



A Personal and Professional Look at the Difficulties Transgender Students Face

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What if one of your children came to you and said that they were gay?

What if that child then came to you and said that he or she is transgender?

It would surely change your life. I know that because it happened with one of my children. It is one of the most difficult situations I have ever experienced, but it also has allowed me to grow and learn about love and support in ways I never had before.

I am writing about this now because I have become aware of two different articles that have reminded me that I, too, have a responsibility to my transgender son (that is, a person born with the physical characteristics of a girl, but with the belief and psychological makeup of a boy). I have a responsibility to help other parents who experience this circumstance as well as help school board members and superintendents learn about an issue they may know little about.

Growing up gay or transgender puts students into very difficult circumstances. It can affect their self esteem, their ability to function with others and often leaves adults at a loss as to how to interact with them. In the *Connecticut Association of Schools'* May newsletter, it was reported that "in the last month alone, two 11 year-old students in the United States committed suicide as a result" of the bullying they had undergone. Both had hanged themselves at home. You can imagine what a "gut punch" this is to anyone with a gay or transgender child.

A new report from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) discusses these issues and has some recommendations for educators. The report, entitled *Harsh Realities: The Experiences of Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools*, found:

- Most transgender youth attend schools with hostile school climates. Consistent with non-transgender gay peers, transgender students reported "frequently hearing homophobic language and negative remarks about gender

expression from other students." Less frequently, some students "reported hearing these types of remarks from school personnel".

- When such language was used, transgender students reported "little intervention on the part of school personnel." Fewer than 20% said that the staff intervened most of the time or always "when hearing homophobic remarks (16%) or negative remarks about someone's gender expression (11%)."
- Many transgender students felt unsafe in school because of "some personal characteristic, most notably their gender expression and sexual orientation. Two-thirds of transgender students felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation (69%) and how they expressed their gender (65%)."
- Transgender students reported higher levels of harassment and assault in school than non-transgender students. Almost all "had been verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened)."

What is the impact on the school experience on these transgender youth? Much like others who are bullied for other reasons, transgender students were more likely to miss school "due to safety concerns than nontransgender students" and those who "experienced high levels of harassment had significantly lower grade point averages than those who experienced lower levels of harassment".

In addition, those who experienced high levels of harassment were "more likely to report that they were not planning on going to college than those experiencing lower levels of harassment."

But, the news is not all grim. The more transgender students "were able to be able to fully participate in their school community — by being open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity" and by being able to discuss transgender and other gay issues at school, the "greater their sense of belonging to their school community".

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The report also discussed institutional resources and supports and the beneficial aspects of having student clubs, such as Gay/Straight Alliances, which help to “lessen the negative effects of victimization”.

The report recommends that educators, policy-makers and safe school advocates continue to “seek to understand the specific experiences of transgender students, and implement measures to ensure that schools are safe and inclusive environments” for all gay and/or transgender youth.

The report also encourages “supportive educators, student clubs, curricular resources, and comprehensive ant-harassment policies” which will have a positive impact on these students. “Practices and policies that are sensitive to the experiences of transgender students would not only serve to improve the school experiences of those students, but can also send an important message to all members of a school community that individuals will not be limited nor defined merely by their gender.”

It has been my experience (certainly not a scientific sample!) that most students today are more accepting of sexual and other differences than many adults, who have never dealt with these issues.

Much like any other students, transgender students want to be accepted for who they are. Some have gone through extraordinarily difficult emotional experiences as they have grown up—trying to hide a secret and at the same time denying who they are.

Like other students, these students need support and a positive school climate. I know that while these times have been difficult, the support that my son has found in his school and the acceptance of his differences from teachers as well as other students has made the difficult adolescent years easier. We all need the support of caring friends and others.

Transgender students are no different.

Note: I received the support of my son, Dusty (he has changed his name during this period of transition), in writing this article. The report is available at http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/000/001/1375-1.pdf. Other resources on these issues: <http://www.nsba.org/MainMenu/SchoolLaw/Issues/Safety/Resources/DealingwithLegalMattersSurroundingStudentsSexualOrientationandGenderIdentity.aspx>; <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/PDFsexual.orientation.guidelines.PDF>