

# Charting a Course to Transgender Inclusion

**"Y**ou're an abomination," a substitute teacher told Aubrey in front of her 7th grade class. During her freshman year, a security guard loudly taunted, "Are you a boy or girl?" as she walked through the school's metal detectors. "What's the matter with your mother sending you to school in girls' clothes?"

Transgender students like Aubrey face the highest rates of verbal and physical harassment in school, and the effects can be dire. Transgender students are more likely to attempt suicide, miss school, earn lower grades, and not pursue a college education. Before switching schools, Aubrey had shoes thrown at her by peers in an incident caught on tape; incredibly, she was suspended, not her assailants.

Where knowledge and will toward inclusion run low, school can be a terrifying place for transgender students. It doesn't have to be, however. As reported in a 2013 Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) survey, many schools are adopting practices that are driving the trend of decreased rates of physical and verbal assaults based on gender expression.

At Aubrey's new high school, she has a support system of adults and peers that she can turn to, and even the teachers who aren't aware of her status are more in-tune with LGBT issues, says her mom, Anna. "They're aware of microaggressions and misgendering; they are all great."

So what are schools that support transgender students doing differently?

## Schools in Transition

When a student comes out as transgender, schools and districts often find themselves in uncharted territory; new resources, however, are filling in the gaps. In September, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the National Education Association, and a number of other groups published *Schools in Transition*, a guide to help

