

Communicating a Change in Gender Status at School: Key Considerations

The Right Plan: For every young person who wishes to share new information about their gender at school, there exists a unique path for doing so. A number of factors will go into the ultimate plan for moving forward with the process. Factors such as the child's age, personality and emotional state, the level of family support, the school's organizational design, and even the time of year all can impact how this process unfolds. It is important to avoid seeking some universal "correct way," for sharing information about a student's change in gender status, and to instead focus on identifying the steps that will create the necessary conditions to make this particular student's experience as positive as possible. More often than not, the process will be governed by a series of options from which to choose; the key is to ensure that informed choices inform how each of these possible approaches is handled, and that the trade-offs of each are seriously weighed. Every child's journey will be unique, and while there are a number of important principles and areas of focus to bear in mind along the way, there are many, many ways for reaching the destination.

*In preparing for battle, I
have often found that
plans are useless, but
planning is indispensable.*

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Urgency and Timing: A student's desire to share a shift in their gender status at school is borne out of a deep need to be seen as one's authentic self. The level of the student's urgency versus the careful planning of the process must be balanced. Ideally, the child is currently not experiencing an unmanageably high level of distress at school. This allows the student, school, and family (if appropriate) to work together as a team to establish the most positive conditions in which the information can be shared. This could include training

for staff, parents & school community members, and students; various forms of communication with any or all of these; and a carefully laid out plan for the student's authentic identity to be shared. These steps need not take an inordinate amount of time, and in fact schools must be vigilant about not using this planning process to delay the process unnecessarily. Nonetheless, the ability to thoughtfully plan for this complex process best insures a positive experience for all involved.

However, it may be that the student's emotional well-being will be compromised if they are asked to delay this process any longer. In such instances where this is the case, the school must quickly lay out a plan for the child's gender to be recognized, with immediacy as the primary factor. It can be anticipated that there will be a variety of issues that will emerge for which the school must be prepared, including staff members being caught "off-guard," questions from other students, and concerns from parents among them. This situation is akin to "walking across the bridge while building it," and will entail, at least initially, the school reactively responding to issues as they arise. This is one of the unfortunate consequences when a school is perceived to be unsupportive of students' gender diversity and the subsequent sense for some of not feeling fully seen within its walls. This is especially likely when the school has not taken any steps to proactively establish more gender inclusive conditions for all students. In these instances, it then falls to the school to help clear the way for this student's true self to emerge. It should be noted, however, that often a student's distress might be reduced once they know there is a "date certain" for the information to be shared, providing the school with an opportunity to get at least some of the key conditions in place.

Age and Grade-level: The age and maturity level of the child is another key variable that will influence how sharing information about a student's gender will unfold. A younger student may be less involved with designing the actual process, while older students may play a greater role in shaping the experience. Conversely, in situations where a child does not have support at home, the process for a primary grade child will be very difficult, if not impossible without parental buy-in. An older student may ask the school to work with them to keep the process private in order to protect them from any negative consequences they may encounter when not at school. Additionally, the student's age will also impact what and how the information about their gender will be communicated to the other students, what role, if any, the student will play in the

process, and potential concerns that may be raised by the larger school community. However, it is also important to recognize that the student's individual personality, and not their age, is frequently the leading factor in determining how the process will unfold.

Privacy and Disclosure: The degree to which others will or will not be aware of the student's gender status is also a major factor in the kind of support that will be necessary and the ensuing plan for generating it. In some cases, this won't be anyone's decision; the child is sharing information publicly in a school or community in which they have been known based on their assigned sex for some time. In other situations, the student's move to a new school setting—say from one level to the next or to a new location—affords the opportunity to privately assert one's authentic gender. In either case, the issue is not if the school supports the student, but rather how.

Sharing Publicly: When communicating a student's gender status with others, it must be remembered that the student is undergoing an incredibly personal experience; few young people want to be the center of attention, particularly about such a private matter. Though others may have known the child previously, they must still recognize the student's right to experience this process quietly with dignity and respect. It is incumbent upon the school's leadership to protect the student's right to feel safe from others' comments, questions or rumors. The school must work actively to ensure that the student's environment remains safe and conducive to learning.

