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## **Working with Transgender Children and Their Classmates in Pre-Adolescence: Just Be Supportive**

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*This study documents a school district's coordinated response to an elementary student's social transition from a gender variant boy to a female gender expression. Data were gathered through analysis of journal entries, lesson plans, and interviews with the child, guardian, and district personnel. Stakeholders reported a favorable outlook on the transition, particularly in the areas of classroom and school interventions, peer involvement, and maintaining safety for all. The greatest concerns related to communication and language. This article provides a record of the model followed in order that other schools and districts may use it as a starting point.*

**KEYWORDS** *Bullying, children, educational policy, elementary schools, gender, transgender, school districts*

Transgender youth need strong and diverse networks of support, including peers; other transgender people and role models; parents or adult mentors; and advocates, such as educators ... (Micah Ludeke, 2009, p. 14)

The traditional school setting in our society often presumes that all children will fit into cultural gender norms based on their anatomy. When a child falls outside of these norms, school can be an uncomfortable place, and that child's social-emotional and cognitive growth can be negatively impacted. As Stephanie Brill and Rachel Pepper (2008, pp. 153–54) write in *The Transgender Child*:

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A child's experience at school can significantly enhance or undermine their sense of self. Furthermore, children need to feel emotionally safe in order to learn effectively. A welcoming and supportive school where bullying and teasing is not permitted and children are actively taught to respect and celebrate difference is the ideal environment for all children. This is especially true for gender-variant and transgender children, who frequently are the targets of teasing and bullying. A child cannot feel emotionally safe, and will most likely experience problems in learning, if they regularly experience discrimination at school.

Keeping children physically safe cannot be neglected, yet emotional safety as a precursor to learning must also be prioritized. All children need curricular mirrors to see themselves reflected and thus feel safe in being themselves, and they also need curricular windows to feel safe with the differences of others (Style, 1996). As one step toward addressing the twin concerns of protecting children and protecting learning, this article presents a child's gender transition in the elementary school setting in order to explore strategies enabling educational professionals to partner in creating safe environments. Through efforts to keep the transitioning child psychologically healthy and while protecting the psychological needs of classmates as well, all children can continue to learn and grow in the instructional and social settings of the school.

## EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES FOR GENDER TRANSITIONS

In exploring resources for working with young people identified as "sexual minority" students (often denoted by acronyms such as LGBTQ, referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and "queer" or "questioning"), a notable body of scholarly literature addressing work with gay and lesbian youth exists. There is substantially less writing about gender non-conforming youth outside of the realms of sexual/affectional orientation.

Gender variance may encompass issues of gender identity (self-perception or inner sense of gender), gender expression (the outward presentation of gender identity, including behavior, dress, and speech), and gender role (social expectations for feelings, thoughts, and actions based on assigned gender) (GLSEN, n.d, pp. 5–6). Gender variance may also lead to a form of cognitive dissonance referred to as gender dissonance, which can result when a person experiences a difference between one's gender identity and one's body (generally reflected in the gender assigned at birth); and the experience of consistent childhood gender dissonance is sometimes a precursor to a transgender identity (Vanderburgh, 2009).

For children who identify as transgender, they may have either "expressed a desire to be the opposite gender since early childhood, have already lived as the opposite gender for some time, or, upon entry into puberty,

disclose, sometimes with great urgency, that they have never identified with the gender assigned to them at birth and are horrified at the unwelcome bodily changes showing their appearance” (Ehrensaft, 2009, pp. 13–14). The majority of transgender children know from a young age that their gender identity doesn’t match their assigned identity; for example, in Vanderburgh’s work, he found that 60.4% of male-affirmed<sup>1</sup> clients knew that they were boys by the preschool years, as did 52.7% of female-affirmed clients (2009, p. 146).

Some writing has been done about transgender youth, generally addressing high school or the teen years and beyond. These reports have identified transgender students as vulnerable to harassment from peers and school faculty and staff; constrained by sex-linked policies and procedures (e.g., regarding school facilities and classroom groupings); and at high risk of school noncompletion due to these persistent burdens (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; Sausa, 2005; Wyss, 2004). Grossman & D’Augelli summarize the perceptions of their transgender respondents by stating, “Attending school was reported to be the most traumatic aspect of growing up” (2006, p. 122). The recent GLSEN report *Harsh Realities* provides statistical documentation for these experiences, with 90% of transgender students reporting verbal gender expression harassment, 53% reporting physical harassment (e.g., pushing or shoving), 26% identifying as victims of physical assault (being punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon), and 39% reporting criticism of gender expression perpetrated by school personnel. Transgender students reported regular intervention in response to attacks on gender expression only 11% of the time for school personnel and 10% of the time for peers (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009, pp. 10–11). In this same survey, 65% of students identified feeling unsafe at school because of how they expressed their gender, and nearly 50% disclosed missing a day or more of school in the past month due to feeling unsafe (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009, p. 14). Only 11% of students experienced an inclusive curriculum with positive representations of LGBT people, history, or events (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009, p. 40). Not surprisingly, the study documented problematic educational outcomes resulting from these experiences, with a high incidence of harassment correlating with more absences, lowered educational aspirations, and lower grade point averages (2.3 vs. 2.8 for those reporting frequent vs. infrequent harassment) (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009, p. 25).

