

WEST SIDE STORY

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GENDER.

Q gender

Q gender identity

Q gender vs. sex

Q gender dysphoria

Q gender in the 21st century

A look into the challenges trans and non-binary students face at West High.



GENDER.

West Side Story explores the experiences of trans and non-binary students at West High.

BY ZAIRA AHMAD, ELLA DE YOUNG & CAROLINE MASCARDO

The word “trans” has been used in this article instead of “transgender” to be more inclusive. Terms like transgender, transgendered and transsexual have been widely weaponized against the trans community due to the composition of the words themselves.

Gender. Even before a child is born, they are given a label: boy or girl. Excited parents choose clothes and toys based on the social construct that is gender—pink is for girls, blue is for boys. Girls play with Barbies, boys play with trucks. Girls wear dresses, boys wear pants. Society has built gender to be the idea that clothing, personality and objects all fit into one of two categories. However, gender is not the same as sex. Gender is how one describes themselves, whereas sex is determined at birth and only refers to one’s reproductive organs. Society controls neither an individual’s gender nor their name and pronouns.

Q names and pronouns

With the general public becoming more educated about gender, the sharing of pronouns has become more normalized. While the use of they/them pronouns dates back to as early as 1386, society has only begun to recognize them more recently.

Students used to only learn about she/her and he/him pronouns, but now they also learn about they/them and neopronouns, demonstrating how grammar has shifted with societal norms. Contrary to common belief, the use of they/them and all other pronouns is grammatically correct, according to the APA Style Handbook. This includes neopronouns, which are new pronouns used in place of “he,” “she” or “they” (e.g. xe/xem/xyr and ze/hir/hirs).

Although grammatical concepts have evolved, societal norms are still catching up. Teachers try

their best to use students’ correct pronouns, but it can be difficult for students to correct them when necessary. This holds for trans student Hayden Dillon ’24.

“I feel like I often just don’t correct my teachers ... it’s just harder to speak up against [them] because they’re more of an authority figure,” Dillon said.

Although students may add their names and pronouns to Canvas and Infinite Campus, some have taken additional steps to ensure others recognize their identity.

“I changed my Google picture to the trans flag. It’s a sign for some people that [the name in my email] is not actually my name,” Dillon said.

Overall, as an English teacher, Kerri Barnhouse thinks the reason for the grammatical shift in pronoun usage is the normalization of identities beyond the gender binary.

“There’s a way that somebody said was grammatically correct at some point, but we also

know that times have changed and culture has changed,” Barnhouse said. “Our understanding of people has changed, and let’s allow [pronouns] to change with it.”

While teachers make mistakes, Barnhouse feels they have their students’ best interests at heart.

“Teachers work really hard to try to remember [students’ pronouns],” Barnhouse said. “Teachers remind each other about [pronouns]; people share different ways of having kids fill out different forms.”

However, it is not uncommon for an individual to unintentionally misgender another. Haley Jungles, Sex Health Instructor for United Action for Youth, proposes there is a simple way to manage this.

“Ask for people’s pronouns. I don’t assume anyone’s pronouns if I don’t know [their] pronouns or haven’t asked yet. I automatically go with them,” Jungles said.

Pronouns do not always correspond to gender, making it especially important to ask for them. For example, one may identify as male but use they/them pronouns. Jungles believes creating an environment that accepts and understands pronouns should start from a young age.

“I don’t think [students] are ever too young to learn about pronouns. Everyone has pronouns—they need to understand what that means,” Jungles said.

Along with educating students, West High Assistant Principal Maureen Head feels the school is responsible for creating an environment that welcomes everyone.

“It’s our job to have a safe space for kids, to respect their humanity and gender identity, and to correctly pronounce their names,” Head said. “[It is] part of what makes them human, so it’s absolutely important.”

Head sees improvements administrators can make, including setting a positive example to normalize the sharing of pronouns.

