

Gender identity policy debate continues during SAD 17 school board meeting

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By Nicole Carter

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Oxford Hills School District directors are joined at their meeting Monday in Paris by about 30 residents, some of whom expressed opinions on the controversial Gender Identity of Students policy. The board voted 11-7 last month to approve the first reading of the policy. *Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat*

PARIS — Public concern and input about Maine School Administrative School District 17's proposed policy ACAA gender identity continued Monday night when about 30 community members attended the school board of directors' meeting.

In an 11-7 vote, directors approved the first reading of the policy during their Oct. 17 meeting. A community forum was held Nov. 1 at Oxford Hills Comprehensive High School to allow the public to express their positions on the issue to the school board.

The five-page policy is on the [MSAD 17 website](#). It contains definitions on gender identity; procedures for addressing needs; guidance on issues such as privacy, school records, names and pronouns, restrooms, locker rooms and other gender-segregated facilities and dress code; safety and support; and staff training and informational materials.

Monday night, seven people spoke during the public comment period at the start of the meeting, including former board member Scott Buffington of Paris. Buffington had also spoken about the proposed policy at the two previous meetings.

At the most recent meeting Buffington implied that when the school board approved the first reading of ACAA directors had not been properly informed before casting their votes, a position he had not put forth during the other times he addressed the board.

"I'm upset," Buffington said. "I believe this board was fed misleading information in a manner to manipulate the outcome of the vote concerning the gender identity policy."

Buffington said he was told that one director led the charge on moving the policy forward before citing a 2014 Maine Supreme Judicial Court decision in *Doe vs. RSU 26* where a transgender student won the right to use the bathroom consistent with her chosen gender identity and a 2016 Maine Human Rights Commission memo that added gender identity and orientation definitions to interpretation of the Maine Human Rights Act.

Buffington did not acknowledge during his statements that ACAA was drafted using language provided to SAD 17 by the district's legal counsel, Drummond Woodsum, in a policy template written by the firm. Drummond Woodsum vetted the policy as written by the school board's policy committee before it was presented to the overall board last month. After consulting with legal counsel, the policy committee unanimously voted to recommend that directors approve the first reading of ACAA.

Following his suggestion that the directors who voted in favor of the first reading had not made their decision using accurate, legally based information and questioning where the original directive for the school board to formulate a gender identity policy initiated from, Buffington asked them to reconsider their vote.

James Grovo, a father of four sons, also spoke in opposition of the policy but instead of saying it was the work of school board agenda he accused school teachers of usurping parents' rights.

"As time has gone on, it has been pretty apparent that teachers seem to want to undermine me as a parent," Grovo said. "I don't care what anybody does with their own lives. I do have a problem with what we are teaching kids I believe teachers have taken it upon themselves, I understand their commitment to their students and I applaud them. My point is, at what point is it too far? It is my job to teach my sons morality, ethics, empathy. I don't believe it's the teachers' responsibility I would be very interested to read this proposed policy and also where we are not in compliance."

Four people voiced support for a gender identity policy, including Justin Bondeson, a Norway resident, parent and an educator with SAD 44 Bethel. Bondeson spoke of his experience working directly with trans youth.

"I was most struck by was the incredible bravery of these young people," he said. "Who faced ostracization and rejection from not just their close family but their extended family, their faith communities. It was not choice. They had to live with either denying their true self or facing that ostracization.

"In my reading of this policy, it is a very low-risk way to make things safe for a very vulnerable population that faces harassment, discrimination and an incredibly high risk of suicide My question is—if you could cut the suicide rate in half for a vulnerable population, would you do it?"

By the time Board Chairperson Natalie Andrews invited each director present to share their thoughts on the Nov. 1 community forum, all community members who spoke in opposition of the proposed policy had already departed.

During their discussion, several directors stated that they hoped the policy language would be revised to reflect the wishes of those who had spoken against provisions like maintaining student confidentiality over parents' rights. Some also expressed concern for the difficult position the proposed policy places teachers and staff in.

Others were concerned that the forum had become a platform for sharing misinformation.

Vice-chair Jared Cash of Norway was troubled that some people in the community used the forum to disparage the work of the school board.

"We try to bring the process forward, with transparency," he said. "To have people, who I believe know the process, misconstrue and take advantage of that for whatever aims they have personally [was frustrating]. It wasn't listening to the views on different sides. It was the people who I think knew what they were doing and made allegations against it.

"The public comments seemed to be 70%/30% against versus for. But my email, and letters, were almost the reverse of that. It tells me that speaking up for this issue has been a challenge to do in a public setting, based on the energy against."

Directors Diana Olsen and Anna Gregoire of Otisfield concurred.

"I particularly appreciated hearing from parents and teachers, and particularly from students," Olsen said. "Unfortunately, with some of the discussion some people were intimidated and fearful of speaking out, and that came across in the numerous emails I received. I am concerned with what each and every student is hearing and how it's affecting them."

"It was pretty heavily weighted with misinformation being shared," added Gregoire. "I found it disheartening that people were afraid to speak."

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