The popular media has paid extensive attention to younger gender variant or transgender children in recent years (Grace, 2009; Hoffman, 2009; Lelchuk, 2006; Reischel, 2006; Schoenberg, 2010; Spiegel, 2008) and they are increasingly represented in the blogosphere as well ([www.acceptingdad.com](http://www.acceptingdad.com); <http://labelsareforjars.wordpress.com/>). There is also a steadily growing body of literature for mental health professionals working with gender dissonant children (Benestad, 2009; Ehrensaft, 2009; Saeger, 2006; Vanderburgh, 2009). Little however has been available to school systems grappling with how best to serve their students.

Sausa's (2005) recommendations include steps that can be taken across the school system, including at the elementary and middle school levels (pp. 24–25). Lee (2007) and Robertson (2007) have both documented efforts at cultivating acceptance of gender diversity with elementary-aged children, though not addressing a time of gender transition. Brill and Pepper's groundbreaking book *The Transgender Child* (2008) does offer one chapter on "The Educational System and Your Family," which has a wealth of information for the family as they work with the schools, and can easily be adapted for school professionals. Another book with a family-oriented perspective on the transgender spectrum is Mary Boenke's 2008 edited volume *Trans Forming Families*.

School faculty and staff are hard-pressed to find resources for a time of gender transitioning, the "complex, multi-step process of starting to live full time as a person of a different gender" primarily involving social changes such as appearance (clothing, hair, etc.) and, for some, changing one's name, mannerisms, and/or voice (Huegel, 2003, p. 181). Resources for serving gender variant and transgender students, though not necessarily created to help in times of going through the process of change, are utilized by educational professionals, along with books like Huegel's (2003) *GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer & Questioning Teens*, to navigate the waters of a child's gender transition. Given that gender variant children are "the most vulnerable because they receive both intensely negative messages and almost no peer support or understanding" (Bochenek & Brown, 2001, p. 174), it is crucial that more information be made available to school systems to better support students in transition. This paper documents one school district's work to stop the harassment, build allies, and teach all children the values of equality and strength through diversity. When used wisely, these actions can help to provide a much-needed "continuity of caregiving" when a child transitions genders (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006, p. 126).

## TRANSITION: KNOWING WHEN IT'S TIME

The treatment of the young transgender child cannot be simply reduced to that of gender identity issues. The self unfolds within the context of the child's other traits and life experiences, as well as in a sea of community, school, family, marital, parental, and sibling dynamics. (Saeger, 2006, p. 244)

Gwen Trace<sup>2</sup> has worked as a support teacher for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) students in the midwestern community of Fairtown for ten years. In every presentation she gives, she clarifies that the "Q" in her title stands for questioning (rather than Queer), as many

of the young people with whom she works are trying to figure out who they are, and who they are becoming. This questioning can take many forms, and a gender variant child (whose interests and behaviors are persistently outside of typical cultural gender norms) might be asking questions like: “Why was I born a boy/girl?” “What makes someone a boy/girl?” “Why do teachers and other people insist that I am a boy/girl?”

One child who has been asking these questions for years is Jaden, who was in first grade when Gwen started providing support to the faculty and staff working with her.<sup>3</sup> Despite a male biological (or anatomical) sex, Jaden had always asserted her identity as a girl. From an early age, Jaden’s aunt Dyann would help out with babysitting, and she reports that from Jaden’s first steps and her first words, at “that age where they start undressing,” she would toddle over to a towel to wrap around herself, calling it “my dress.” Dyann reported this behavior to Jaden’s parents, and they were “okay with it.”

“Everything was princesses: Mulan, Belle, Snow White, the Little Mermaid. She had every costume from the Disney Store; some her parents bought, some I bought. At that time we said she’d outgrow it.” Jaden’s own first memory is of wrapping a Blue’s Clues towel around herself and saying she was Cinderella. “This was around age three,” she said. “I remember it all vividly because it was so important to me.”