“All of the administrators could do a better job with how we model. I’ve seen a lot of people with email signatures that include their pronouns,” Head said. “I just want a really small and simple way for teachers to start including [pronouns].”

Although West tries to create an environment that welcomes all, not everyone understands that pronouns and gender identity do not necessarily correspond. Joseph Polyak ’22, who uses he/they pronouns, sometimes feels conflicted about how others refer to them.

“Maybe I feel compelled to use [he/him pronouns], maybe I want to use [he/him pronouns]. I’m unsure,” Polyak said. “Addressing it can at times feel like sitting in a room across from an oppressively massive and unsettling oil painting.”

As a non-binary student, Andy Ham ’24 believes coming to terms with one’s identity is an ongoing process.

TERMS.

GENDER (N.): a set of identities systemized as feminine or masculine that are assigned to people at birth; a social construct that can be modified or rejected to reflect one’s true self

SEX (N.): a category that is assigned to every person at birth: either male, female or intersex

INTERSEX (ADJ.): someone born with a combination of male and female reproductive organs

TRANS (ADJ.): someone whose gender identity does not align with the gender they were assigned at birth

CISGENDER (ADJ.): someone whose gender identity is the same as their gender assigned at birth

GENDER IDENTITY (N.): how an individual identifies in regards to gender

GENDER EXPRESSION (N.): how an individual communicates their gender through clothing, behavior, etc.

PRONOUNS (N.): words an individual wants to be referred to by (e.g. he/him, she/her, they/them, neopronouns, or a combination of any or all)

QUESTIONING (ADJ.): an individual in the process of exploring their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression

GENDER TRANSITION (N.): the process of asserting one’s gender identity over the gender they were assigned to at birth, whether by medical transition and/or social transition

MISGENDER (V.): referring to a person in a way that does not correctly reflect their gender identity, whether with incorrect pronouns or terms

"Labels and names are not definite; you don't have to stick with anything that you don't want to stick with," Ham said.

Q school environment

Among students, there are varying perspectives on the level of inclusion of trans and non-binary students at West High. Polyak has a more positive view of the climate.

"Overall, I consider [West High] a fairly accepting place that tries to care for each other, and it has a diverse spectrum of people," Polyak said.

In comparison, Ham perceives the West High community as not as considerate as it should be.

"It's not something quite as simple as, 'I don't like you.' Some people can be perfectly clear of that, but here, it's difficult to tell what people really think. That's just true of any place with teenagers," Ham said. "I think they're supportive but don't quite understand all of this."

In recent years, West High traditions have changed to create a more inclusive community. In 2018, a non-traditional homecoming court format, the Heroes of Troy, was introduced to the homecoming dance at West. The former design of homecoming was that a king and queen were the final two people picked. The Heroes of Troy is a gender-neutral way for the student body to recognize six of their classmates without regard to gender categories.

"That felt really good in terms of not having a binary system of nominating kids who are worthy of recognition at school," Head said.

This year, the upperclassmen homecoming events, previously known as the Powderpuff and Manball Games, became the Trojan Games.

"I hope that this is just a small piece of building a more inclusive school," Head said.

While the Heroes of Troy and the Trojan Games were ideas brought up by students, teachers also try to make West High more welcoming. Dot Spoerl, a paraeducator who uses all pronouns, helped paint the various gender identity and sexual orientation flags at the "Welcome to West" sign.

"[The flags are] sparking awareness, sparking conversations, sparking curiosity to [think], 'Maybe I've seen that flag before. I wonder what it means,' and looking into it," Spoerl said. "Or maybe someone is coming into themselves, and they're on an identity journey and seeing those flags can help them understand themselves a little more."

Trans and non-binary individuals at West may also find a sense of understanding and support in COLORS Club. COLORS Club is a community of LGBTQ+ students who come together to simply talk in a comfortable environment.

"[COLORS Club] is just really accepting—it's a safe place to hang out with people who kind of understand me," Dillon said.

