

Messages show complexity of gender identity debate

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By Nicole Carter

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PARIS — The proposed policy on student gender identity under consideration by Maine School Administrative District 17 has revealed deep differences within the Oxford Hills community as parents, educators, children and elected officials have spoken against or in favor of proposed Policy ACAAA, the first reading of which was approved by the district's school board during its Oct. 17 business meeting by a vote of 11-7.

Public outcry was immediate and before the vote was even taken. Some spoke passionately on behalf of transgendered youth who struggle with depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts due to fears of family and peer reactions. Others were concerned about the provisions of ACAAA that mandate confidentiality from parents if a transgender student requests it. A number of parents feared that without proper medical diagnosis that unsupervised bathrooms and locker rooms will be accessible to bullies who are not truly transgender, or that their cisgender children's safety will be at risk.

On Nov. 1 about 300 people attended a community forum on the proposed policy. Fifty spoke publicly, with around two-thirds opposing it and one-third supporting it.

No one who spoke against the policy offered solutions to protect transgender students' mental health and physical safety.

Similarly, proponents who support maintaining student confidentiality from their families did not speak about the consequences of families being uninformed, and to district employees who do not have proper training on matters of behavioral health and gender dysphoria.

The actual number of transgender students in Oxford Hills is not known. Off-the-record estimates are that 100-130 of the district's 3,200 student population may fall into this group.

SAD 17 school board meetings and forums are recorded by Norway Paris Community TV and can be viewed either live, or later on [the organization's website](#). Additionally personal messages have been sent to school board directors and the Advertiser Democrat.

Few community members who have used charged and divisive language in their public comments have put their positions in writing, while some of the most disrespectful statements from the community were made in the shadows of email messages rather than in front of neighbors and peers.

A handful of people have stated their positions during public meeting, emails to the school board as well as in letters to the editor in the Advertiser Democrat.

The Advertiser Democrat requested access to messages from the public to school board directors through Maine's Freedom of Access Act. The newspaper has viewed 34 messages from 31 people, all sent between Oct. 17 and Nov. 25. The senders include students, parents, educators and other citizens. No attempt has been made to verify the identity of people who have written messages to the school district.

Thirty-seven percent wrote in opposition of the policy. Reaction varies from valid concern to crude insult.

Those who support the proposed identity policy consistently spoke of LGBTQIA+ students' well being and mental health.

Unedited excerpts representing both sides of the issue are below:

Nov. 25, 2022

"Gender ideology is a lie created by Satan himself. Only people hypnotized by him believe that retarded garbage. I suggest starting a dialogue with Jesus. It's the only thing that can clear your head and heart."

Nov. 6, 2022

"I recall being discouraged from acting in a flamboyant manner. I recall being told that other little boys didn't dress up like I did, that other boys weren't drawn to playing with dolls, or doing their mother's hair like I was. But there was also something deeper. I had the realization that I was born the wrong gender, that I was a girl in a boy's body.

"I really don't know where this idea and feeling came from. It was something pure and natural, and not from any outside source, but even so, at the time I thought that it was wrong. I already knew from the world I saw around me and from the things that were said to me that my flamboyance was "wrong." I also definitely knew that my gender mix-up was also "wrong." I knew that the world outside wouldn't understand and I wondered how I could live my life like this. I considered ending my life. There didn't seem any other way out of the situation. I had no one to talk to. I knew my parents loved me, but I didn't think they would understand, so I kept it all inside."

Oct. 21, 2022

"I am requesting the members of MSAD 17 school board vote 'no' on the new transgender policy for students in our district. I respectfully ask you to consider the ramifications of this policy, how it will affect all of the student population, their parents, and school staff.

"We are talking about kids, with brain development in progress, with different backgrounds and backstories. Some parents and children have trauma, unknown to those around them but could be triggered by some of the changes being considered."

Oct. 19, 2022

"My daughter and I know a child who will benefit from the updated gender identity policy. We would like to thank you for making their school experience safer. As I'm sure you have all noticed, trans youth don't really have a great support system in our community outside of school. We are truly thankful to have a school board that puts the safety of all children ahead of politics."

Nov. 17, 2022

"I keep hearing that "the law requires it," in referencing this policy. I have read the policy multiple times and the laws that the policy states do not require the specifics of this policy. The laws require fair treatment of ALL students. The most quoted "law" (court case relay) from Northern Maine specifically calls out that it is not to be used as case law for casual use of bathrooms by anybody. It called out the pivotal presence of a medical diagnosis with that particular student as being one of the main reasons that student won their court case..."

Nov. 14, 2022

"...I want to be very clear that supporting a student's preferred gender identity does not mean providing them with gender-affirming medical care such as hormone-therapy treatments. It simply means calling them by their preferred name, using their preferred pronouns, and allowing them to present themselves as the gender with which they identify Over the years, I have sat with far too many students who have considered, and even attempted, suicide because they believed that they would never be accepted by friends/family/society or find a place where they truly belonged..."

Oct. 18, 2022

"As a parent and constituent of yours, I'm disgusted with this new bathroom policy in our schools. The fact that some deranged male playing dress up can follow my teenaged daughter into the bathroom is absolutely wrong. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I'm looking forward to when your team is up and we can have a representative with a backbone. First the whole superintendent debacle and now this. It's disgusting."

Nov. 14, 2022

"If you are here fighting against a child's right to privacy, then I think you should be asking why a child in our community would feel threatened at home for trying to preserve their own life – and we need to understand it is a fact that people experiencing gender dysphoria have a far greater chance of suicide unless they are accepted by their family and community. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that 73 percent of Transgender Adolescence reported psychological abuse, 39 percent reported physical abuse, and 19 reported sexual abuse, higher in every category when compared to their CIS gender counterparts."

Nov. 7, 2022

"My concern is that who has the schooling and licensing (PhD) to make this diagnosis or to determine that a given student has gender dysphoria? How are they qualified to rule out 10 other disorders that can also have this symptom: dysphoria? – even social workers and counselors are not able to make this type of diagnosis."

Nov. 2, 2022

"If I were a trans individual and any of the first 10 speakers last night were my parents, I would truly not feel safe outing myself to them..."

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