UNGENDERING YOUR LANGUAGE

Thank you for reading this handout. Just by picking this up, you have shown a willingness to learn more and provide support to LGBTQ+ students and families in your school, and that matters. We created this handout as a resource for teachers and educational professionals who want to create an inclusive environment in their schools, regardless of a student's gender identity or sexuality. Here, you will find suggestions for ways to un-gender the language you use and create a dialogue that is inclusive and affirming for all.

Why should I "un-gender" my language?

From the very beginning, many languages (particularly English) have used masculine nouns and pronouns to represent groups that definitely are not exclusively male. Even the Declaration of Independence uses the phrase "all men are created equal." As a society, we interpret the word "men" in that context to refer to both men and women, and yet, the distinction is important to make for the sake of equity. How much sooner would women have been able to vote if the drafters of the Declaration stated from the beginning that "all people are created equal?" It has also become standard practice for most academic writing. Even the APA, MLA and Chicago Manual have now been updated to use gender neutral language.

Colors don't have genders and toys are for everyone.

Un-gendering your language is also an important step to building inclusive school environments for students and families. Assuming that every student has a "mom and dad" has long been viewed as problematic. Now, it's time to take that one step further and stop assuming that everyone wearing pink is a girl or that only boys play with trucks.

Okay, that makes sense, but how do I do that?

We get that this is not something you can change overnight. After all, for most people, this is a lifetime of habits and English classes to overcome. Like most things though, the thought really counts. Once you start trying to work on un-gendering your language, your students and families will see how much their comfort and inclusion means to you and this will help to build trust. If you mess up now and then, it's ok! Just acknowledge it and move on. No one expects you to get it all right immediately.

What if I am not sure about someone's gender? How do I address them?

This is a very important question. The truth is, you can never know someone's gender without asking them (or consulting their pronoun pin, name badge or screen name). Assuming someone's gender based on their clothes, their favorite color, the way they wear their hair, or any other visualized gender stereotype does not honor the fact that gender is a part of someone's internal identity.

PS
PROUD SCHOOLS

Help me understand the pronoun thing! Isn't it bad grammar to use they/them?

Actually, it's not bad grammar at all. The use of they as a pronoun means that it can substitute for any noun and still be correct. Just because our language provides gender specific pronouns does not mean that those are the only correct pronouns to use. For now, the most appropriate pronouns to use, when in doubt, are they, them or theirs. For example, the sentence "He was not in homeroom this morning." can very easily become "They were not in homeroom this morning."

While we're talking about pronouns, why does everyone have to share their pronouns all the time now? I don't feel like I should have to do that because I am not a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

It might seem like there isn't a reason to share your pronouns if you are cis-gendered, however, sharing pronouns is a great way to demonstrate to students and families that you are a safe person who is willing to accept them for who they are. The reason that we encourage you to ask for other people's pronouns and preferred names is also because this is a signal that you respect other people's identities. The only guaranteed way to know you are addressing someone in the most respectful and affirming way is to ask them how they would like to be addressed.

Can you give me some specific examples of ways to un-gender my language?

Absolutely!

Instead of…	Try…
Girl or Boy	Young Person, Individual, Student, Kid, or Teen
Man or Woman	Person, Individual, Adult
Mom and/or Dad	Grownup(s), Parent(s), Loved One
Boyfriend or Girlfriend	Partner, Significant Other
Sister or Brother	Sibling
Son or Daughter	Child
Grandmother or Grandfather	Grandparent
Granddaughter or Grandson	Grandchild
Niece or Nephew	Nibling, Chibling, Sibkid or just "My sibling's child"
Mr. or Mrs.	Mx. (pronounced "mix")
Hero or Heroine	Heroix
Freshman	First-year Student or 9th grader
Upperclassman	Upper-level Student
Human	Person
Mankind	People or Humankind