Barnhouse, the COLORS Club advisor, witnesses students benefiting from the club.

"[In COLORS Club], I notice that they suddenly come out of their shell, and they become much more social," Barnhouse said. "They feel like they finally have a place."

Resources like the University of Iowa LGBTQ

trans students everywhere," said Calyn Leake, associate director of the clinic.

Q education

Many sources, including school, the internet and peers, contribute to the understanding of gender. Nevertheless, these resources do not provide equal access to the information many trans and non-binary students seek.

Grayson McNamar '24, a trans student, does not feel represented in portions of the health curriculum.

"They leave out transgender [people]. They leave out all of the things that aren't specifically written down in the textbook, which can make for some very interesting, awkward moments," McNamar said.

During West's required trimester-long health course, where students learn about gender identity in the human growth and sexuality unit, a sex health educator from UAY teaches students in health class for a week.

"A lot of those lessons talk about gender identity and sexual orientation, and all of those pieces, so they're very explicitly taught during those portions," said Lindsey Schluckebier, the ICCSD Health Curriculum Coordinator.

Although trans students see progress in the education department, they detect a lack of focus on gender identity and trans inclusion in any curriculum.

"There have definitely been discussions about transgender rights in more open classes, but those have just been fleeting moments," Ham said.

Due to the inadequacy of trans education in schools, many students turn to the internet for more clarification and assistance. For Dillon, the aid of social media during the pandemic gave him a better understanding of his gender.

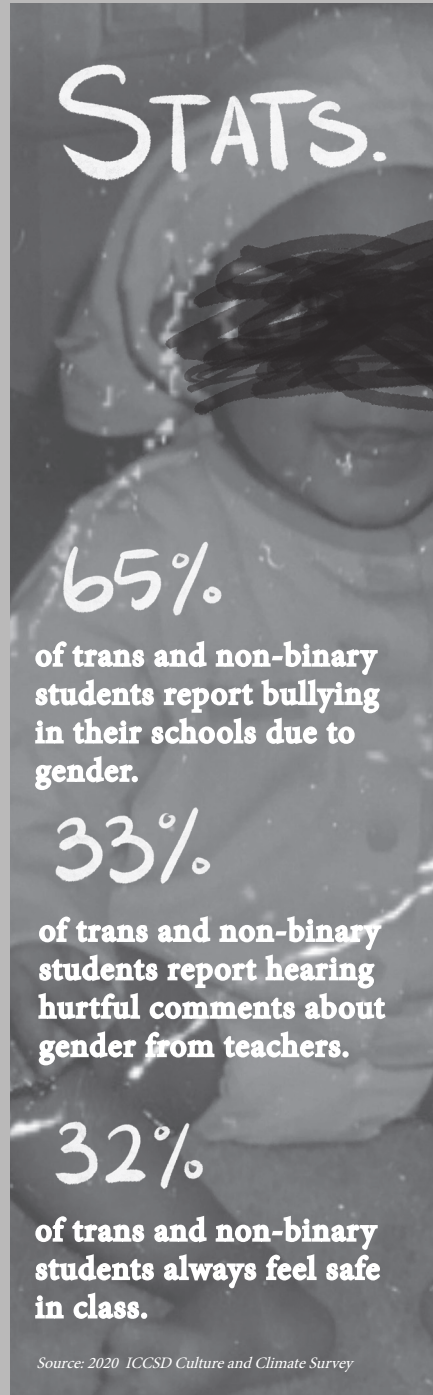
"I started following more LGBTQ+ pages on Instagram, and a lot of them have informational stuff. [I realized] there are these words that I can use to describe myself," Dillon said. "It can make you wonder if all that hadn't happened, would I have ever even realized?"

The school curriculum did not provide much support to McNamar either. The most beneficial source of insight came from his friends.

"[Trans education] is something that should be in our curriculum. It's something that should be widely spread, like in normal conversations or conversations amongst friends—just so people have more of an idea about what they're talking about when they say 'trans' because right now, it's just a label," McNamar said.

