

PROPOSED NEW POLICY – EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

*Statement from Dan Cates, Superintendent
Township High School District 211
September 19, 2019 Board of Education Meeting
at Palatine High School*

Clear laws did not exist around the specific issue of transgender students and access to locker rooms four years ago. We have long recognized transgender identity and provided supports to transgender students, and we have also always considered the best way to serve ALL of our students surrounding access to our facilities. Tonight, we are presenting a new proposal on this matter to our elected school Board for its first consideration.

Four years ago, our Board at the time wanted to make this important decision – even in the face of pressure from the federal Office for Civil Rights seeking to mandate unrestricted locker room access for transgender students, and lawsuits representing opposing viewpoints. The Board and our administration considered all the issues very carefully. At that time, we listened to hours of individual comments, received hundreds of email messages and engaged in informal conversations nearly everywhere we went. Importantly, the Board engaged in many hours of discussion with each other, and often debate, as each Board member felt a great deal of responsibility for the community they were elected to serve.

Ultimately, the Board decided that our District should implement a practice of granting access to the locker room of a student's gender identity upon the student's agreement to change clothes in a private area within that locker room. We improved our locker rooms by adding several private changing areas and made them available to any student. For four years, we have implemented this practice without controversy or incident. These changing rooms will remain in place.

In our District of 12,000 students, less than a dozen students have identified as being transgender. To make this declaration is not easy, in fact, it can be extremely difficult. We believe more students may experience transgender identity, but do not come forward because of how hard this can be.

Transgender students are those who consistently assert a gender identity different from their birth gender. It is common that students can be at different stages of their transition during their four high school years. Our student support team members work with each student and parent or guardian to create an individualized plan designed to be responsive to that student at whatever their stage of development and transition. Typical items of discussion include whether the family would like teachers, staff and students to use a different name when referring to the student than the name on the birth certificate; whether to change the gender classification in the student's records; and what pronouns the individual prefers.

Each transgender student we know about has support from an individualized support team. Some seek a private space and different accommodations, and others want to use the bathroom or locker room of their gender identity. These students access our bathrooms and locker rooms without

notice or disruption because our students regularly demonstrate exemplary respect, acceptance and tolerance.

While our balanced compromise – providing access as long as private changing areas were used – has prevailed in the face of all challenges thus far, legal and otherwise, our society and community has advanced over the years.

The proposed policy we are presenting provides for equal educational opportunities, without exception or condition, and without the restriction of private changing stalls that we have required of transgender students for the past four years. The core of the policy was created by the Illinois Association of School Boards, and the policy has been adopted widely across the State of Illinois. We haven't heard of challenges or controversies associated with unrestricted access in districts across the State.

As we all know, a lot can change in four years.

In those four years, understanding and acceptance of transgender identity have advanced – societally and in our immediate communities – for the better. In our District and countless others, students, families and staff recognize, honor, and respect differences, and our students do this best of all.

We recognize that there are varying views on this issue, and **anyone** who is uncomfortable for **any** reason can seek support and alternatives. In a large high school district of nearly 12,000 students, we make hundreds of accommodations every day for students experiencing a large variety of issues. We are fortunate to have caring staff and excellent facilities with the ability to support a variety of needs.

It's time that we take the next step forward. The new, unrestricted policy will be presented to the Board later this evening for its first review and consideration. No action will be taken on this policy tonight, and the policy will be considered for action at our next board meeting.

Thank you for what I know will be thoughtful and respectful comments, and for your support of this District and all our students.