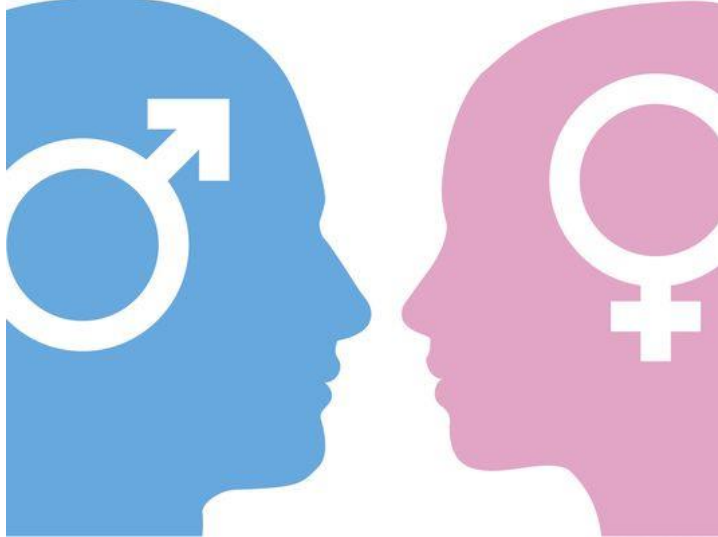


Schools aim to include transgender students



[Amanda Oglesby](#), @OglesbyAPP 1:46 p.m. EST November 13, 2014



(Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto)

Transgender students will benefit from a quiet cultural shift happening at schools across the state.

Some school officials are considering extending to transgender students the same protections educators promise against bias based on race, gender and sexual orientation.

Hazlet Township Public Schools

introduced a policy last month that gives transgender students there the right to assert a preferred gender identity, as long as the student is consistent and sincere with their choice and they provide notice in writing.

"We want to make sure all of them feel comfortable and are able to access all public education has to offer," Hazlet Superintendent Bernard F. Bragen Jr. said.

Hazlet's policy sets a framework for school officials, the student and parents to discuss issues like bathroom use, locker room selection, physical education classes and other school issues tied to gender. Bragen said the policy does not lay out specific answers to those questions, because each would be determined by the student's circumstances, age and the facilities available within the school.

The comfort of other students would also be considered, he said.

Other Jersey Shore schools are considering taking similar action. The Jackson School District will consider a transgender student policy this month, and Manchester's Policy Committee is scheduled to review a similar handbook addition.

Bragen said the transgender student policy in Hazlet expands already existing rules aimed at stopping discrimination. The district had one experience with a student who asserted a new gender identity, he said. The school and family were able to agree on ways to meet the student's needs, Bragen said.

"I'm not sure it (the policy) has changed anything," said the superintendent. "I think what it's done has specifically identified transgendered students to make sure they are appropriately included."

Not everyone is on board with the changes. Many parents are vocal objectors to the idea of their students sharing bathrooms and locker rooms with transgender students.

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Rachel Pepe is a 13 year old Transgender who finds herself without a school. Her mother Angela has found a private school where she can feel safe, but Middletown Board of Education is reluctant to pay for it. STAFF VIDEO BY PETER ACKERMAN

The divide flared after a Middletown mom said her [Thorne Middle School teenager, who was transitioning to live as a girl, met resistance from school officials about her gender identity.](#) Across the country, battles continue to be waged between transgender students and school districts.

In 2013, California passed a law allowing transgender students in public school to select the locker room and restroom of their gender preference.

Seth Rainess, a facilitator for the transgender support group of Jersey Shore PFLAG (Parents, Families, Friends of Lesbians and Gays), said schools have little choice but to protect transgender students. Last April the U.S. Department of Education said a federal law, called Title IX, that protects students from discrimination based on sex also applied to transgender students.

"Transgender people are just people," said Rainess, who is also transgendered. "The important thing is just to be on board and give them support."

Already ahead of the trend, Ocean Township School District has a decade-old policy that ensures transgender students can pick the restroom and locker room of their choice, said Sue Henderson, an adviser to the district's Gay Straight Alliance.

"We're on our fourth transgender student," she said.

The new school policies represent a significant shift in school culture, said Andrea Bowen, executive director of Garden State Equality and a transgender woman.

"There shouldn't be this sense that trans students should be banished to some far off faculty bathroom as a immediate response," she said. "Kids have a right to use whatever facilities match their identities."

Bowen said the new policies are leading to positive interactions between transgender students and their teachers.

"It's really beautiful and heartening, without question," she said. "It makes me proud of our movement."