Education is ever-evolving.

"[LGBTQ-inclusive education] wasn't really even on our radar 36 years ago when I was in the classroom. That was not something we probably discussed and certainly not something that was part of our instruction," said Diane Schumacher,



Health Clinic also provide a safe space and free mental health care for trans and non-binary students.

"Having an LGBTQ Counseling Clinic signaled to me that I would have support and acceptance here. I hope that is increasingly true for

the ICCSD Director of Teaching and Learning for the Elementary Schools.

With constant developments in education, Jamie Ellis, the UAY Pride Group Organizer, feels gender identity instruction should begin in elementary school.

“The younger they are, the more [teachers can say], ‘Hey, do you know that there are all kinds of people in the world? Do you know that there are all kinds of families?’” Ellis said. “Once you get to fourth, fifth, sixth grade, you can start talking about the specific uniqueness of family. I think normalizing that not everyone is exactly like you [is important].”

Ellis believes learning never stops, and it is fundamental in further creating a more inclusive environment at West.

“There are new labels and pronouns and identities—there’s something new to learn every day,” Ellis said. “The beautiful thing about it is that people are also learning those things about themselves.”

Q restrooms

To promote a more accepting environment for trans and non-binary individuals, West High added one single-stall gender-neutral restroom in 2018. While the restroom is available for all to use, students like Tori Lowman '23 find its location in the art hallway inconvenient.

“There’s only one gender-neutral bathroom here, which is so stupid. There should be more, and a lot of people don’t want to have to walk all the way to the art wing if they’re all the way in the language wing,” Lowman said.

Dillon sees the addition of the gender-neutral restroom as a mediocre effort by administrators.

“[After West] put up the gender-neutral bathroom, I feel like they just do the bare minimum,” Dillon said. “It feels like, ‘Here, we gave you this. Are you happy now?’”

Polyak sees separate restrooms as enforcing and normalizing the gender binary.

“Society has been telling me to use this [bathroom] for the past 17 years of my life, so I guess I already feel comfortable with the concept of ‘this is the me bathroom’ rather than ‘this is the guys’ bathroom,’” Polyak said.

Instead, Polyak believes gender-neutral bathrooms should be the norm.

“[Having gender-neutral spaces] breaks down the concept of a gender binary society and also gives more places that don’t force someone to confront their gender identity,” Polyak said.

Principal Mitch Gross recognizes these issues and hopes to improve them soon.

“I would love to have bathrooms renovated with this next round [of construction] and to make sure that we have more gender-neutral bathrooms,” Gross said.



Q exclusion

Despite districtwide and schoolwide progress regarding the inclusion of trans and non-binary students in the classroom, many students experience transphobia regularly.

“It wasn’t until this year when I started noticing people making casually transphobic comments around me,” Polyak said. “Then you just sit there and be like, ‘This is not a good place to address that, so I guess I have to let that slip,’ because people generally don’t listen to the opinions and observations of random strangers.”

Ham believes administrators can do more to address transphobia in the classroom.

“I’ve definitely had experiences where people assume things and are less educated about [trans people] than people who have dealt with them in their personal lives, but I don’t know that the district or West High does a whole lot about things like transphobia,” Ham said.

McNamar thinks the district responds reactively rather than proactively to transphobic events.

“[The ICCSD] addresses it ... like all things that aren’t strictly talked about—we don’t really talk about depression until something happens; we don’t really talk about [transphobia] until something happens. It’s something that we know about—it’s in the back of our heads—but it’s not fully presented,” McNamar said.

As the ICCSD Director of Diversity and Cultural Responsiveness, Laura Gray has witnessed transphobia in various forms, most commonly in subtle interactions between trans and cisgender individuals.

“What I’ve seen a lot of [trans students] face is microaggressions—things that aren’t said, non-verbal reactions or [not] using preferred pronouns,” Gray said. “Things like that are harmful.”