Nonetheless, the school must still be prepared to respond to genuinely innocent confusion or uncertainty that may come up from members of the school community, including setting clear boundaries about questions being directed at the student or family. This often means a delicate balance of providing information about gender diversity broadly while not talking specifically about an individual student. Again, in schools that have proactively worked to be more gender inclusive, a student's sharing about their gender sits in a larger context of gender acceptance, creating a framework in which a gender-expansive student's experience can be better understood. However, regardless of how public the process is or the degree to which the student or family are open about its details, the school must not reveal any information about the student that could be seen as a violation of that child's privacy rights.

Sadly, schools must also be prepared to protectively respond to negative reactions about the child's change in gender status. Even as they undergo this often-difficult process, these students and their families can be subject to ignorant intrusions and even outright hostility from the larger school community. As such, schools are uniquely positioned to serve as a buffer from the non-accepting judgment of others. Without speaking about the specific student, there are a number of important talking points leaders and other school staff can use to respond to the questions or negative reactions of others. The box at right provides some specific language schools might use to grapple with these concerns from others at the school.

Even with well thought out responses and talking points, it is also important to keep in mind some overarching notions in the face of unkind or bigoted responses to a student's decision to share information about

their gender. Many of the objections that will be voiced can be boiled down to a lack of comfort or familiarity with the idea of transgender people, particularly children or teens. While learning about a child's

Responding to Concerns...

- *I know this is new territory for many of us. Sometimes change is really challenging. Perhaps I can share some information with you about this issue?*
- *Be assured that the safety, well-being and education of all students remains our highest priority.*
- *Of course I can't talk about any individual students, just as I would never talk about your child.*
- *Schools have always worked to support the needs of individual students in a variety of ways. Like we have always done, we are committed to supporting all of our students.*
- *Are there specific behaviors of other students that are causing your child to be uncomfortable?*

gender might make others (including yourself) feel uncomfortable, that does not negate the child's need to be safe and supported, nor your responsibility for ensuring that they are.

Keep in mind the following ideas as you consider responding to those expressing concerns regarding a child's sharing about their gender:

- The bottom line is this: One person's discomfort never justifies limiting the rights and dignity of someone else
- If someone feels uncomfortable, it does not mean they are unsafe
- Disclosure of any sensitive student information violates that child's right to privacy, and could be an infraction of HIPPA/FERPA regulations
- Consider for a minute if this were another form of diversity that others "weren't comfortable with." How would you respond?

Private Assertions: When a student's gender status is to remain private, it may be that very few adults (the school's leader, a counselor, or even someone at the district office) will be aware of the situation. For some educators, this can be uncomfortable. With the best of intentions, they will insist upon the importance of adults knowing about the child's gender status, in order for them to better support the child. On the one hand, this makes sense; should any issues arise in which the child's privacy is compromised, adults can potentially intercede on the student's behalf.

But for many students and their families, the goal is to simply be another kid on campus and not "that transgender student." They may well recognize any risks associated with few if any adults on site knowing about the child's gender, and accept them nonetheless. Ultimately, it must be the student's (and when possible, the family's) decision about whether, and if so when and to whom, they will reveal this personal information. Even with risks that privacy may entail, some students and their families believe it worthwhile to have a chance at a school experience that is not dominated by this single aspect of the child's life. However, even in the circumstances where a student's gender status appears to be completely private, with no imaginable way for others to "find out," the school, family and student must still think about contingencies should that privacy be somehow compromised.

