

# Schools embrace inclusivity, adopt gender-neutral uniforms, language

## Creating A Safe Space For Students To Form Their Personal Identity

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No more “Welcome, ladies and gentlemen!” at the annual day function at Birla Open Minds International School from now on. The school in Walkeshwar has decided to do away with its traditional greeting at events and meetings by replacing it with gender-neutral alternatives such as “Dear guests” or “Hello everyone” as a step towards inclusivity. Birla Open Minds isn’t the only one to bin gender stereotypes in school routines and practices.

The Aditya Birla World Academy (ABWA) is introducing gender-neutral uniforms for the upcoming academic year where students regardless of their birth gender can choose between trousers or ‘skorts’ (hybrid of a skirt and shorts) as their uniform if they so desire.

In an email to parents last month, principal Radhika Sinha described their new way forward as a move to “reduce gender differentiation in uniforms so that students of various genders, gender non-conforming, or questioning gender can feel safe discovering and expressing themselves at the school”.

The school in Tardeo — which made a significant stride last year by setting up Rainbow Club (an LGBTQIA+ support group led by the student body and guided by teachers) and currently glowing in its new identity as a “gender inclusive school” — also laid out an action plan last week in celebration of the Pride month that lists LGBTQIA+ history and activism in classroom discussions, shifts in school norms such as allowing students to choose the length of their hair “as long as it is neatly tied up” and regular workshops with teachers and parents as part of what they call a “move away from the cis-heteronormative environment in the education world”.

“The idea of a gender-neutral uniform was led by the Rainbow Club that has been speaking to students about



**SPECTRUM OF LOVE:** June is celebrated as Pride Month across the world

terminologies, different forms of attraction, pronouns and same-sex families in ways that normalise queer experiences. Since June is Pride month and also when students order their new uniforms, we thought it would be the right time to introduce it as a step towards prioritising comfort and freedom of expression,” explained Aachal Jain, pastoral care co-ordinator for ABWA.

Doing away with ‘ladies and gentlemen’ was “a small but important statement”, believes Puspita Chattopadhyay, president of Birla Open Mind even as she admits that, “It’s not easy in a school scenario where parents are still conservative about dialogues on sexuality but we’re taking slow steps.” In her effort to build a kinder environment, Chattopadhyay has designed what she calls ‘Soul Science’ as a part of the curriculum that addresses gender bias, peer pressure and bullying through story-based learning and role play.

Chattopadhyay was part of a 13-member contingent of educators and heads of educational institutions in the city, motivated to take ‘Pride’ to the schools they mentor or teach in, especially after they came together in April for a round table with members of the LGBTQIA+ community and learn how they could create less-hostile experiences in the classroom.

“This was an important conversation because as humans we start developing a sense of identity in school, be it with our favourite sport, our friends’ circle or our gender expression. Most students who are figuring out their sense of identity do not feel comfortable speaking to their parents about it. This makes it a responsibility for teachers and educators to provide a safe space,” reasoned Supreet K Singh, director and CEO of the Red Dot Foundation that hosted the discussion along with the School Leaders Network and QKnit Foundation that works on legal and social rights of the queer community.

“Bullying for the way a student might dress or express themselves is a prominent issue that surfaced,” said Singh, adding that, “At times, with no ill-intention educators, too have shown micro-aggressions that may have caused unwanted harm to the community.”

“Bullying can be managed if we’re open and don’t shy away from difficult conversations,” says Sunita George, principal, Bombay Scottish School that has introduced themes related to gender stereotyping and mental health to ‘Perspective-360 degree’ an initiative to promote critical thinking. “It’s helping students argue candidly and confidently about their needs.” If some schools are thinking of

establishing queer support groups for students and conducting sensitisation sessions with parents and teaching staff, some are deliberating on gender neutral changes in infrastructure or how one addresses students.

“Be it facilities like toilets or alternative terms for head-boy and head-girl, various strategies are being discussed to broaden educator approach to the LGBTQIA+ community,” said Francis Joseph, director, School Leaders Network.

Chattopadhyay understands the pushback that has come from certain parents for whom ‘gender and sexuality’ are still sensitive topics they don’t want taught in the classroom but Farzana Dohadwala, educational mentor for Crimson Educational Services argues that classrooms could also make for a powerful space. “To help children develop respect and empathy for those with different identities from a young age,” she says.

Recounting the resistance schools had faced when they started sex education, Dohadwala remains optimistic even as she fears moral panic from conservative parents or senior teachers as they start a conversation around gender inclusivity. “The reason students laugh or use derogatory words is because they don’t understand what they’re saying. Teachers can change that in informative and non-judgmental ways.”

Peter Murphy, head of Oberoi International School, agrees. “Educators have a voice that speaks to the young and old alike. I’m keen on creating that safe space which allows young people to discover, articulate and be understood for their personal identity,” he stressed. Oberoi International, which was one of the first schools in the city to have established a queer support group two years ago has recently made space in their primary school’s library for children’s picture books that use cartoon-style illustrations to tell stories questioning gender norms.