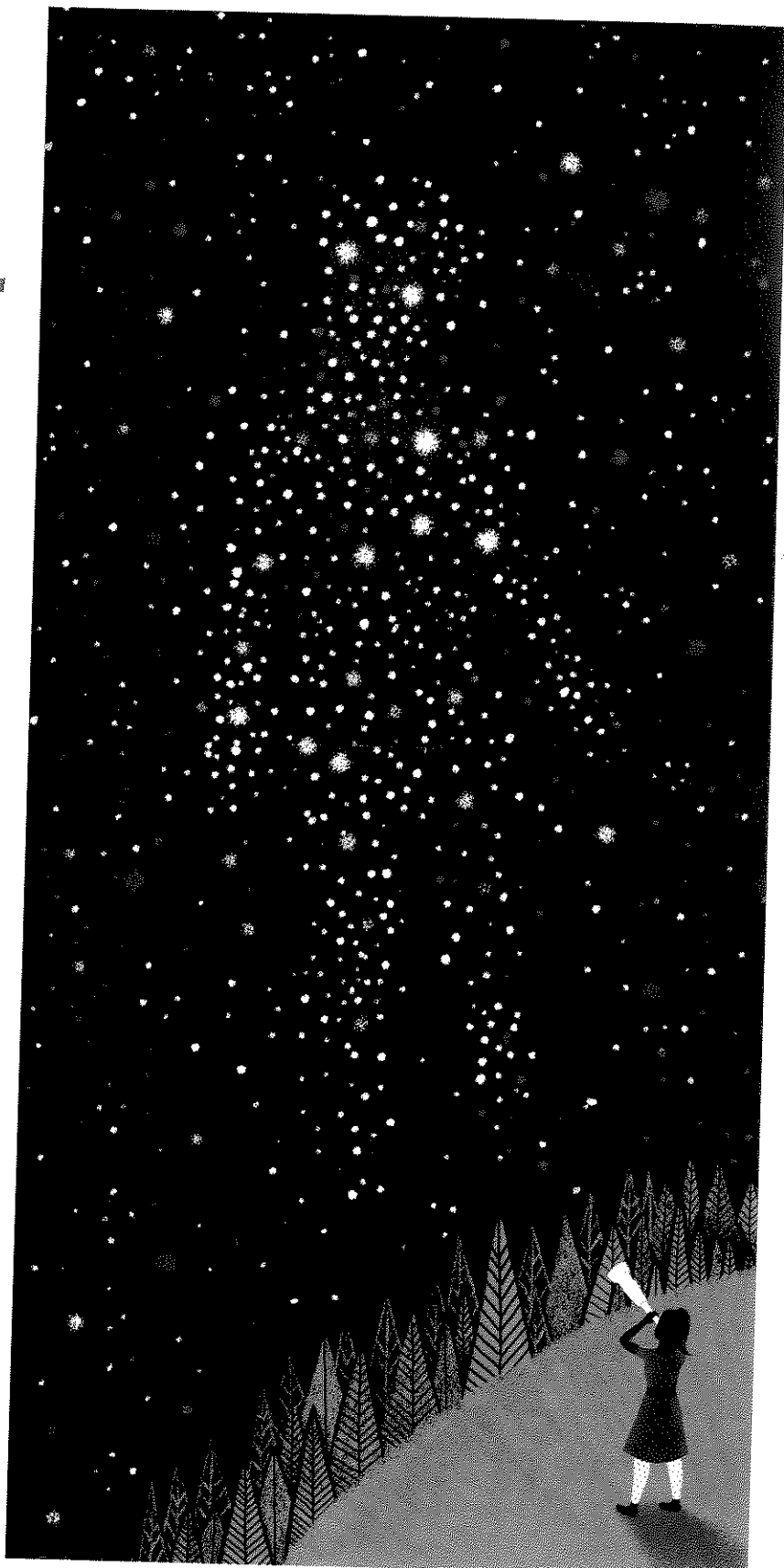


Illustration by Donald Ely

K–12 schools build inclusive environments for transgender students.

"A lot of questions we get asked [at HRC] are answered in the guide," says Ellen Kahn, director of HRC Foundation's Children, Youth, & Families Program. The guide addresses grey areas schools often encounter, including best practices around accommodations such as restrooms and athletics, and how administrators can respond to common questions from students and parents, such as *why is the school making such a big deal out of this?* and *who is protecting my child?*

*Schools in Transition* also provides clarity on what can seem like a fluctuating legal landscape. Although state laws vary (14 states and Washington, D.C., have laws against discrimination based on gender identity in schools), federal law (under Title IX) unequivocally prohibits discrimination against transgender students.

"The law is on the side of students," says Kahn. "Title IX is about access and opportunity, academics, supports—everything the school has to offer."

## A District Plan

For the Central Dauphin School District in Pennsylvania, it's not about meeting legal requirements or doing the minimum to avoid getting sued, says Assistant Superintendent Karen McConnell. "It's about best addressing the needs of an at-risk population."

After several students came out as transgender last year, McConnell became the district's single point of contact—a recommendation from GLSEN—to ensure that "the district speaks with one voice on the issue."

She worked with the school's central office to develop guidelines using GLSEN's model district policy as a framework ([www.glsen.org/article/transgender-model-district-policy](http://www.glsen.org/article/transgender-model-district-policy)). Developing a district policy that provides equal protections and specific guidance can help administrators prioritize transgender students' safety and well-being. "From the leadership down, you have to make expectations very clear," says Kahn. "Train your staff and make sure they know how to help and intervene, and how to answer kids' questions."

McConnell has already trained administrators and counseling staff in the 12,000-student district, as well as staff in schools that serve transgender students.

*Ask the student's chosen name and preferred pronouns, and work with staff to make sure the correct name is always used. If there's an "unwillingness to affirm who this person is, it can have a tremendous negative impact on [that student's] emotional well-being and academic success."*

The training, she explains, covers the "whole gamut of basic terminology," including terms such as gender identity and gender expression. Staff learns what it means to be transgender, what it looks like, what kinds of challenges students face, and how to appropriately support them.

It's the kind of training that should happen regardless of a school's student population, says Anna, and it should include every adult in the building, plus bus drivers and substitute teachers.

## What's at Stake

Anna and Aubrey know too well the difference between districts that plan to support transgender students and those that don't. When Aubrey was in middle school and her mom brought LGBT resources to the administration, they didn't think the issue affected enough students to warrant training—and at the time, there were no district policies in place. In fact, the principal and assistant principal said in a PTA meeting that they'd never heard the term "LGBT," so the learning curve was steep. Eventually, when Aubrey publicly transitioned and presented as female at the end of 8th grade, the administrators agreed to bring in HRC's Welcoming Schools program to speak with staff.

