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# WHY SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS MATTER FOR LGBTQ+ STUDENTS

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For LGBTQ+ students, this year has been especially difficult. Over 300 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been introduced in dozens of states across the U.S., many of which target LGBTQ+ students. States across the country are barring transgender children from sports, reviving “bathroom bills,” censoring library books, banning lessons on LGBTQ+ history and LGBTQ+ inclusive sexual education, and requiring educators to forcibly out and misgender LGBTQ+ students with no regard to the students’ health and safety. With these cruel attacks increasing at the state and local levels, progressive voters who care about the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ youth are paying more attention to their state races this year. Rightfully so.

In the national debate about defending LGBTQ+ equity and inclusion in schools, school boards are an important piece of the puzzle but are rarely the focus of our mobilizing efforts. With hundreds of school board races happening in almost every state this year, thousands of school board members have the chance to be held accountable for their actions in protecting or persecuting LGBTQ+ youth. To help you understand what’s at stake, we have prepared a brief summary below:

## WHAT’S AT STAKE IN SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS?

Local elections have some of the most direct impact on people, yet they receive less attention from the voting public. A study by the [Brookings Institution](#), a non-partisan research group, found that most school board elections are decided by just 5-10% of the voter base. Because of low turnout, these races are “susceptible to the whims of a small number of voters.” Many voters neglect to study the candidates that are “down-ticket,” including school board candidates. In some places, this has allowed the far-right to essentially take over school boards by mobilizing their extremist base to elect anti-LGBTQ+ candidates.

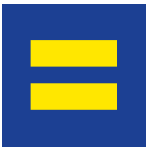
In Colorado Springs, Colorado, DEI initiatives of all types fell by the wayside when their local school board was taken over by anti-LGBTQ+ members. In Lake Travis, Texas, school board elections are seeing [unprecedented amounts of money enter the race](#) from anti-LGBTQ+ PACs. If pro-equality voters sit these races out, attacks on LGBTQ+ youth, and BIPOC youth, will only get worse. Schools should be a place where students go to learn, not a place where they are unsafe, ostracized, and relegated to marginalized status.

## WHAT ARE SCHOOL BOARDS?

There are over 90,000 people serving on school boards all over the country. According to the [National School Boards Association](#), school boards “establish the vision and goals for the public schools in their district, and they set standards for the performance of schools and superintendents,” They are locally elected in order to best represent the community’s voice in education. Of all the policymakers at work in schools, board members are closest to the students, educators and parents.

## WHAT IMPACT DO SCHOOL BOARDS HAVE ON LGBTQ+ STUDENTS, EDUCATORS AND PARENTS?

School boards drive policy on all kinds of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. This includes affirmation of LGBTQ+ identities as well as LGBTQ+ inclusive lessons, books, and programs. School boards determine policies related to gender-affirming dress codes, discipline measures for anti-



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LGBTQ+ bullying incidents, inclusive curriculum measures, and diversity in hiring. School boards also set the goals that district administrators follow. While school boards can be constrained by action at the state level, they still have a wide range of control over the designs, budget, and culture of schools under their care.

According to the Department of Education, 50.8 million American youth attend public school, or 90% of all American students. Locally-elected boards have the power to make schools safe learning environments for all students. By setting performance goals for the schools they manage, boards can push schools in a more equitable direction. The opposite is also true: long-time opponent of the LGBTQ+ community and former Georgia Republican Party chairman Ralph Reed once said that he “would rather have a thousand school board members than one president.” If anti-equality groups win school elections, they can drive state legislatures’ war on LGBTQ+ youth even further into local communities.

Now that you have an overview, here are testimonies from individuals fighting on the ground to keep schools safe for all students. The respondents are Amy Lyle and Ashley Green, parents of a non-binary teen in Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, and James Santana, an out LGBTQ+ school board candidate for the Montebello Unified School District in Los Angeles, California. Some responses have been modified for length and/or clarity.

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### **In your mind, what is the most important job of a school board? How do their actions impact students, especially students from vulnerable or underserved populations?**

**Amy & Ashley:** *The most important job of a school board is to set policy that emphasizes diversity, equity, and inclusion and ensures a safe environment so that students can learn. This means having gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation as part of the district’s non-discrimination policy. School board policies can lift up, protect, and ensure a safe learning environment for all. Conversely, they can also erase, endanger, and leave vulnerable students even more at risk of harm. The role of the school board can’t be overemphasized.*

**James:** *The School Board’s most important job is to act as the overseers of the local community’s public schools. Individually, they should act as educational navigators. Their collective goal should be setting the direction, establishing structure, providing support, ensuring accountability, and providing community leadership towards and for all stakeholders. The most vulnerable populations - BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and those with special needs - are not prioritized when school boards fail to reflect the communities they’re charged with representing.*

### **Local elections don’t get the turnout they deserve. Elections can be decided by 5-10% of the electorate. What would you tell people to motivate them to vote in school board elections?**

**Amy & Ashley:** *There is nothing that impacts your child more than where they go to school all day, every day.*

**James:** *In order to provide motivation, I remind people that we have to be the change we want to see. For far too long, we have prioritized the importance of federal office while neglecting the local impact we can make in our own communities by running for local offices. We elect around 500,000 local officials who control over \$2 trillion in local government spending. If you’re like me, you want to know how this is impacting you and the people around you.*



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## Candidates running for local office can be difficult for voters to research. How do you recommend voters inform themselves about school board candidates?

