

School districts becoming pronoun-savvy for transgender and questioning students

By George Basler
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Malcolm Greenspun came out as transgender to his parents when he was in eighth grade. When he entered Ithaca High School as a freshman this fall, he asked teachers and administrators to call him by his new first name.

Greenspun, 14, is among nearly 2% of American high school students who identify as transgender, according to a 2019 survey by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. Transgender is defined as having a gender identity that does not correspond to one's assigned sex at birth.

Some transgender students and "questioning" students (who are unsure of their gender identity or sexual orientation) want teachers and classmates to refer to them using the gender-neutral pronouns of they, them and their. That is, rather than have people use a phrase such as "I heard him say" or "I heard her say," a student (or staff member) may wish the phrase to be "I heard them say."

On Dec. 10, Merriam-Webster announced "they" as the 2019 word of the year, endorsing its use as a singular pronoun.

Greenspun asks others to use the pronouns he, him and his.

"Pronouns are important because it helps a student feel comfortable," Greenspun told *On Board*. "It also shows other students in the classroom that we respect our differences."

If school personnel fail to use a student's preferred name or pronoun, the district risks being found in violation of the state Dignity for All Students Act, according to Tracie Lopardi, a school attorney with Harris Beach, which represents some 150 school districts across the state.

She cited state guidelines issued in 2015 called "Guidance to School Districts for Creating a Safe and Supportive School Environment for Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students" (bit.ly/23XyJa).

The first step in creating a welcoming school environment for LGBTQ (lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender or questioning) students is "having an open and honest conversation" about the needs of these students and "creating opportunities for all students to have a voice," according to Jeremy Thode, president of the board of education in the Smithtown Central School District on Long Island.

The father of a high school sophomore who is transgender, Thode gave a presentation at NYSSBA's 2019 Annual Convention in Rochester on "Accepting & Celebrating the LGBTQ Student."

One of his recommendations: school leaders ought to ensure that transgender students have staff members who can be their "champions" in the school environment.

Also, "the pronoun piece for most transgender people is vitally important," Thode said. "It's critical because that's what their brain believes they are."

When students inform teachers and classmates about the name and pronouns that they want used to refer to them, reactions can vary.

Consider Peter Vlaming, a French teacher at West Point High School in Virginia. Last December, one of his students began to identify as male and wanted to be



Malcolm Greenspun, a transgender student in Ithaca High School, is a member of an advisory group called the Student Superintendent Advisory Council. ❖ Photo courtesy of Ithaca City School District

referred to by the pronouns he, his and him. Despite a principal's instruction to comply with those expressed wishes of the student and the student's parents, Vlaming responded by avoiding using pronouns altogether. But when the student was walking around while wearing virtual reality goggles, Vlaming called out, "Don't let her hit the wall!" The student complained, and the school board later voted to terminate the teacher's employment for violating the district's nondiscrimination policy. Now Vlaming is suing the school board, claiming violation of his free speech and religious liberty rights.

A similar controversy over pronoun avoidance arose involving a math teacher in Jacksonville, Florida, according to *The Washington Post*.

To Ithaca Superintendent Luvelle Brown, it's appropriate to require teachers and staff to call students by the name or pronoun they prefer. "Our mission is to engage, educate and empower young people," he said. "What better way to do that than to allow them to choose how they wish to be identified?"

It is also important that districts follow state guidelines regarding bathroom access, according to NYSSBA General Counsel and Deputy Executive Director Jay Worona.

"Prohibiting a student from accessing the restrooms that match his gender identity is prohibited sex discrimination," according to State Education Department guidelines. "Alternative accommodations, such as a single 'unisex' bathroom or private changing space, should be made available to students who request them, but should never be forced upon students, nor presented as the only option."

When the Windsor Central School District renovated its high school recently, the Broome County district replaced four traditional boys' and girls' bathrooms with

18 single-stall, gender-neutral restrooms. The district also created private changing areas in its locker rooms.

"If a student can't learn at a high level because our policies, practices or facilities are not inclusive, we must make changes," Windsor Superintendent Jason Andrews said.

As capital projects arise, school boards should expect architects to ask whether they want plans to include gender-neutral bathrooms.

Another approach to provide a welcoming environment involves minimizing use of gender-specific words. The Ithaca school board has a policy to avoid gender-specific language in school communications. For example, sign up sheets for school events and field trips no longer use the words "boys and girls." They use the gender-neutral word "students."

"The shifts are subtle, but they're not subtle for young people who are questioning their gender identity," Brown said.

Sometimes school officials overcomplicate the question of how to be a welcoming district, according to Rob Egan, program manager of the Identity Youth Center, a Binghamton non-profit that has worked with districts throughout the region.

"The first question I ask officials is: 'Did you ask students what they need to feel safe and affirmed?'" he said.

To solicit such information on an ongoing basis, Ithaca administrators have set up a student advisory council of middle and high school students.

Greenspun, who sits on the committee, said it's a good mechanism for airing student concerns.

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Nevertheless, he only gives the district a grade of “B” in dealing with issues of importance to transgender students. Gender-neutral bathrooms ought to be in all, not just some, wings of the high school, he said, and there should be more discussion of issues surrounding gender non-conforming students in health classes. Also, he is annoyed that his former first name is on his school ID card.

According to advocates for transgender youth, it’s hard to determine how many school boards have taken action involving pronoun usage, bathroom access and other forms of inclusivity for LGBTQ students.

“There are so many different types of schools that you have to go district by district,” said Erin Cross, director of the University of Pennsylvania’s Lesbian Gay Bi-

sexual Transgender Center. “Many districts have started thinking about being more inclusive, but obviously some are not giving any thought to what’s coming.”

And what’s coming? It may be more “gender non-conforming” students – individuals with a self-concept that deviates from conventional norms for masculinity or femininity. Gender nonconforming individuals may identify as male, female, some combination of both, or neither, according to the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network.

Gender non-conforming individuals and others may prefer gender-neutral pronouns such as Zie (pronounced “zee”) as a replacement for he, she or they. Hir is pronounced “here” and can replace her/hers/him/his/they/

theirs (see story, left).

Society is changing, and schools need to change along with it, said Brown, the Ithaca superintendent. “When we pay attention to a group that traditionally has been marginalized, it sends a message of welcome and acceptance to all kinds of students and staff. It improves the culture.”

Editor’s Note: The U.S. Supreme Court is expected to address the issue of whether Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination against transgender people in June, when it is expected to hand down a decision in *R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes Inc. v Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*.

How to use gender-neutral pronouns

By **Caroline Forsey**
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Just because a student, staff member or administrator in your school district appears feminine or masculine doesn’t mean they are male or female. They could be someone who thinks of themselves as agender (without gender) or nonbinary (neither exclusively male or female; sometimes called “genderqueer”). Or, they might be someone who is just uncomfortable identifying with either “he” or “she.”

To avoid making incorrect or hurtful assumptions about someone’s gender, pronouns can help. For instance, I used the word “they” to refer to “a” student, staff member or administrator in the above paragraph. Shakespeare used “they” as a singular pronoun in *Hamlet*, and the BBC says the earliest use might be 1386, in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*.

In English, the word “he” traditionally has been used as universal pronoun.

But, using “he/she” is problematic because it doesn’t leave room for other gender identities. For instance, a transgender individual may not identify as either “he” or “she.”

By shifting away from “he” to gender-neutral language, you can make your sentences inclusive for everyone.

Here is a list of gender-neutral pronouns:

- **He/She** - Zie, Sie, Ey, Ve, Tey, E

- **Him/Her** - Zim, Sie, Em, Ver, Ter, Em
- **His/Her** - Zir, Hir, Eir, Vis, Tem, Eir
- **His/Hers** - Zis, Hirs, Eirs, Vers, Ters, Eirs
- **Himself/Herself** - Zieself, Hirsself, Eirself, Verself, Terself, Emsself

Typically, you won’t use one of these gender-neutral pronouns unless the person asks you to identify them as such. When in doubt, refer to someone by their name, rather than “him” or “her.”

You are also safe using traditional gender neutral pronouns. These include “them,” “they,” “their,” “everyone” and “that person.”

“They” is one of the more common gender-neutral pronouns, and it’s easy to incorporate into your daily conversations. Here are some examples of how to use it:

- “I spoke to the principal, and they said they’d get back to me.”
- “I think someone left their laptop behind.”
- “Who’s in charge of that project? I’ll email them.”

How to learn someone’s pronouns

In many universities and some businesses, it’s becoming more common for people to list their preferred pronouns at the bottom of their emails or below their signature of a letter. But face-to-face, learning someone’s pronouns can be tricky.

When you first meet someone, you don’t want to ask about their pronouns. This could make them feel

like you’re asking them to out themselves as transgender, agender or nonbinary.

Instead, you can introduce yourself with your pronouns: “Hi, I’m Caroline, and my pronouns are she/her.” By sharing your own pronouns, you’re allowing the other person to share theirs, but not forcing them to.

U.S. Senator Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) modeled this approach at a Los Angeles LGBTQ town hall event in October, when she said, “My pronouns are she, her and hers.”

Harris’s first words after being introduced, however, were, “Thank you, guys.” Ahem. You should avoid “Hey, guys” or similar phrases, because “guys” is typically masculine. When addressing a group of people in a speech, forum or meeting, it’s best to say, “Hello, everyone,” or “Hey, team.”

One last piece of advice: avoid saying “preferred” pronouns. Despite the popularity of the term, it’s incorrect, since “preferred” implies someone’s gender is a preference.

Ultimately, using gender-neutral pronouns won’t require a lot of effort on your part. But it could make a huge difference in creating a warmer, more inclusive environment for everyone.

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