Student Information Systems: For students seeking to maintain their privacy, one of the significant challenges comes from the various student information systems that schools employ. Frequently driven by the student's name and gender marker as reflected on a birth certificate, these systems are utilized across the site and between multiple bureaucracies and levels for conveying information and data. As a result, there are a great many ways in which a student's gender status may inadvertently be revealed. General processes such as completing enrollment, taking attendance, assigning grades and communicating with the home can all easily compromise the student's privacy. Other typical stumbling points include after-school programs, school photos and class pictures, substitute teachers, outside district personnel or professionals providing a service on campus, yearbooks, ID cards, posted lists, library cards, distribution of texts or other school supplies, and standardized tests.

Too numerous to name, even in the most supportive of school settings, these bureaucratic functions can cause significant harm for a transgender student with literally the click of a computer key. A single instance of the child's private information being unintentionally made public can have devastating consequences. The difficulty is compounded by unclear definitions of a "legal student record," often defined legislatively. School officials and IT professionals are placed in very difficult positions as they seek to fulfill their mandated responsibilities on the one hand, while simultaneously protecting the student's privacy on the other. Fortunately, there is growing recognition of this challenge. Some SIS companies are providing options that allow greater flexibility in this area. There are also a growing number of best practices that serve as "work-arounds" when these technical solutions are not available.

Transgender Students with Unsupportive Parents or Caregivers

Unfortunately, transgender youth often experience high levels of family rejection. A family's lack of affirmation can have a detrimental effect on a young person's short- and long-term mental health and well-being. Family rejection significantly increases the likelihood that a transgender student will engage in high-risk behaviors. In such instances, schools can play a critical role in alleviating the psychological distress caused by family rejection. School may be the only place a transgender student feels safe enough to be themselves. As a result, a safe and supportive learning environment is just as important, if not more so, for transgender students who do not have supportive parents as it is for those who do.

When seeking to meet the needs of transgender students, it is essential to first know whether the student's family affirms their gender, so school officials can avoid putting the student at risk of greater harm. For example, it might work best to manually change attendance sheets to reflect the student's chosen name, but not alter the entry in the district's student information system so that any written communication with the parents uses the student's name as reflected on the birth certificate. Through this process the student and school can collaborate to develop a plan that balances the student's need to be affirmed at school and the reality that the student does not have that support at home.

In cases with unsupportive parents, school officials should explicitly address the following basic topics and situations as part of the student's gender support plan:

1. The modifications/accommodations the student is seeking (*i.e.* use of chosen name and pronouns; use of gender-specific facilities);
2. How to refer to the student when communicating with the student's parent(s)/guardian(s);
3. How to refer to the student when communicating with the student's siblings;
4. What information, if any, to share with the student's teachers;
5. How to address questions from peers (if student's transgender status is not private); and
6. Support services the school can provide to assist the student in coping with the lack of support at home.

Addressing the student's needs at school provides a great short-term solution; but where possible, the goal should be to support the student's family in accepting their child's gender identity. The number one factor in a transgender student's ultimate health and well-being is parental support. Thus, in consultation with the student, the school should seek opportunities to foster a better relationship between the student and their family. A parent's initial negative reaction to their child exhibiting signs that they might be transgender is likely based on inaccurate or incomplete information about gender identity, or out of fear for what this will mean for their child's future. Those reactions often come from a place of love and protection, and are not intended to harm their child (even though they do).

Sometimes a parent's rejection is a failed attempt at protection.

Schools can assist the process of family acceptance in myriad ways -- arranging a safe space for the student to disclose their gender identity to their parents, providing counseling services for the whole family, or connecting the family to local resources or other parents of transgender or gender-expansive youth. As part of this effort, it is important to educate the student's family about the serious consequences of refusing to affirm their child's gender identity. Sharing the observations of school personnel that highlight the effect that rejection has had on the student may also help encourage parents to begin moving toward acceptance.

Conclusion: Supporting a student's sharing information about their gender can feel like an overwhelmingly daunting task. Yet through careful planning, appropriate support and ongoing communication, not only can schools manage the process, they can master it. In so doing, they don't just support a transformative experience that the student will never forget; they may well create a transformative experience for the staff, families and students surrounding the child as well. In the process, a student's successful experience affirms a school's commitment and responsiveness to the genuine needs of all of its children.