI inclusion at the school

"We know that students who identify as LGBTI are at a much higher risk for self-harm and suicide. They are also less likely to ask for help, as they're often very afraid of the reactions of others, especially close family and friends. So they are a hidden group and they are at risk. We needed to make sure that all students knew our school was safe and inclusive." - Staff member, Bunbury SHS

In 2011, school staff responded to a number of students who were questioning their gender identity and sexuality. The school were concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of some of these students, and felt that as staff, they lacked the training and resources to respond sensitively and appropriately to these students, and give them the support they required. The school engaged a local LGBTI organisation called True Colours - an initiative of Uniting Care West that was providing a social and support group for LGBTI young people in the area at the time. True Colours was engaged by Bunbury SHS to offer support to school students and work alongside the school to create a more inclusive school environment for LGBTI students.

In 2012, Bunbury SHS began facilitating activities within the school with True Colours' support to raise visibility of the LGBTI community. For example, they ran craft activities with an LGBTI educative theme and flew the Pride flag on days of LGBTI significance. Showing such open support and inclusion for LGBTI students resulted in the school gaining some media attention and also elicited some criticism from a small number of parents at the school.

In light of the attention, some queried whether there needed to be a specific focus on LGBTI inclusion, given the school already had anti-bullying policies and processes in place. However, they committed to this area of focus after better understanding the needs and experiences of LGBTI students.

"After meeting with the True Colours staff and understanding how young people are often closeted and can't seek support for homophobic or transphobic bullying at school for fear of being outed, and the high percentage of self-harm and suicide amongst LGBTQI youth, [the school leadership] saw how a more inclusive school environment was needed for those students." - Staff member, Bunbury SHS

Overview of the school's LGBTI inclusion strategies

"We have developed a reputation in the South West for being inclusive, so much so that students have deliberately enrolled in our school because they know they will be supported and looked after, particularly those involved in gender transition." - Staff member, Bunbury SHS

Bunbury SHS has implemented a range of strategies to promote and support the inclusion of students who are LGBTI. These strategies include having:

- Clear and public commitment from the school.
- Inclusive policies and processes.
- Staff training and education.
- Visibility, safe spaces, and support.

Clear and public commitment from the school

Bunbury SHS has made clear and explicit commitments to supporting LGBTI inclusion, including in their public documents (e.g. annual reports, business plans), as well as the public dialogue in which the school engages. The school's vision and value statements reflect the importance of celebrating diversity and equal opportunities and explicitly references it's commitment to ensuring equal opportunities for people regardless of gender and sexuality.

The school is a member school of Inclusive Education WA, which provides resources and support for schools across Western Australia to ensure their school environments are safe and inclusive for LGBTI students, staff and families.

With a clear commitment from the school leadership, individual teachers have felt empowered to be able to proactively support their students and promote LGBTI inclusion in the classroom.

"Knowing you can do these things and have the support of your school. There is that worry of having a parent say 'Why are you doing this?' and 'Why are you teaching this to our students?', and I know my principal is going to back me up

and say 'this is the way we do things around here...we need to be supportive'."
- Teacher, Bunbury SHS

In the year that the school was engaged as one of the Commissioner for Children and Young People's Advisory Committees the school publicly showed its support for LGBTI students by hosting a free public seminar on *Supporting LGBTI children and young people in schools*, supported the filming of video resources and spoke on radio about the importance of LGBTI inclusive and supportive schools.

Inclusive policies, processes and procedures

The school has made a number of changes to internal policies and processes to better consider the needs of LGBTI students at the school. This has included:

- School uniform policies and dress codes that allow for non-gender specific clothing items.
- School ball guidelines that refer to partners and do not assume gender of partners. (The school is planning to make the School Ball guidelines even more inclusive and explicitly state that same-sex couples are welcome at their School ball).
- School bullying policies that explicitly make statements around homophobic comments as verbal bullying.

When an individual student identifies as being trans or gender diverse the school will:

- Work with the individual student to identify their support needs and develop a plan for them at school, for example, preferences around toilet use, participation in gendered activities (e.g. sports).
- Ensure staff are aware of the individual's names and pronoun.
- Ensure school reports and forms use the student's preferred name and pronouns and work around legal requirements for this (e.g. developing two school reports to reflect legal name and preferred name).

Staff training and education

"We don't have exact figures [on the number of LGBTI people], but if it's roughly 10% of population, I just expect that in a class of 30, I maybe have around 3 students who identify in the LGBTI community." - Teacher, Bunbury SHS

The school initially engaged True Colours to run professional development training for staff in 2012 and 2013. This was focused on improving understanding about LGBTI diversity and developing the capacity of staff to support students who discuss or are openly questioning their sexuality or gender. Staff have also been encouraged to challenge and address homophobic and transphobic comments they hear between students or around the school, and while this has improved, continues to be an area the school identifies a need to continue to work on.

Visibility, safe spaces and support

The school has implemented a range of initiatives to increase LGBTI visibility and representation within the school, and ensure students have access to safe spaces and support when they need it.

Safe spaces

The school established a Diversity Club in 2012 as a space for LGBTI students to meet and come together in a safe environment. Initially the group started out small, however has grown in size over the last few years as it has expanded its focus to be for any student (i.e. LGBTI or non-LGBTI) who wants to support LGBTI equal rights, or show their support for LGBTI students within the school. Whilst LGBTI diversity is the primary focus of the group, the Diversity Club also promotes inclusion and other kinds of diversity, including cultural diversity.

"The main purpose we had when we started it was to have a safe space for kids who were either LGBTI themselves or who had friends or family who were. To give them somewhere they could come and be themselves and not feel judged. We called it the Diversity Club to be more open to kids who aren't out, or kids who just want to be supportive to their friends." - Staff member, Bunbury SHS

The Diversity Club meets weekly during lunchtime and is an open space for all students to attend. During the session the group holds discussions about relevant topics, plans activities for the school to promote diversity, raises money for LGBTI supports or charities, and provides a casual space for students to hang out.

"[Diversity Club] is good, because you've got people who can come together in a space where everyone feels the same. And we can talk about things that maybe we wouldn't be able to talk about in other school environments." - Student, Bunbury SHS

Visibility strategies

"The events and awareness raising we do helps to reinforce the message that our school is a safe and inclusive environment." - Staff member, Bunbury SHS

The school, primarily through the Diversity Club, has run a number of events and activities to show their support of LGBTI students and acknowledging LGBTI diversity. This included asking all teachers wear purple on Wear It Purple Day to show their support for LGBTI students, hosting cake stalls and activities during Diversity Week and fundraising for local organisations supporting LGBTI young people. The school also had a chalk art activity where students could use chalk to draw and write messages on the ground in support of LGBTI people.

A number of staff at the school have also put up LGBTI resources or posters in their classrooms, student services building and staff offices, as a way of providing visual cues to students so they know they are supported.

"When I go into a classroom and see a [LGBTI] poster...I feel safe and feel I can trust that teacher." - Student, Bunbury SHS

Teachers also use curriculum content, such as written and visual texts in English classes that include LGBTI characters as a way of promoting the representation of LGBTI people.

"If you're inclusive in your classroom, if you include LGBTI literature in English, if in history you include figures who stood out and changed things, it could make people that are different - even if they're closeted - to feel included, and create a friendly atmosphere in the classroom. They won't dread going to that classroom. They will feel a little more safe in there." - Student, Bunbury SHS

Support

A small group of school staff members facilitate the Diversity Club, and students know these teachers are safe and available to reach out to about issues relating to gender identity or sexuality. Students also have access to the school psychologist (who also facilitates the Diversity Club), as well as counselling and other supports at the school.



Some student members of the Diversity Club