

# Oxford Hills residents divided on student gender identity policy

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By Nicole Carter

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PARIS — Fifty people shared diverse viewpoints Tuesday night at a public forum on Maine School Administrative District 17's proposed policy on gender identity of students.

Terry Hayes of Buckfield, executive director of the Maine Municipal Bond Bank and former state legislator, moderated the public discussion attended by about 300 people at Oxford Hills Comprehensive High School.

Roughly 70% of the speakers opposed the policy, which the board of directors approved in its first reading Oct. 17.

Three key points in the policy were generally disputed:

- A Maine Human Rights Commission memo from 2016 that added definitions surrounding gender identity and orientation to the interpretation of the Maine Human Rights Act has been applied as law, rather than guidance.
- In 2014 in *Doe vs. RSU 26* based in Orono, a transgender student sued over the right to use the public bathroom she identified with. The Maine Supreme Judicial Court's decision was based on the fact that the student's family, peers and the school district all recognized her gender. The decision also noted that the student had been medically diagnosed as transgender and had an established transition plan. SAD 17 directors cited that case in writing the policy draft, yet according to the proposed policy, a student in the Oxford Hills School District may choose which bathroom to use after they have consistently asserted their preferred identity. Speakers pointed out that a medical diagnosis and a consistent assertion do not merit the same conclusion.
- The policy requires district staff to keep a student's gender identity and preferences, such as changing their pronoun or name in school, confidential from parents when the student requests it. In instances where a parent is aware of their child's gender identity and expression and disagrees with it, the school is obligated to abide by the wishes of the student and not the parent.

While the policy allows students to keep their gender identity confidential from their parents, a parent is allowed to view the records of their minor child, which include their gender preferences. The school must inform the student of the parent's request. Only students over the age of 18 are able to keep their school records confidential from their parents.

Not all statements were focused on the Human Rights Commission memo, the 2014 lawsuit and the provisions for student confidentiality.

Alan Bean, an occupational medicine specialist from Harrison, said gender dysphoria — a sense of unease a person may have between their biological sex and their gender identity — is caused by various mental health disorders and it's wrong for medical professionals to normalize the condition of their patients.

"I appreciate those who are pushing to normalize gender identity choice believe that they're doing so from a position of compassion," he said. "This is grossly misguided. I practice medicine as compassionately as any physician you will ever meet. However, lying to my patients by minimizing their problems is not compassion. If I tell my patients that their disorder is normal that is not compassion.

"Medical science has always known that gender dysphoria or gender identity disorder is clearly that: a psychological disorder. To label it as a normal or legitimate choice is either misinformed, societal brainwashing, or outright lie," Bean said.



Natalie Andrews of West Paris, Maine School Administrative District 17 board chairwoman, addresses a forum Tuesday night on a proposed gender identity policy at Oxford Hills Comprehensive High School in Paris. *Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*



Residents of the Oxford Hills School District attend a forum Tuesday night on a controversial gender identity policy directors are considering. Of the 50 people who spoke at the high school in Paris, roughly 70% were opposed to the policy. *Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat*

Other speakers voiced political or religious opposition to adopting the policy.

“We don’t need this proposed policy,” Linda Chagnon of Oxford said. “I know where it’s coming from. It’s the activists from the (LGBTQ+) people. Political. Why would I want to give up my current rights to my children and grandchildren. Let’s have some common sense here. This is controlling our thought, too.”

Ron Blake of Norway said, “From the beginning of time, from Adam and Eve, man, cultures, civilizations, have risen and fallen over this exact issue, gay and lesbian problems that have been allowed to infiltrate and destroy not only government but also entire societies.”

Eric Hanson of Paris, pastor of Hosanna Church in Oxford, educator and Oxford Hills High School alumnus, tied gender identity to the decay and fall of western civilizations.

“When government gets to the place where they feel and enforce that they are the ones who know what is best for others in matters of family privacy and matters of morality, soon things begin to unwind very seriously,” he said. “Not just in our time and those of western culture backgrounds.

“Other times in history, one of the major warning signs is the birth rate that drops below replacement level, which is 2.1 children per woman of child-bearing age over the course of a lifetime,” he said. “It is already well below that in the U.S., precipitously below that in France and other countries. There are forces in motion pushing it ever lower and lower and lower in a spiral. Local control and family sanctity and family having the final say-so is sacrosanct for the continuation of any culture.”

Oxford Hills educators who spoke were split on the policy.

A couple questioned whether administrators are qualified to make judgments on students’ gender identity and dysphoria and said staff have not been properly trained to be responsible for bathroom privacy and safety.

Some teachers urged looking at the perspectives of the students who experience gender dysphoria.

“I fully support this policy,” Amanda Miller of Hebron, a school social worker, said. “It improves mental health and reduces suicide ideation, substance use and self harm. Being trans is not a diagnosis, it is not a mental health problem. It only becomes a problem when those individuals repeatedly face barriers around social acceptance and cannot freely express themselves.

“My goal is to keep families at the table,” she said. “To keep them involved. To keep students trusting that their families love them. But some families . . . send messages to trans children that an important part of them is not acceptable within their family. There are times when these youth need expanded support from the wider community to feel worthy, safe and fully valued.”

Melissa Prescott of Norway, a teacher in School Administrative District 44 based in Bethel, took direct aim at the positions of some opponents as some in the crowd tried to drown her out.

She called the policy “harm reduction,” she said. “For those of you who speak about the care for suicide and all these other concerns about student mental health, I go to guidance counselors, to social workers.

“The folks who spoke in opposition, I can understand your fear and confusion about it,” Prescott said. “But there is science and best practice to back up this policy. I realize we have a doctor who spoke tonight who said some inaccurate information. The idea that you are either male or female at birth is false. Intersex people are real and they deserve protection.”

Students on the Oxford Hills Comprehensive High School civil rights team addressed the board and attendees on behalf of transgender students, saying LGBTQ+ students need extra support and protection from being bullied and their fears about bathroom safety need to be understood.

One student read a letter to the board, signed by two dozen LGBTQ+ students, staff and advocates, asking for support for the policy.

“The recent negative feedback of the policy has caused students and staff who are part of the LGBTQ+ community to feel unsafe, unwelcome and uncomfortable in the school,” the student read. “If this policy is not put in place then what we consider to be human rights and privileges would not be provided to trans and nonbinary students. This portrays the message that their identities do not matter, which means that they do not matter . . . The misinformation and rumors that are being spread have negatively impacted students and staff who are part of the LGBTQ+ community in our school. We ask that people read the policy and ask clarifying questions so that they can understand and support the rights and protections it offers trans and nonbinary youth.”

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