On a larger scale, long-lasting institutional discrimination has significantly affected the well-being of trans and non-binary people.

“The LGBTQ+ community has historically been an underserved community that has also been harmed by both medical and mental health professions pathologizing LGBTQ+ identities. Mental health continues to be a pressing issue facing trans and non-binary youth,” Leake said.

According to the Trevor Project, more than half of trans and non-binary youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year. Additionally, nearly half of LGBTQ+ youth have wanted counseling from a mental health professional but did not receive it.

“Trans and non-binary youth have higher rates of suicide, likely due to the increased minority stress experiences faced by this population,” Leake said. “Unfortunately, much of this minority stress is due to systemic discrimination. For this to get better, there needs to be change and

HELP.

ART BY KAILEY GEE & ZOEY GUO

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The Trevor Project is a nonprofit that works to prevent suicide among young LGBTQ+ individuals. Some of its resources include:

Crisis Counselors: If you are ever in need of support, trained counselors are available 24/7. Counselors can be contacted through a chat, phone call or messages. It is completely free and 100% confidential.

TrevorSpace: TrevorSpace is a moderated online platform for people ages 13 through 24. The platform is an international community that allows young people to talk about coming out, relationships and anything else on their minds.

Resource Center: The resource center is a great place to find information on topics such as mental health, gender identity, coming out and more. It even offers handbooks that can guide you through processes like conversation and support. The research center is not only beneficial for LGBTQ+ youth but for anyone looking to learn more.

Source: The Trevor Project

GENDER IDENTITIES

This is a brief overview and not a definitive list.



Trans: an umbrella term for someone whose gender identity and/or expression is different from the gender assigned to them at birth

Non-binary: someone who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman

Genderqueer: someone who identifies as neither male nor female, as somewhere in between or beyond genders, or as a combination of genders



Genderfluid: someone who does not identify with a single fixed gender or has a fluid, unfixed gender identity

Agender: someone who identifies as not having a gender



Demigender: someone who feels a partial but not complete connection to a particular gender identity (e.g. demigirl, demiboy)



Pangender: someone whose gender identity and/or gender expression is numerous, either fixed (many at once) or fluid (moving from one to another, often more than two)

Source: GLSEN, University of Massachusetts, Human Rights Campaign

support at societal and structural levels.”

Rachel Maller is a former research assistant on the equity-implemented partnership between the University of Iowa Public Policy Center and the ICCSD. From 2015 through 2020, she helped administer the annual School Climate Survey to ICCSD students in fifth through 12th grade. Administrators use the survey results to address the disparities in the district and work toward promoting equity in the classroom. In 2020, 2% of ICCSD students identified as non-binary, an umbrella term the survey uses for all non-cisgender identities. That number is closer to 1% at West.

“[The School Climate Survey] highlights all these different data that demonstrate the inequities in schools that non-binary and LGB students face,” Maller said. “There’s a lot of bullying and harassment, and these things are connected to your achievement, mental health and future outcomes.”

Throughout her work, Maller has seen little change in how trans and non-binary students feel at school. In 2017, the ICCSD added LGBTQ-specific questions to the School Climate Survey. That year, 70% of non-binary students reported feeling unsafe in their classes, and in 2020, that number was 68%.

“Something that often gets neglected is the urgency of this [issue] and thinking ‘We’ll get to that,’” Maller said. “It’s so urgent because of people’s mental health, and everything is at stake. You’re going to have to put [in] work to be able to change it over time; you can’t just hope it will change, because it will not.”

Social studies teacher Travis Henderson believes that students have the most significant influence on the school culture.

“Little things change a culture, and each student particularly making that decision every day is what shapes the culture because you have to make what feels normal,” Henderson said. “If it feels normal to make transphobic comments, we have to shift the norm to make it unacceptable, and teachers alone can’t do that.”