"They went from zero understanding to about 60 percent," says Anna, but they never fully got the pronouns right and the bullying continued. Instead of moving on to the feeder high school that fall, Aubrey's family relocated from the nearby suburbs to Washington, D.C. Anna feared that her daughter "wouldn't have lasted a week" at the local high school because she would have been in physical or emotional danger.

## How to Help

In the District of Columbia Public Schools, a clear policy for being inclusive of transgender students eliminates the guesswork. Central Dauphin's districtwide guidelines mirror the recommendations outlined in *Schools in Transition* but also allow for flexibility. Some students have supportive parents and others don't; some choose to transition openly while others want to keep their status private. "We're just stepping through it very carefully, one student at a time," says McConnell.

Kahn notes that regardless of a student's age, schools can rely on the following best practices to support students who are transitioning.

**Get the Pronouns Right.** Ask the student's chosen name and preferred pronouns, and work with staff to make sure the correct name is *always* used. If there's an "unwillingness to affirm who this person is, it can have a tremendous negative impact on [that student's] emotional well-being and academic success," says Kahn.

Many districts, including Central Dauphin, have worked with their software companies to correctly identify students in the database, even if their names have not legally changed. In Pennsylvania, most documents don't require a legal name, McConnell explains, including diplomas, IEPs, class schedules, rosters, and report cards.

**Provide Accommodations.** The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights recently stepped in on several high-profile cases to defend transgender students' rights to use the bathrooms and locker rooms that correspond with their gender identity—and a growing number of

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states and districts have policies in place backing Title IX protections.

Experts say students should have the option of using the restroom that aligns with their gender identity or a unisex restroom; Central Dauphin leaves this decision up to the transgender student and provides accommodations accordingly.

At the same time, relegating a student to a nurse's bathroom can be stigmatizing and "out" them to others, Kahn cautions. "Sometimes schools will choose (or a student will agree) to use a nurse's bathroom because it's 'safer,'" she says, but that should only be a short-term solution.

**Respect Their Privacy.** One of the most common questions that arises when a student transitions is whether the school community "has a right to know," according to the guide. And "the simple answer is 'no.'" Revealing a student's transgender status, legal name, or sex assigned at birth could violate FERPA as well as expose the student to increased bullying and harassment.

Never disclose a student's transgender status unless he or she specifically authorizes you to do so, advises Kahn. "Only a few people need to know about the transition plan."

**Intervene.** Creating a safe learning environment means intervening not only when students are harassed, but also when they say inappropriate comments. The boys in Aubrey's high school often "make jokes about transgender people and talk about how, if they ever found out their girlfriend was transgender, they would be violent toward her." It puts Aubrey on edge knowing that her safety could be compromised if students learned of her status.

When the media sensationalizes transgender issues, the rhetoric only gets

worse, she says. Students regularly throw around language like, "Oh, did you see that tranny on TMZ last night?"

"Teachers can't let kids be kids all the time," Aubrey remarks. "Sometimes you have to step in and [tell students] 'that's not an OK thing to say.'"

**Create a Gender-Inclusive Environment.** There's a tendency in schools, especially at the elementary level, to embed gender into everything from activities and routines to procedures and language. For instance, students are often grouped or lined up by gender, and kids are routinely addressed as "girls and boys." Dialoguing with staff about ways to be more inclusive and drawing from resources like Welcoming Schools ([www.welcomingschools.org](http://www.welcomingschools.org)) could help eliminate students' anxieties over choosing a side.

### When the Change Comes

Working in these layers of support and raising awareness about transgender issues can help students like Aubrey thrive. "Just trying to get that acceptance in the school community is a good starting place for changing the culture of our country," assures McConnell. "Once people say, 'oh, I know a transgender person, what's the big deal?,' that's when the change starts to come."

As policies and practices become more supportive, McConnell and others aren't idly waiting by. "I'm not going to sit here and say, whose civil rights do I honor today? I honor everyone's civil rights every day, and that includes transgender students." ■

*Aubrey and Anna are pseudonyms used to protect the student and parent interviewed in this article.*

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