

Gender Transitions at School: Key Considerations

The Right Plan: For every young person who undergoes a gender transition at school, there exists a unique path for getting there. 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 the student's transition unfolds. It is important to avoid seeking some universal "correct way," for handling a student's transition, 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 problems to be solved, each with potential solutions. The key is to ensure that informed choices mark how each of these the situations are handled, and that trade-offs of each approach are seriously considered. Every child's gender transition will be unique, and while there are a number of important principles and areas of focus to bear in mind, there are many, many ways for reaching the destination.

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

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Urgency and Timing: A student's desire to transition gender at school is borne out of a deep need to be seen as one's authentic self. The urgency and planning of the process must be carefully 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 transition can take place. 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 child's transition unnecessarily. Nonetheless, the ability to plan for this complex process best insures a positive experience for all involved.

However, the need to carefully plan for this process must be considered in light of the student's levels of urgency and/or distress. 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 transition, with its 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 as unsupportive of students' gender diversity and the subsequent sense for some of not feeling fully seen within its walls. 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 transition to occur, 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 a student's gender transition will unfold. A younger student may be less involved with designing the actual process, while older students may play a greater role in shaping how the transition unfolds. Conversely, in situations where a child does not have support at home, a transition 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 the gender

transition will be communicated to the other students, what role, if any, the transitioning student will play in the process, and potential concerns that may be raised by the larger school community.

Privacy and Disclosure: The degree to which others will or will not be aware of the student's gender transition 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 transitioning 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 transition privately. In either case, the issue is not if the school supports the student, but rather how.

Public Transitions: With a public transition, it must be remembered that the student is undergoing an incredibly personal experience; few young people want to be the center of attention, particularly for such a private matter. Though others may have known the child prior to their transition, 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 in general while not talking specifically about an individual student. Again, in schools that have proactively worked to be more gender inclusive, a student's transition 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 able to respond to intentionally negative reactions to a child's public gender transition. Even as they undergo this often-difficult process, the larger school community can subject these students and their families to ignorant intrusions and even outright hostility. As such, schools are uniquely positioned to serve as a buffer from the non-accepting judgment of others. With out 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 below 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 public gender transition. 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 such a transition might make others (include yourself) feel uncomfortable, that does not negate the child's need to be safe and supported.

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?"*
- *"I can assure you 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?"*

Keep in mind the following ideas as you consider your responses to those expressing concerns about a child's gender transition:

- The bottom line is this: One person's discomfort does not trump the rights and dignity of someone else
- If someone feels uncomfortable, it does not mean they are not safe
- 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 Transitions: When a student's transition is 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 assert 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 legal name and gender marker as reflected on a birth certificate, these systems are utilized across the site 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. Compounding the difficulty is the definition 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.

Transgender Students with Unsupportive Parents or Caregivers

Unfortunately, transgender youth experience high levels of family rejection. That lack of support 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. Schools can play a critical role in alleviating the psychological distress caused by family rejection. That environment may be the only place a transgender student feels safe enough to be themselves. As a result, having a safe place to learn 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 is accepting, 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 birth name. 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 address the following basic topics and situations as part of the student's support plan:

1. The modification/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 parents/guardians/caregivers;
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. 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.

Schools can assist the process of family acceptance in myriad ways from arranging a safe space for the student to disclose their gender identity to their parents, to 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 for 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 gender transition 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, not only will they create a transformative experience that the student will never forget; it may also be a transformative experience for the staff, families and students surrounding the child as well. In the process, a student's successful gender transition affirms a school's commitment and responsiveness to the genuine needs of all of its children.