According to a 2019 study, 71% of adolescents claim they have observed bullying at school. Henderson believes equipping students with bystander intervention strategies will have the most significant impact on school culture.

“If someone hears something, then having the tools to intervene makes a difference, not just for the student who was a target of that particular comment. [It] also provides one small moment that ultimately influences a broader culture,” Henderson said. “If we have students who feel comfortable doing direct or indirect intervention strategies when they hear something problematic or unintentionally hurtful, that starts to shift a culture.”

Q moving forward

In 2021, the Iowa legislature proposed 15 bills discriminating against the trans community, seven of which directly targeted students. These bills ranged from limiting trans students from participating in athletics to outing students for their pronouns to allowing discrimination for religious reasons. None of these bills became law.

“The intentional exclusion of transgender people is alienating and dehumanizing,” Ham said. “It’s an awful thing to do.”

Dillon believes politicians have no reason to propose transphobic bills.

“It’s so wrong ... it doesn’t affect [politicians] at

**“DON’T MIND
WHAT OTHER
PEOPLE THINK.
JUST TAKE YOUR
TIME TO FIGURE
OUT WHO YOU
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HAPPY WITH
YOURSELF.”**

-HAYDEN DILLON ’24

all,” Dillon said. “There’s no point for that, except to be transphobic.”

In the face of this adversity, Head thinks schools must be a safe space for students.

“With [prohibiting] transgender restrooms at school, sports participation and all the ways certain laws are trying to exclude trans students, it’s even more important that schools are a place where kids can come and just be respected and valued as their true, authentic selves,” Head said.

Furthermore, she believes trans and non-binary students should not be responsible for teaching others about their identities.

“Just like it’s not the responsibility of people of color to educate others about [their] experience, it’s not the responsibility of LGBTQ+ individuals to educate everybody else,” Head said.

At the administrative level, Gray prioritizes a student-centered approach to change.

“It’s our professional responsibility to be as cul-

turally responsive as we can with students,” Gray said. “Students are our priority. We don’t want anyone to feel left out. [We need to] get more voice from our transgender students to figure out what they need, where the gaps are [and] what they think is necessary to feel more welcome.”

Although the ICCSD LGBTQ+ policy is the first established and most progressive in the state, there is still potential for improvement. For Schluckebier, receiving student feedback is essential to creating meaningful change.

“[We] grow and respond to student needs, so it’s a constant work in progress—listening to students, getting their feedback, getting the resources and changing some materials, not just continuing to do what we’ve always done,” Schluckebier said.

At West High, Gross sees change as a perpetual process.

“[These changes] are not boxes we’re checking off—they’re ongoing, they’re enduring,” Gross said. “I want West to be a place where students can thrive being their true and authentic selves—that’s very important. If you can’t act [as] who you are, you’re never going to be the best version of yourself.”

When it comes to changing school culture, Henderson believes students and teachers must work together. He also sees discomfort and struggle as a natural part of the process.

“When we try to shift a culture, it gets harder before it gets better in the same way that sometimes we get sicker before we get better,” Henderson said. “What’s going on is all these things might make us notice the problem more, make it seem worse or even make it feel worse for a while—it’s not always going to feel good.”

Many students look toward the future for progress and support.

“Ultimately, I hope that our community, if not our overall society, abandons the concepts of gender roles and societally imposed genders,” Polyak said. “I believe that this is important because a genderless society would become more welcoming to all experiences and may even help eliminate gendered conflicts, such as sexism.”

Dillon encourages trans and non-binary students who are struggling with their identity to focus on themselves.

“Don’t mind what other people think. Just take your time to figure out who you are and be happy with yourself. Dress and present however you want because other people’s opinions don’t matter,” Dillon said.

McNamar is optimistic for the future of trans and non-binary students at West High.

“I have pretty strong hopes that we’re going to have more of the student body talk about it,” McNamar said. “Hopefully before I graduate, it’s a lot easier for a younger trans person to find others than it was for me.”