

LGBTQ+ advocates seek uniform use of Anne Arundel County's safe schools policy for trans students



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Rachael Pacella

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More than a year after Anne Arundel County Public Schools adopted a policy [supporting a safe learning environment for gay and transgender students](#), advocates are asking that the policy be implemented uniformly as students continue to report harassment.

In June 2021, the Anne Arundel County Board of Education approved a policy stating that students have a right to be addressed by a name and pronoun that matches their gender identity. Under the new policy, students also have the right to use bathrooms and locker rooms that match the gender identity the student consistently demonstrates and identifies with.

Similar guidelines have been in place for years, including support of continued professional development and the use of gender-inclusive terminology when practicable. The board's action at the time was meant to strengthen the protections because board approval would be required to remove them.

Among those calling for more support of LGBTQ+ students are Abbie Ellicott of the Coalition for LGBTQ+ Students and John Jasen of One Pasadena: Building a Safe and Inclusive Community. Ellicott and Jasen have shared their concerns with school district leaders, and are hoping for more training, accountability, data collection and support of Gender and Sexuality Alliances across the district.

Jasen and Ellicott are asking the system to shore up mechanisms students have to report hate or bias incidents. In some cases, students aren't reporting issues for fear of retaliation from other students. When that happens it creates a cycle in which school leaders can't help because they are unaware.

"Schools need to be a safe environment because children don't learn if they're scared," Jasen said. "If they're worried they're going to get jumped in the bathroom, they're focusing on how to get around that, versus paying attention in math class."

In the months after the board policy was approved, students at Chesapeake High School reported harassment during a spirit week event and fliers promoting the school's Gender-Sexuality Alliance Club were torn down. In response, the group One Pasadena: Addressing Racism set out last December to decorate the sidewalk in front of the Pasadena school [with messages promoting inclusivity](#).

More training is needed to ensure that teachers understand why the safe and inclusive school policy is important, and how to practice it effectively, Ellicott said.

"In terms of what actually happens in the ground our clear impression from many students is that a lot of things do not get reported because of fear," Ellicott said. "And because the students do not have confidence that anything useful will happen from the report."

AACPS Communications Director Bob Mosier said there is still work to be done to make LGBTQ+ students "feel safe and supported every day" while ensuring the new policy and regulations are implemented with fidelity as the system continues to collaborate with community partners.

During the last year and a half, AACPS has conducted professional development with principals, teaching them how to support LGBTQ+ students, how to share that lesson with teachers and how to engage in more gender-inclusive classroom practices. The system is also working in greater collaboration with LGBTQ+ advocacy groups in Anne Arundel

County, including Annapolis PRIDE, the Coalition for LGBTQ+ Students, and PFLAG. Starting next school year, students will have the option to take [a course on American LGBTQ+ history](#), as well as a course on the county's African-American history, for the first time.

All staff members are required to complete annual online training that provides them with key information, definitions of important terms and "outlines the role of educators in supporting LGBTQ+ students, regardless of any personal feelings about a student's gender identity or sexual orientation," Mosier said.

"It outlines the impact of biased behaviors in the classroom and relevant statistics related to the bullying and harassment of LGBTQ+ youth," Mosier said.

Staff also participate in professional development around supporting LGBTQ+ students during quarterly equity training, Mosier said, and can voluntarily sign-up for additional sessions during the year.

"Many of these trainings focus on the use of gender-inclusive instructional strategies that can be used to support LGBTQ+ students in the classroom," Mosier said.

Jasen and Ellicott say not all schools in the county have easily accessible gender-neutral facilities, and that not all teachers are following policy regarding the use of students' names and pronouns. Joe Toolan, director of Annapolis Pride, has heard similar concerns, and said policy enforcement will be important in communities where some parents have been vocal about opposing the rights of trans individuals.

In instances where there is evidence of intentional discrimination in violation of the Safe and Inclusive Environments for LGBTQ Students policy, measures including disciplinary action are considered.

"There are times in which an AACPS staff member may unintentionally misgender a student or call a student by the wrong pronouns. In these cases, AACPS expects staff members to acknowledge the mistake, apologize, and move forward," Mosier said.

Gender and Sexuality Alliance clubs, safe spaces where LGBTQ+ students can come together to discuss and learn about sexual orientation and gender identity, have been shown to increase a student's connection to their school. Jasen and Ellicott said at some schools there is not enough support for these clubs.

There are 32 GSAs in the school system, one at each high school and all but two middle schools. The goal is to have a club at each middle and high school that is well-supported, with one or more advisers who advocate for their students and make them feel accepted.

Kids who don't feel safe in school tend to avoid school.

"All of which of course affects that child's success in life, their ability to graduate and ability to do well in school," Ellicott said.