

Viewpoints

Iowa Judge Provides Clarity on District Lessons Regarding LGBTQ+



A recent federal court ruling brought some clarity to Iowa's controversial 2023 law regulating how public schools handle LGBTQ+ topics in the classroom. While headlines have described Senate File 496 as a "Don't Say Gay" law, U.S. District Judge Stephen Locher's May 15 decision makes clear that saying gay – or referencing LGBTQ+ people – isn't the problem. Teaching mandatory lessons about LGBTQ+ issues to elementary students is.

Judge Locher's ruling struck down portions of the law that barred "programs" and "promotion" of LGBTQ+ content in K-6 grades, finding those terms overly broad and unconstitutionally vague. This means schools are permitted to allow things like GSA clubs and pride flags, and teachers are not required to hide that they're in same-sex relationships.

The court did not change the law entirely but upheld the law's ban on formal instruction (i.e., lesson plans or required curriculum) that includes detailed explanations of gender identity or sexual orientation for students



in grade six or below. So while it might be permissible to mention that a character in a book has two moms—but the story cannot be used as a jumping-off point for a deeper lesson on LGBTQ+ issues.

This nuanced outcome reinforces what many educators already practice: a commitment to neutrality and inclusivity, without crossing into direct instruction on sensitive topics for younger students. And while the law's requirement to notify parents when a student requests a pronoun change remains intact, the judge found the broader "accommodation" requirement too vague to enforce.

The ruling will likely ease the pressure some school districts felt to over comply with the statute. Teachers won't be penalized for mentioning their partners, and GSA clubs may return to school hallways and bulletin boards. But as Iowa's Attorney General vows to appeal, the legal landscape remains fluid.

What's clear for now: schools can include LGBTQ+ people in the broader narrative of public education—but drawing the line between reference and instruction will remain a point of tension and careful judgment in the classroom.

That means teachers are lawfully barred from providing "mandatory lessons or instruction to students in grade six or below that include detailed explanations or normative views on "gender identity" or "sexual orientation." But they can still provide lessons with "neutral references" to LGBTQ+ people — for example, by assigning readings that mention same-sex couples so long as their sexual orientation is not the focus of the text.

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