She loved reading, and she loved the Little People toys from Fisher Price—in fact these were the only cars she was willing to play with. Her parents bought her a motorized tractor to ride on, but she refused. She always liked girls, had girls as her best friends, and participated in “girl play.” She was allowed to dress as a girl at home, and at day care she would modify her boy clothes in the dress-up corner. The year she turned five she was able to finagle her birthday party into a dress-up “ball” so that she could wear a gown. Dyann says, “All of her peers completely knew what Jaden was in to.”

As Jaden got older, she became more perceptive about the rules she had to follow. Dyann explained that this manifested in the many questions Jaden started asking.

When we went out we would say, “We’re going out, change your clothes,” and she would recognize the double standards and ask, “Why? Why can’t I be myself outside?” The first time she really verbalized it was at age six when she asked my sister [Jaden’s other aunt], who works in health care, “Do you think someday they will be able to do a brain transplant?” My sister said, “I don’t know, why do you ask?” and Jaden said, “Because I want my brain to be transplanted into a girl’s body.”

This was the beginning of Jaden’s gender dysphoria, her discomfort and distress about being assigned a male gender (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 200).

Perceptive already, she realized it would take an extraordinary intervention to give her the body she yearned for; transgender children “often call on God, parents, doctors, or fate to fix the mistake that seems so visible to them but so invisible to others” (Ehrensaft, 2009, p. 18).

Life changed dramatically for Jaden (and the younger brother she now had) when her parents separated. Her mother’s new boyfriend was determined to make Jaden into a man. Jaden no longer had any privacy, and was forbidden to go to the bathroom sitting down, as she had her whole life. He forced her to discard “all of her girly things, everything pink, even Disney Monopoly, all her Disney books, all of her stuffed animals, practically everything.” Not content to deprive her thus, he increased the humiliation by making her put everything in the trash herself. As Dyann put it, “When he did this she didn’t just lose her toys, she lost her identity.”

Looking back, Jaden too recognized how heavily this time weighed on her. “I started to think maybe I was not okay, maybe I should change [to be more masculine]. But then I came here [to Dyann’s house] every Friday, and she said I am fine as I am and I didn’t need to change.”

As Dyann continued to babysit Jaden and her brother, it took “months and months” for Jaden to be able to tell her about everything that had taken place with her mother’s boyfriend, including physical abuse. Meanwhile Dyann documented everything, photographing the bruises and contacting protective services. The couple got evicted (in addition to the violence, there was illegal drug activity in the home) and went to live with the mom’s relatives out of town. When child protective services visited to inquire about the kids, the family was gone—the adults had dropped Jaden off at school and disappeared. Because they had Jaden’s brother, the police were involved in finding the family. When the district attorney offered them immunity for returning the boy, they took it. Jaden’s dad was unable to take care of her and her brother fulltime, so Dyann took them in.

Even at that young age, Jaden’s strength and resilience were apparent. Dyann surmised, “I think what kept her going was knowing, completely believing for herself, that ‘I am a girl,’ and she knew no one could take that from her. She didn’t have a mom, or a stable home, or this or that, but she always had that knowledge.” Thankfully Jaden was able to maintain a positive relationship with her dad. She stayed with him every Wednesday and every other weekend, spending time together at the park or playing video games.

As Jaden entered the school system, first in a preschool/day care, and then the public school system, she was met with a great deal of tolerance. Though the policing of gender appropriate behavior can be strong in preschool (Bochenek & Brown, 2001, p. 61), in Jaden’s case her gender transgressions were seen as more acceptable in the younger grades, and there was a notion among some that it was “just a phase” she was going through. Helen, the school social worker at Parkhurst Elementary, reported

that as early as kindergarten, whenever there was an opportunity to dress differently for a special day or occasion, Jaden would dress as a girl. In these years Jaden was less affected by the barriers or social stigma attached, and there were no obvious issues with teacher discomfort in the primary grades: “I think to a large extent that’s developmentally how primary teachers view kids; there is more of a wide range of acceptable behaviors from ages five to seven. People really found Jaden to be endearing.”

Jaden’s second grade teacher was exceptionally supportive, and when the school had mismatch day Jaden picked out a skirt and a blouse at a thrift store and wore them to school. “That took a lot of strength for a second grader to do that,” reflected Dyann. Beyond these special occasions, the double standard continued, with Jaden expected to follow norms for dressing as a boy at school. But when she got home she could relax and be herself. “Every day she would come home, go upstairs, change into a skirt or dress, and then come back downstairs and start reading or doing her homework. She wasn’t playing; it was like she was putting her slippers on.”

