

### Gender Transitions at School: Key Considerations

**Age and Grade-level:** The age and maturity level of the child is one key variable that will influence how a student's gender transition will unfold. A younger student may be less involved with the actual process, while older students will have a greater role in shaping 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 well ask the school to work with them to keep the process private to protect them from any negative consequences they may encounter when not at school.

**Privacy and Disclosure:** Whether 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, and it is incumbent upon the school 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 also be prepared for genuinely innocent confusion or uncertainty that may come up from members of the school community, including setting clear boundaries about questions to 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 their privacy rights.

Sadly, schools must also be able to respond to explicitly 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 hostile treatment. 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. These include:

- “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 always have 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.”
- “How can we help your child to be more comfortable?”

Finally, 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. 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 was another form of diversity other people “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, 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 characterized 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. One of the real challenges many students face come from the various student information systems that schools employ. Frequently driven by the student's legal name and gender 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 push of a computer key. Compounding the difficulty is the notion of a student's 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.

Here again we see how crucial it is for all involved to be working in concert on an ongoing basis, so that open conversation can occur as the situation evolves.