

Oxford Hills board approves first reading of student gender identity policy

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By Nicole Carter

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Directors of Maine School Administrative District 17 listen Monday to discussion on a student gender identity policy in their board room in Paris. Two dozen members of the public attended, some of whom gave their views on the policy. The board voted 11-7 to approve the first reading. *Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat*

PARIS — Maine School Administrative District 17 directors voted 12-7 Monday night to approve the first reading of a policy on student gender identity.

Two dozen members of the public attended, with many parents, students and community members supporting the policy; several people opposed it.

The latter cited concerns about use of restrooms and locker rooms by students according to their gender identity and requiring staff to not disclose information to parents without the approval of a student. The nondisclosure issue involves instances where a student has asked to be called by their preferred rather than legal name in school or use their gender identify on school records. However, parents would be able to access any information contained in their children's school records by request.

Four people spoke in favor of the policy: a parent with an LGBTQ child; an educator who said staff need to be properly trained on student gender identity; a staff member who talked about the high rates of suicide, homelessness and bullying of LGBTQ youth; and a person who said she recently learned about a friend's traumatic high school experiences as a nonbinary student.

Paris resident John Andrews, who also represents Hebron, Buckfield and Paris in the Maine State Legislature, was the first to address the board, stating that his Sunday football viewing was interrupted by constituents calling him and railing against the policy with triggering rhetoric. He accused the board of making drastic change to policy in secret and laying "the groundwork of the criminalization of parenting."

"This is a drastic change that's being hidden from the public," Andrews said. "What's the rush? The obvious inference is that you want to ram this through before parents get wind of it."

Andrews called the policy an ideological purity test that demands agreement with far-left dogma. He said parents who disagree with the policy will be targeted and threatened and possibly lose (custody of) their children. He also said noncompliant teachers would be punished or terminated and predicted that it will lead to many resigning. At different times he referred to the policy proposal as totalitarian or radical.

Andrews left the meeting before Chief Student Services Officer Jan Neureuther explained to the board that the school district's legal options are to create a regulation or a policy regarding student gender identity. Administrators chose to write it as a policy because that process requires transparency to the public and board approval.

Norway Director Curtis Cole said he did not understand the difference between regulation and policy about student gender identity.

"To say we're sneaking this in?" Neureuther said. "We're not. Regulation does not have to be voted on by board, so we could have put it in as a regulation. We didn't. We put this in as a policy so it is coming in front of the board. We are being transparent. That's the truth."

During the board's discussion, one student said she previously sought counseling for abuse through the school only because it guaranteed confidentiality.

"It was very scary knowing that I had a parent at home that was not willing for me to go to counseling," she said. "I would have been ridiculed and yelled at. It was good to know they did not have to tell my parent that I was seeking counseling because I would have gotten in trouble for that at home. I had someone I could talk to at school, that wouldn't tell."

The five-page policy, [Gender Identity of Students](https://tinyurl.com/yty6p7fr), is on the MSAD 17 website at <https://tinyurl.com/yty6p7fr>.

Approving the first reading were Mark Heidmann of Harrison, Jared Cash and Kelly Jacobson, both of Norway, Anna Gregoire and Diana Olsen, both of Otisfield, Shauna Broyer and Gary Smith, both of Oxford; Sarah Otterson and Julia Lester, both of Paris, Judy Green and Kitty Winship, both of Waterford, and Natalie Andrews of West Paris.

Voting against it were Rose Lacasse of Harrison; Lew Williams and Amanda Fearon, both of Hebron, Peter Wood of Norway, Lisa Dunham of Oxford, and Jennifer Russell and Robert Jewell, both of Paris.

Cole abstained from voting, and Stacia Cordwell of Oxford and Veronica Poland of West Paris were absent.

There will be a second reading of the policy and another vote.

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