In third grade she started asking if she could wear girl’s underwear, saying it would “make her feel better,” and Dyann consented. One time Dyann let her get pink and purple streaks in her hair as well, and Jaden regularly enjoyed having her toenails painted.

The issue of needing to go to the bathroom in public was getting more contentious for her, however. Dyann said, “When we went swimming she would be bleeding from the sand rubbing her, but she refused to go to either the boys or girls bathroom [to rinse it off]. Sometimes she would ‘hold it’ the whole school day, and she didn’t drink any water [so she could avoid the bathroom].”

By this time Jaden was also involved in a group with a therapist, which she had started attending in second grade. In this group of boys, there were a lot of opportunities for expression through movement therapy and dressing up, and as Jaden grew comfortable talking about what she truly liked to wear and do, she started flourishing, finally finding a public voice. This ability to speak up for herself carried over into her life at Parkhurst. “She started taking more risks at school: letting her hair grow and wearing it in a ponytail or pigtails; wearing pink earrings; really pushing. When kids would question or challenge her about it, she would reply ‘that’s a problem for you, not me.’ She felt okay to take those kinds of risks at Parkhurst.”

Unfortunately, she had to spend one academic quarter in third grade away from Parkhurst, in the small town where her maternal grandparents lived. A guardian ad litem<sup>4</sup> had suggested to Jaden’s mom that she try living with the kids there. The mom left after two and a half weeks, but Jaden and her brother stayed to finish out the quarter. It was heartbreaking for Dyann to watch: “Jaden said that in that school she thought they’d kill her everyday. She took no risks, but still the kids knew. They were calling her gay, telling her she needed a sex change operation. How do eight-year-olds know about

sex change operations? Jaden was very scared there.” Fortunately, at the end of the quarter, she was able to return to Parkhurst.

Both resource teacher Gwen and social worker Helen (who initially became involved with Jaden to play a therapeutic role regarding her family issues) provided support for Jaden’s gender variance as needed. Gwen worked behind the scenes for many years, for example addressing LGBTQ issues in the context of routine staff meetings at Parkhurst when questions arose. One such question was the bathroom issue; Gwen reported that the alternative arrangements she had helped formulate had “been in place for quite a while,” started in an earlier grade due to Jaden’s own discomfort. Helen continued to work with Jaden as she grappled with anxiety and distractibility (diagnosed with the Behavior Assessment Checklist), most likely resulting from Jaden’s efforts at sorting through the gender identity issue (rather than simply being an organic anxiety disorder). Such problems are common among biological boys who don’t accept socially defined gender borders, facing “the tension-filled task of balancing their inner feelings and desires with the exigencies of the culture around them” (Ehrensaft, 2007, p. 299). The stress about the dissonance between her assigned gender and her strong gender identity as female were seriously undercutting Jaden’s ability to focus and learn.

In fifth grade, Jaden was placed in Darcy Coradcor’s classroom. Darcy is a veteran teacher who works to nurture students as well as nurturing community among them.

I strive to make sure that my classroom is always a safe place to be emotionally and physically. I say to the students throughout the year that it’s important to be accepting. I tell them the world is a negative place, why would they want to contribute to that? We should be able to lift each other up. I try to be attuned to what’s going on in the classroom, even subtle clues like body language.

She says she makes it clear to her classes each year that she simply will not put up with things like name calling. She is not entirely comfortable with this authoritarian element of her teaching persona, worrying how students will respond when she runs a “tight ship,” but she makes sure to temper it with “fun and love.” This was a firm foundation for a gender variant child such as Jaden. Darcy said, “I didn’t have any background in this area, but I knew that an important role for me was to just support him<sup>5</sup>, be understanding, and do what we need to do for him.”

In January, a student teacher, Jesse, started working full-time in Darcy’s classroom. Jesse did a lot of the teaching throughout the semester, including several weeks of lead teaching. He noted, “Right away I thought Jaden was a she—from the beginning I found myself saying ‘her’ and ‘she’.”

Midyear, when the class started talking about the upcoming health unit on growth and development in puberty, the stress really ratcheted up for Jaden; she couldn't sleep, and she started wetting the bed. This is a common experience for transgender children, that puberty is "experienced as a nodal point of trauma rather than a celebratory transition to adulthood" (Ehrensaft, 2009, p. 15). When she started noticing the pre-adolescence growth spurts and body changes of her peers, her hatred of her own male body increased exponentially. When I interviewed her months later, she said of that time, "I knew if I didn't transition soon [puberty] would just be there . . . and it would be too late. And I thought if I didn't do it soon I was just gonna explode."