**Amy & Ashley:** <https://www.vote411.org> - VOTE 411.org - Provides reliable, nonpartisan information in both English and Spanish, including candidate guides. Often the [League of Women Voters](#) publish candidate guides in local newspapers, as well.

**James:** I recommend you first decide what priorities are important to you and the people in your neighborhoods. Reviewing previous minutes from school board meetings can help give you an idea of what candidates will be facing. Have questions ready for the campaign and reach out through email, website, or a call. Ask endorsers and supporters why they support their candidate. Talk to the candidate directly or at an event. Have a voting plan.

## We've recently seen a lot of anti-LGBTQ+ state legislation targeting education and students. What can school board officials do to support their LGBTQ+ students and educators when they're hearing about attacks taking place on LGBTQ+ identities?

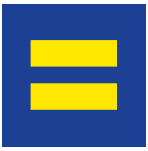
**Amy & Ashley:** School board officials can make their support of LGBTQ+ students and educators highly visible and vocal. They can speak out about harmful legislation and should be ensuring their schools have the resources to support LGBTQ+ students and their mental health. School boards need to say "we see you, we've got you" and back it up with strong, inclusive policies and protections. School board members should be asking their LGBTQ+ educators what they need and make sure that they get it.

**James:** School board officials need to follow the golden rule of treating others the way they want to be treated and provide welcoming schools. They should take seriously and follow through on anti-discrimination policies and enact fair and firm penalties to attackers. By including and partnering with outside organizations like [HRC Foundation's Welcoming Schools](#) and other alliances, you can provide inclusive training for students and educators. As an LGBTQ+ candidate running for the school board I was raised in, I wish I would have had a safe space on campus.

## Anti-equality groups have recently put a lot of energy and money into school board elections. What can supporters of equality do to counter their efforts?

**Amy & Ashley:** There is so much you can do to support local candidates whom you believe in. Volunteering for a campaign that supports equality can be fun and really easy, even if you have never done it before. Giving even a few dollars and encouraging others to do the same can make a huge difference. Offering to reach out to your friends and neighbors to put candidate signs in yards in high traffic areas and putting literature on doorknobs are other great ways to help out. Many times, candidates may not even have a budget for literature or signs, but showing up to candidate forums and posting pictures on social media talking about why you are voting for this candidate and why they should, too, can really boost their visibility.

**James:** Supporters of equality need to support local municipal elections like they have in state and federal. We need to change the mindset that only those matter. Local candidates and measures can impact your family, job, what you do recreationally, and some of the access to your future dreams. If you support equality, we need everyone to put their time, energy, and available money to work - today.



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## Wisconsin recently had their school board elections. Theirs are some of the earliest in the nation. What lessons can people in other states learn from your outcomes?

**Amy & Ashley:** *One thing we learned is that you need to have a pool of equality candidates who are willing to run, even if reluctantly so. We know that outside anti-equality groups are doing their own recruiting of school board candidates and buying them fancy signs. But that doesn't mean that they win. Sometimes parents' rights candidates used the strategy of evading questions on equality topics, and this ended up backfiring, at least in our district. People were rightfully suspicious of candidates who were refusing to answer questions. It helped equality candidates to highlight this and to use this opportunity to talk about their values and commitment to equity, even if they had never even considered running for school board before. Consider running for school board yourself, or supporting someone who is.*

## California, like some other states, has their school board elections at the same time as the midterms. How do you make sure voters hear your message with so many other races happening at the same time?

**James:** *As a candidate myself, I announced early and have the goal to work with everyone who has the best interest of the student and community. I want to bring all stakeholders to the table. I have to be intentional with my time and energy as I volunteer and have events across the district. Most importantly, I stay confident in my purpose to give back to the school district that gave me so much.*

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Don't let fringe groups of anti-LGBTQ+ activists take over your community. Schools are a major setting in which the fight for equal rights is happening. Just as the fight for federal and state legislatures needs to be fierce, so too do progressive voters need to keep their eyes on local races. If we don't become the 5-10% of the electorate that seats the school board, our opponents will.

### HOW TO TAKE ACTION:

- 1. Research your local races.** Find out when school board elections happen in your community. Hint: not every community has them on November 8th. Make sure you're registered to vote and plan to be present on Election Day. Many Board of Education races also have non-partisan primaries. It is important to turn out so that the final slate of candidates in the general election is not just anti-equality, discriminatory candidates.
- 2. Know the candidates.** In many states, early voting is a great way to be proactive. When you get your ballot in the mail, take the time to research where your candidates stand on LGBTQ+ issues before you cast your vote.
- 3. Support pro-equality candidates.** Volunteering, donating, and sharing media doesn't have to be time consuming. The hardest part about school board races is getting the information out there. Encourage your friends and neighbors to support the candidates who are committed to safety for all students.
- 4. Expose anti-LGBTQ+ talking points when you see them.** Anti-inclusion school board candidates use the same language as their peers in state offices to advance hate. Watch out for terms like "grooming" and misuse of the concept of "wokeness." If a candidate avoids questions on equality issues, press them on why.
- 5. Vote in school board elections.** Who runs your school district does matter. Your vote makes the greatest impact in races with the fewest voters. It will make a difference. Don't let hostile groups take over the education system.
- 6. Be that person.** If you are connected to your school district as a parent, a former student, or through a professional or vocational role, consider running for a seat on your local school board.

**Disclaimer:** *This resource is meant for the purposes of voter education only. It does not endorse any specific candidate for any specific office.*