



Gegi's Tips for Gender-Friendly School Athletics

1. Learn what gender-based discrimination in school athletics looks like. Every student has the right to participate in athletics, and try out for a team or use a changeroom (etc.) that they know to be right for them, gender-wise. No one may ask a transgender student to try out for a team or join an intramural league that does not align with their gender identity, as this may be gender identity discrimination. Asking transgender students to provide legal or medical documentation in order to participate may also be gender identity discrimination. Once a transgender student has joins team, they may still experience harassment from other players or staff, which by law must be addressed. Because all Ontarians also have gender expression human rights protections, students who aren't transgender but who are gender non-conforming also have the right to play without changing how they express their gender, or wearing a gendered uniform if it does not match their gender expression. You can learn more about gender identity and gender expression human rights in Ontario at gegi.ca.

2. Be honest about your starting place. The world of sport has long been gender-segregated. School athletics staff have likely come up through sport cultures with embedded expectations about performance, fairness, etc. that reference common assumptions about gender and sex. There are a lot of opinions circulating about transgender athletes, but these opinions tend to exist independently of research which, for example, shows greater variation *among* women athletes in terms of performance than *between* men and women. It's likely that staff need professional development in order to work toward a gender-friendly school athletics program, and Gegi recommends opportunities particularly tailored to sport. An exemplar is the training required by the Ontario Hockey Federation (<https://www.ohf.on.ca/coaches/gender-identity-training>).

3. Make a plan. There are transgender students in every school, whether staff know or not. Some are boys, some are girls, some are nonbinary (neither boys or girls), and some are gender-fluid (with a gender identity and/or gender expression that changes). And some of these students are into sports! So, make a plan that prepares staff and keeps them all on the same page. For example, what will you do when a trans boy shows up at a boys' team tryout, or signs up for boys' intramurals? Hint: unless he is facing discrimination or harassment, the answer is 'nothing,' because a transgender student is the only judge of which option (e.g., the boys' team, the girls' team, all-gender intramurals, etc.) is best for them. However, as transgender students often experience harassment at school, including in athletics, it's important for staff to keep an eye out. What will you do when a nonbinary student (i.e., who is neither a boy or a girl) wants to try out? One idea from Thames Valley DSB's (2018) *Supporting trans and gender diverse students and staff* policy is to give that student a choice of one gendered team, per sport, per year (e.g., they can't play on *both* the boys' and girls' soccer teams), but not to hold them to a single gender across different sports (e.g., they may play girls' soccer and boys' basketball). Until there are all-gender athletics in Ontario high schools, this will likely have to be the way.

4. Go out of your way to let transgender and/or gender non-conforming students know that school sports are also for them. Otherwise, they might never show up. Sport is a fraught place for many transgender people. As a result, trans students probably assume that your school's athletics program is not a space where they will be welcome, comfortable, and safe. One way to address this assumption is *showing* that your athletics program, intramurals, etc. are committed to welcoming transgender and/or gender non-conforming students (more on this below). A teacher (etc.) who has formed a trusting relationship with a transgender and/or gender



non-conforming student can also directly check in and ask if they'd like to play a sport, etc. If you know that a trans student's parents or guardians affirm who they are, checking in with them about their student's interest can be a good idea, but this should never replace or supersede the student's own articulation of their needs.

5. Change school culture by visibly, loudly, and unrelentingly showing your support for gender-friendly athletics. Go out of your way as staff to signal, all the time, that you *anticipate* transgender and/or gender non-conforming student-athletes, so a student knows they won't have to do all the heavy-lifting. If there is no related policy in your board, create your own and ensure it is easy to find and readily accessible. Put up signage near washrooms and changerooms which indicate (kindly yet firmly) that people in here are the best judge of where they belong so mind your own business. Staff can model a shift to gender-inclusive language when addressing a team, saying "players" or "team" instead of "ladies" or "gentlemen." Gendered team uniforms can be changed, perhaps in a school-wide design contest that loudly proclaims why this is necessary. If/while gendered team uniforms persist, *every* student can be given the choice of which uniform they'd like to wear. School announcements about athletics tryouts or intramurals can explicitly include a welcome to transgender students. Gegi is confident that you can come up with more ways to show your support, and gegi.ca is here to help!

6. Make sure athletics staff understand their obligation to respect student privacy. Staff may not know why a student is using a particular changeroom – whether or not it is an all-gender one shared with staff – and do not get to know why. Students who are transgender and/or who experience changerooms (and washrooms) as unsafe places may not be out to staff, and may not present in the ways staff expect. A best practice is to not ask, and simply let be. Furthermore, a trans student's experience may or may not include gender-affirming medical treatment, and this is not something they are required to disclose to school staff, under any circumstances. If staff do come to possess medical information about a transgender student, at no point should any trans student be asked medical questions unless these questions directly pertain to their safety (e.g., sprains, concussions, etc.). If you happen to collect any information about a student's gender (including legal name, if applicable), ensure it is kept secure and confidential, as this can be vital to their safety. Quick tip: ask for preferred names on team tryout or intramural sign-up sheets, and ensure all public lists only use preferred names, regardless of what is contained in a student's school record.

7. If a student objects to playing alongside another student because they are transgender, do not penalize the transgender student. Consider how this strategy for addressing 'someone-is-in-the-wrong-washroom' complaints can be applied in the case of athletics: "are they doing something to make you feel unsafe? No? Then move along and mind your business. If you like, the all-gender washroom is down the hall." Here, behaviour, not gender identity, is grounds for removing someone from a space. If a transgender student is playing by the rules of the sport, and with sportsmanship and consideration for others on the field (etc.), they have the right to play on the team that is the best fit for them. If another student objects, they can be supported in identifying another opportunity to play the sport, but their preference to not play alongside a transgender student-athlete has no bearing on whether their transgender peer can play. Bear in mind that perceptions of any athlete's skill are informed by assumptions about their gender (e.g., gender non-conforming or 'more masculine' girls are more likely to be viewed as 'playing rough'). This means that even the most 'objective' complaint about a transgender student-athlete is likely based on misconceptions.



About gegi.ca

gegi.ca is an Ontario-based online knowledge mobilization hub about gender expression and gender identity human rights protections and advocacy created by Dr. Lee Airton (Faculty of Education, Queen's University), Dr. Kyle Kirkup (Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa) and their research team. For more information, visit www.gegi.ca/about.