

CARE-ED

California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education

Understanding Gender-Related Parental Notification Policies September, 2023

What are gender-related “parental notification” policies?

School districts throughout California are facing pressure to implement or modify their district policies to ensure parents are “notified” if their child requests to use a different name or pronoun at school. As of September 1, 2023, four California school districts ([Chino Valley](#), [Murietta Valley](#), [Anderson Union High School District](#), and [Temecula Valley Unified](#)) have adopted these policies, and [Orange Unified School District](#) has a vote scheduled for September. In response, the [California Attorney General filed a lawsuit](#) challenging the legality of these policies, arguing that they violate California’s anti-discrimination laws.

Where did these policies come from?

Gender-related parental notification policies are part of a [broader legislative agenda](#) that targets lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and questioning (LGBTQ+) people in schools. Since 2018, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced nationwide ([National Education Policy Center, 2023](#)), with almost [500 anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced during the 2023 legislative session](#) alone, more than 200 of which focus specifically on limiting access to inclusive educational environments. Many of these bills and policies are sponsored, advocated, or endorsed by nationally recognized anti-LGBTQ [hate groups](#).

Why are these policies being introduced in California?

Advocates of these policy changes suggest that they are necessary to protect parents’ rights and ensure they are involved in their children’s lives. However, every public school teacher is already legally required to report cases of suspected child abuse or neglect, and every school district in California already has policies in place that give parents access to students’ academic and disciplinary records; notify parents of issues related to absenteeism, school safety, bullying, and discipline; and engage parents as partners when making decisions at the school- and district-level. Additionally, California Education Code 48980 already requires all school districts to provide parents with written information about their rights and responsibilities at the beginning of each school year.

Thus, these new policies are *not* intended to protect children or notify parents overall, but are specifically designed to target and forcibly “out” students who are - or are perceived to be - LGBTQ+.

What are the risks of expanding parental notification policies to include students’ chosen name or gender identities?

Research indicates that schools - and some homes - can be hostile places for students who are - or are perceived to be - LGBTQ+, with dramatic effects on LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students alike.

- In a recent national study, 82% of LGBTQ+ students indicated they did not feel safe at school due to name-calling, bullying and harassment, exclusion from curricular and extracurricular activity, and even physical and sexual assault. Almost three-quarters of students reported hearing anti-LGBTQ+ remarks from teachers and school staff ([GLSEN, 2021](#)).
- Anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes have dramatic effects on LGBTQ+ students' mental health and academic experiences, leading to increased absenteeism, lower grade point averages, more disciplinary referrals, lower levels of self-esteem, and higher levels of depression. LGBTQ+ students are also 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers: nationally one LGBTQ+ young person attempts suicide every 45 seconds ([Trevor Project, 2021](#)).
- Many LGBTQ+ young people have supportive parents and home environments, but others do not. Far too many LGBTQ+ young people report being rejected or threatened by their families, leading to increased rates of homelessness, running away from, or being kicked out by unaccepting family members ([Trevor Project, 2022](#)).

Having access to supportive educators saves lives.

Research shows that LGBTQ+ students with supportive educators at their school sites feel safer; miss less school; perform better academically; report better psychological well-being; have higher self esteem and lower levels of depression; and are less likely to have considered suicide over the past year ([GLSEN, 2021](#)).

There are many reasons why a young person might talk to a teacher about something before they talk to their parent: they may want advice about how to bring up what they fear will be a difficult conversation, suggestions for ways to diffuse teasing, or simply need a healthy and safe sounding board. Knowing they can come to their teachers if they need help or support provides a critical lifeline for students.

Requiring teachers to “out” students is dangerous, unnecessary, and creates an inhospitable climate for all students.

- The use of a nickname or gender-neutral name may be the first step in a students' coming out process, or may simply be a case of a teenager differentiating their school persona from their childhood or home persona. Requiring teachers to report students who use a new nickname, or who they perceive as gender questioning or non-conforming, creates an unnecessary climate of suspicion and limits young peoples' access to safe and supportive adults.
- Requiring teachers to investigate or “out” students who are - or are perceived to be - LGBTQ+ diverts time and resources from teaching and learning. It does not protect students from bullying, and places LGBTQ+ students at academic, emotional, and physical risk.

Where can parents, educators and policymakers learn more about supporting LGBTQ+ youth in schools?

In addition to organizations like [GLSEN](#), the [Human Rights Campaign](#), [PFLAG](#), and the [Trevor Project](#), there are also national consortiums of educators who have published research briefs about ways to support LGBTQ+ young people in schools, including [Support LGBTQ Education](#) and [Support Trans Youth](#). You can also learn more state-specific information by reviewing the Los Angeles Times' August 2023 summary of [LGBTQ+ students' rights in California](#), and updates from the [California Teachers' Association](#).

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