

Trans

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County. The campaigns of Dawn Pulliam, LaToya Nkongolo and Chuck Yocum argued that the district needs to ensure girls’ bathrooms are safe by keeping out all students assigned male at birth. Pulliam is the only candidate espousing those ideas who won a race.

For transgender and nonbinary students, being the subject of speculation can be difficult and even frightening. After the election, the Trevor Project, a national nonprofit organization that offers mental health hotlines for LGBTQ+ youth, reported a 700% increase in calls, texts and chats compared to prior weeks.

Ro, a 16-year-old Pasadena resident who attends public school, has socially transitioned and has a supportive community in his family and church. Still, he has experienced harassment online and in public and struggles to get adults to believe his experiences.

“My general experience in Anne Arundel County is that mostly with adults, it isn’t outright hatred, but it’s complete ignorance,” said Ro.

The day after the election, within five minutes of entering his school, another student quietly told him to “kill [himself] before Donald Trump lets them do it for [him],” Ro said.

“I have learned that it is not worth my time to go report it,” said Ro. “I kept it to myself because I didn’t feel that I was in a safe enough place with the adults in the room or that I would be heard to report it.”

Going to the bathroom can be anxiety-inducing for transgender people. Thirty-six percent of transgender or nonbinary students with restricted bathroom access reported being sexually

assaulted in 2019, according to research from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

Even if they have access to their preferred bathroom, the social stigma and unwanted attention can be deterring.

“When all of that hatred is being drummed up and stuff like that, using the space that you should be using is almost just as terrifying,” said Jayne Walters, an Annapolis Pride board member and Anne Arundel Public Libraries librarian.

Walters was the first openly transgender manager at the Indianapolis Public Library but moved to Anne Arundel last year following targeted harassment. Anne Arundel is not perfect but it’s more welcoming than Indiana, Walters said.

Ro feels unsafe in the male bathroom and uncomfortable in the girls’, so when he needs to use a bathroom, he has to go to the counselor’s office to get the key to the one gender-neutral restroom in his school, which he said can take up to 15 minutes out of class time.

For parents, knowing their child is out in the world and at risk for harassment is also anxiety-inducing. Edward Evans raised his son in Anne Arundel public schools and began having conversations about transitioning when his son was 17. His son is now 30, and Evans worries about his safety.

“It’s a brand-new fear,” said Evans. “I’m at the mercy of individuals and situations, and I can only pray and hope for the best.”

Board of Education candidates also argued parents should be informed if a student indicates they’re changing their gender identity, but potentially outing students to their family can be dangerous.

In her time working at libraries and LGBTQ+ Pride organizations, Walters met young people who were

kicked out of their family homes because of their gender identity.

“They’re using them as political fodder, and they don’t care about the repercussions of what damage this does to kids,” said Walters.

Walters struggled growing up, not knowing the label for her feelings and aware her family would not understand. She says as an adult, she does everything she can to be a source of knowledge and comfort for LGBTQ+ youth, something she did not have growing up. Walters said she sees young transgender people get access to gender-affirming care, and it transforms their mental health.

“What I see is kids that are just worrying about the everyday things that teenagers have to worry about,” said Walters. “They don’t have that added stressor of hiding.”

Evans says the question of whether teachers should report students to their parents is “tricky.” It could create a hostile environment for the students and teachers largely are not all qualified to act as counselors. However, parents are the ultimate authority on their child and should be kept informed.

Ro recently started the college application process, and rather than searching for a certain major or program, his first concern is finding a school where he will feel safe. He struggles with anxiety and depression but believes in the growing demographic of young voters to change the environment for transgender people in the United States.

“I have hope for the newer generations to come forward and make better decisions that improve my quality of life,” said Ro.

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