In Darcy's journal, she noted that the pressure really seemed to be escalating for Jaden:

Past few weeks & especially this week Jaden is quieter, more reserved than usual. I observe Jaden staring off more often, getting lost in thought, very unfocused. In class, work is left undone, or done incorrectly. Jaden appears to be listening, but always needs reminders about what the class is doing or what the directions are. He plays a lot with paper, string, etc. Kind of lost. Lost in his own world. I sense a lot of inside anxiety.

The pressures were nearly as intense for Dyann, who has bleak memories of that time: "Jaden would say things like, 'I feel like I'm getting empty. I'm not sad or worried any more, I just feel like I'm going to die. I'm going into a dark hole and it's getting narrower and narrower, and my life is going to end. I'm in the wrong place.'" Ehrensaft's work confirms this sense of fatality: "A wish for death of the whole self to avoid living a false life that forecloses any chance for authenticity may be the very experience of the transgender youth confronting the body changes of puberty" (2009, p. 20).

Dyann was desperate for help, and felt she was getting nowhere with a private psychologist who tried to convince them that Jaden was gay [most families seeking advice about gender dissonance end up with a professional who has never worked with a trans client, and the assumption of a gay or lesbian orientation is not uncommon (Vanderburgh, 2009)]. Dyann decided to initiate a conversation with a transgender woman at her church, who gave her a list "with the names of doctors, counselors, books, support groups, and websites, and the first name at the very top of the list was Gwen Trace." Dyann had already been working with Gwen, and was relieved to realize she could be a resource for a transition as well. She talked to Gwen, and many others, as she weighed how best to go about the transition. She thought about changing schools, and even considered a private Catholic school, but in the end recognized the value of keeping Jaden at Parkhurst, where she had a good support network. Some of Dyann's confidants recommended waiting until the fall, when Jaden would start middle school, but Dyann took it to heart when Jaden told her she couldn't handle two transitions at once.

Jaden and her family had come to trust Gwen fully, and now, having thoroughly discussed the situation with their family and friends, they trusted Gwen to help Jaden carry out one of the most important decisions of her life. She told Gwen “It’s time.” Gwen was convinced, and agreed to do everything she could to make the transition as smooth as possible for Jaden and her family, as well as for her teachers and her peers.

As Gwen prepared to enter what was uncharted territory for her, she wanted to share this experience with other educators, and thus, during the spring 2009 semester, I had the opportunity to follow the Fairtown School System’s coordinated response to Jaden’s social transition from a gender variant boy to a female expression of gender. The teachers and support personnel involved were asked to maintain journals during this period.

Data were gathered through the analysis of journal entries and lesson plans, and through interviews with Jaden, legal guardian Dyann, the parent of a classmate, and key school and district personnel (classroom teacher, student teacher, social worker, principal, and resource teachers). This was a study to document the actions taken by district personnel. There were no intentional “interventions.” That is, nothing was done for the sake of research; rather, the teachers were doing everything in their capacity to nurture the students and ensure a positive outcome for all. My role was to document the process in order that others might benefit, noting what emerged as best practices, as well as potential opportunities for improvement, in order to provide a record of one model which other schools and other districts could use as a starting point.

To the extent that the results of this project suggest successful approaches, they will provide a foundation for developing and expanding formal policies and procedures; and to the extent that school strategies failed to accomplish the intended goals, the project will be useful in suggesting other avenues of inquiry in striving to meet the goal of protecting all children during a time of gender transition.

#### INTERVENING FOR THE SAFETY OF CHILDREN: “DIFFERENT ISN’T BAD”

The implementation plan Gwen crafted for the transition, relying heavily on her years of experience with older gender variant students and informed by the Boenke (2008) and Brill & Pepper (2008) books mentioned earlier, was designed in collaboration with Parkhurst Principal Naomi Shelle.

Shortly after Jaden decided the time had come, Gwen and Jaden worked together to draft a set of agreements. This document listed the “safe people” Jaden identified on staff, the people she could go to if, for instance, Darcy was busy or had a substitute teacher. Her “safe people” included a former

teacher, a member of the student services team, and a member of the nursing team. Gwen went to those people, confirming their willingness to take on this role. She then determined what days and times each person was available, making sure that Jaden would have access to one of them throughout the day and week.

An expectation of the agreements was that any harassment or suspicion of harassment would be reported. Gwen said this was important, given that in the past Jaden had endured teasing and perceived slights without complaint, bearing the weight on her own and later informing others. Gwen wanted to be certain to interrupt this pattern, and made it clear to Jaden that she should tell someone, but that it didn't have to be someone at school. Often Jaden would make such reports to Dyann, who would call Gwen or Naomi so that they could follow up at school. