

STUDENT SERVICES STUDENT SERVICES STUDENT SERVICES

Transgender Youth

Students who identify themselves as transgender or who are questioning their gender identity require a broad range of support and services.

By Micah Ludeke

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Student Services is produced in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Articles and related handouts can be downloaded from www.nasponline.org/resources/principals.

In ninth grade, Joshua began wearing skirts, nail polish, and makeup. He insists on being called “Amanda” instead of “Joshua” and being referred to as “she” instead of “he.” Some students are diligent about observing the requests, but others respond with bullying behavior, including insults, physical violence, and threats. “Joshua’s” teachers wonder if they are obligated to refer to “him” as “Amanda” and whether doing so would be in “his” best interest. The gym teacher has requested guidance as to which locker room “Joshua” can use and which would be most safe. “Joshua” has also asked to use the women’s bathroom, but other students have complained. The principal wonders if forcing “him” to stop this behavior would be a legal and effective way to address the bullying and other issues. There has been no communication from “Joshua’s” parents.

“Joshua” begins to withdraw socially and show signs of depression, and “his” academic performance slips. The principal calls together the student support team to determine the school’s responsibilities and options for addressing the bullying issues, meeting “Joshua’s” facility needs, and addressing “his” mental and emotional health concerns.

Identity Development and Challenges

Transgender is an umbrella term for people who self-identify as other than their birth sex (male or female). The exploration of gender nonconformance occurs among people across all ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups. Transgender or questioning students may have unique challenges and stressors in their daily lives, including school. Often, educators and other school professionals can work with those students to address challenges and facilitate the students’ safe participation in all school activities while supporting their exploration of or decisions about their gender identity.

STRESSORS AND SPECIAL NEEDS

Because transgender identity can involve the presentation of one’s body as a gender that is different than one’s physiology, a transgender student may face body shame, ridicule, harassment, or violence. Changing names, pronouns, clothing, or appearance or pursuing medical services to physically transition can be difficult processes, but they can also be straightforward

and affirming when pursued with the support and empathy of adult advocates, such as school professionals, mentors, and family members.

Identification language. Many transgender individuals choose names that are more appropriate to their gender identity than their physiological sex. For example, a student born physiologically female may choose a male name and request that name and male pronouns (he/him) be used instead of his birth name and female pronouns (she/her). It is not uncommon for a student to choose a gender-neutral name or request that pronouns be avoided whenever possible. It may become an administrator’s responsibility to create a formal policy or to clarify existing policies to resolve any contention regarding a transgender student’s right to use a chosen name or pronoun or dress in preferred gender-specific clothing. Administrators who are unsure of how to interpret certain policies or need help locating up-to-date legal information or best practices can contact national advocacy groups for guidance and resources.

Sex, dating, and sexual identity. *Transgender* does not refer to a sexual orientation. Transgender youth may self-identify as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer (a word that is gaining popularity as a term for flexible, gender-nonspecific sexual orientation). Navigating sex and dating relationships is difficult for anyone and especially so for students who are exploring or questioning their gender identity. Peer support from existing friendships; diversity groups, such as gay-straight alliances (GSAs); and online Web sites for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth can be essential.

Culture and sexual identity. Both gender and sexual identity manifest uniquely according to an individual's culture and community. Transgender and gender-variant identities exist in all cultures, but the language used and the ways that transitioning or transgender identity manifests itself vary widely. Internet resource searches that combine cultural language with *transgender* (i.e., "American Indian" and "transgender") may help identify culture-specific language, history, and information. Effective services can be provided by focusing on the individual's needs and communities, rather than looking exclusively to published knowledge about the relevant cultures or identities.

IDENTIFY EXPLORATION AND EXPRESSION

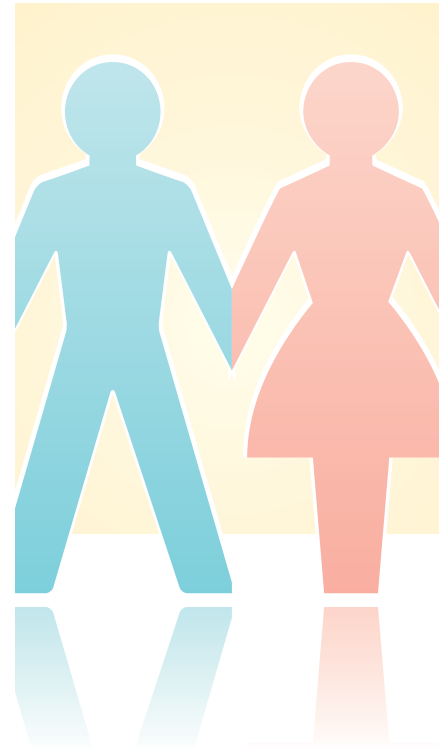
Transgender or questioning youth may face frustrations, fears, and risks as they explore their gender identity.

Confusion and frustration. Although individuals explore transgender identity for highly individual reasons, many youth report a deep feeling of discomfort or a pervasive sense that their physiological sex is

"wrong." These feelings can contribute to a sense of shame; isolation; body image dysphoria (dissatisfaction); depression; and, in particular, distress regarding gendered body development during puberty. Transgender youth may not have the language to express what their feelings may mean for their identity or role models to help them understand. Often, it is reassuring to hear about people in media or pop culture who are transgender or gender nonconforming.

Fear and risk. Transgender youth may fear losing the acceptance or respect of their families, peers, and religious or cultural communities. They may fear losing current or future housing, financial support, medical care, or other essential services. Those concerns may compound an already stressful or confusing exploration of identity and may prevent youth from coming out or reaching out for the support they need.

Identity disclosure. Transgender individuals may or may not choose to publicly identify themselves as transgender and may or may not choose to outwardly present themselves as the gender with which they identify. For example, a youth who was physiologically male at birth and who identifies personally as female may choose to use female pronouns and a female name; dress in female clothing, pursue medical services, such as female hormones (estrogen) or surgery to acquire female secondary sex characteristics; and make physical body changes to facilitate a female appearance. Another student might choose only some of those actions—or none at all—on the basis of what that student feels is necessary to feel healthy and whole or on the basis of limitations of services or support. Although minors may



have difficulty accessing medical services without parental consent, other support services—such as transgender support groups and counseling—can provide essential, confidential mental health support even if a youth's parents are not aware that their child is questioning his or her gender identity or are not supportive of the process.

Role of Administrators

Administrators usually become involved when a transgender student reports bullying or harassment or when others complain about the presence of a transgender student at the school. It may become an administrator's responsibility to facilitate effective resolutions among all parties. This can mean providing intervention, discipline, new policies, or other support to prevent, discourage, or terminate harassment or bullying that targets a transgender student. It can also mean working with parents, students, educators, or community members to establish a norm of tolerance and

respect for transgender students in the school and asserting that every student is entitled to and will receive the services that are needed to ensure his or her safety. To effectively provide those services, however, principals must evaluate their own beliefs about transgender students and gender non-conformance.

PERSONAL BIAS

In a 2008 study done by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and NASSP of principals' perspectives regarding bullying in schools, administrators reported far fewer protections for LGBTQ students who experience bullying or harassment compared with the protections and resources that are available for students who are victimized because of their racial or religious identities (The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2008). In fact, principals reported that antibullying programs, education resources, and other support systems were the least inclusive of transgender students among all minority identities listed.

Clearly, schools do not have the resources or policies in place to be effective advocates for transgender students. Negative attitudes about transgender inclusion, lack of funding, and lack of expertise or resources pose serious barriers to providing effective advocacy for and ensuring the safety of transgender students. Administrators can provide basic advocacy and support to transgender students simply through thoughtful and concerted efforts to use the administrative tools they already have. School psychologists and other health professionals can be instrumental in helping administrators, teachers, and staff members assess and overcome their own biases

to provide a safe and positive educational experience for transgender and questioning students.

ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Administrators are responsible for creating a backbone of support for students and staff members.

Ensuring students' rights and safety. All students deserve protection from harm and harassment at school, and any administrator equipped to provide such protection can effectively meet the safety needs of transgender students. Existing policies regarding bullying, harassment, and physical accommodation of students who are unable to effectively use school facilities can often be applied or easily adapted to address the unique needs of transgender or questioning youth.

Students may face concerns about the safety of using such facilities as restrooms, locker rooms, showers, and pools or of adhering to school dress codes. They may feel subject to harassment in gendered spaces or they may feel that using a gender-specific facility (or wearing gender-specific athletic attire or uniforms) negates their gender identity. For example, a student who was physiologically female at birth but who identifies as male may feel uncomfortable or unsafe wearing a skirt as part of a school uniform and may fear harassment in both male- and female-specific locker rooms.

Providing accommodations. It is the responsibility of school administrators to facilitate transgender students' full participation in school activities. Teachers and staff members are often willing and able to create effective arrangements and enforce them, but they will likely need support from administrators in the form of policies—and enforcement of the

policies—that protect the student. Such accommodations may include creating a unisex restroom in the building or allowing transgender students to use a staff restroom or allowing students to use the nurse's office instead of gender-specific locker rooms.

Facilitating names and pronouns. Many transgender individuals want to use names and pronouns that are consistent with their identified genders. Often, having a principal inform teachers and other professionals of a student's preferred name and pronoun change is an essential form of advocacy because students may be afraid, uncomfortable, or unable to request that their preferences be honored by their teachers, coaches, and other school professionals. Policy and policy enforcement, as well as professional development, can be essential components in the successful and smooth implementation of these practices. By setting a strong and clear expectation for compliance, administrators ensure that these practices are uniform and do not create conflict.

Support Systems and Interventions

Presently, there is a dearth of quantitative research on transgender youth and their needs. Anecdotal evidence that has been provided by educators and social service professionals who work with transgender youth, as well as testimonials from transgender youth themselves, indicate that transgender youth need strong and diverse networks of support, including peers; other transgender people and role models; parents or adult mentors; and advocates, such as educators, adult community members, religious leaders, and transgender-positive health care professionals. Educators and adult

Resources

Print

The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals. S. A. Brill & R. Pepper. 2008. San Francisco: Cleis Press.

Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender Issues

Bibliography. National Association of School Psychologists & M. Ludeke. In *Helping Children at Home and School III: Handouts for Families and Educators*, A. Canter, L. Z. Paige, & S. Shaw (Eds.). 2010. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Issues in Education: Programs, Policies, and Practices. J. T. Sears. 2005. New York: Routledge.

The Principal's Perspective: School Safety, Bullying and Harassment: A Survey of Public School Principals. Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. 2008. Retrieved from www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/000/001/1167-2.pdf

Transgender Community and Ally Organizations (Online)

Advocates for Youth www.advocatesforyouth.org

Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) www.glsen.org

National Coalition for GLBT Youth www.queeramerica.com

National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC) www.nyacyouth.org

Parents and Families of Gays and Lesbians (PFLAG) www.pflag.org

Transgender Youth Support Network www.transyouthsupportnetwork.org

Transyouth Family Allies www.imatyfa.org

Hotlines

LYRIC Youth Talkline: 800-246-7743
Monday–Saturday, 9:30 p.m.–midnight ET; peer talkline staffed by LGBT youth ages 16–24.

National LGBT Youth Hotline: 800-246-PRIDE
Monday–Friday, 8 p.m.–midnight ET; free and confidential peer talkline that addresses coming-out issues, relationship concerns, parent issues, school problems, HIV/AIDS anxiety, and safer-sex information.

The National Runaway Switchboard: 800-RUNAWAY
This 24-hour hotline for U.S. parents and youth offers crisis intervention, message service, educational information, referrals, and runaway searches.

Peer Listening Line for GLBT Youth: 800-399-PEER
Trained volunteers address safer sex, coming out, where to find gay-friendly establishments, HIV and AIDS, depression, suicide, and antigay and anti-lesbian harassment and violence.

The Trevor Project: 866-488-7386
A free and confidential service that offers hope and someone to talk to, 24/7.

Transgender Rights and Other Law Information (Online)

American Civil Liberties Union, Know your rights!
A quick guide for LGBT high school students:
www.aclu.org/lgbt/youth/28338res20070209.html

Lambda Legal, Rights of transgender people
www.lambdalegal.org/our-work/issues/rights-of-transgender-people; 212-809-8585

National Center for Transgender Equity
www.nctequality.org; 202-903-0112

Transgender Law and Policy Institute
www.transgenderlaw.org

Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund
www.transgenderlegal.org

Transgender Health Care Information (Online)

Many states and cities have transgender health organizations, projects, and provider lists for update information specific to your locale. A basic Internet search that includes your state and a search term like “transgender health” may bring up available local resources.

Transgender Care www.transgencare.com

World Professional Association for Transgender Health www.wpath.org

Intersex Conditions

The Intersex Initiative (IPDX) www.intersexinitiative.org

Intersex Society of North America www.isna.org

Examples of Transgender People in Popular Culture (Online)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_transgender_people

advocates are frequently first contacts for transgender or questioning youth and are uniquely positioned to advocate for them to family members and teachers and to help them locate appropriate resources.

SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT

At the school level, peer and adult support are essential for transgender youth to safely navigate identity and practical issues. Administrators must provide an environment where diversity is acknowledged and where students from diverse backgrounds and identities are affirmed, supported, and assured equal rights to safety and services. Refusing to help a student locate resources or support can be detrimental to that student's self-esteem and may intensify or facilitate developing feelings of depression, isolation, and fear. An administrator's failure to effectively and seriously respond to a transgender student's concerns or requests for support may make a school vulnerable to legal action.

Transgender and questioning students must be approached with sensitivity and a demonstrated willingness to help. Often, a goal-focused approach, such as finding resources or resolving a pressing concern (e.g., fear of bullying while using the school restroom), can assuage distrust or fears that the youth may hold regarding adults in authority. It is often helpful to work with a school psychologist or another designated mental health professional on staff to identify needs and resources, as well as providing a specific supportive adult to whom the student can turn when necessary.

Specific actions that administrators may make include:

- Reassuring students that their role is to support the students

without personal judgment

- Educating themselves on transgender issues
- Reassuring students that questioning and exploration are healthy and normal and that resources are available to aid in nonpressured self-exploration
- Making students aware of local and national resources for domestic violence, family conflict, homelessness and runaway services, suicide and depression, and peer support
- Communicating with organizations that work with transgender youth and referring students for services—a school psychologist can help
- Talking directly with school staff members or adults about accommodating a student who feels too disempowered to self-advocate or who fears negative repercussions from requesting support
- Inquiring about and addressing students' needs, such as having gender-neutral locker rooms.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

School professionals can help transgender youth and their peer allies locate community-based organizations for support and resources. Depending on the needs of the individual youth, those resources might include transgender-aware health providers and therapists; social and peer support groups; support groups for parents and families; advocacy organizations who can help problem solve and locate resources; and local shelters for runaway youth. School-based GSAs and other diversity groups may be welcoming and supportive resources for transgender youth. Many communities

have support groups or programs for LGBTQ youth to find social and emotional support and other resources. In areas where no local transgender support services are accessible, national e-mail discussion groups, Web sites, peer support hotlines, and organizations can be especially helpful.

Conclusion

With adequate support, all transgender youth can succeed academically and socially, but in many communities, support and resources for transgender youth are scarce or nonexistent. Support, encouragement, and advocacy by school staff members and administrators are essential to facilitate the safety, education, and social success of transgender youth and provide them with tools to self-advocate among peers and family members and in the community.

It is the responsibility of all administrators to respond to diversity and safety concerns and to be aware of current laws, policy, and best practices for handling such issues. Effectively managing those concerns requires principals to assess their own beliefs about transgender individuals and to encourage teachers and staff members to examine their own as well. Because ensuring safety and fostering diversity are ongoing processes and because responding to the needs of transgender students requires the support of a broad range of groups, involving school psychologists and other mental-health professionals is essential.

REFERENCE

- Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. (2008, May 12). *The principal's perspective: School safety, bullying and harassment*. Retrieved from www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/2294.html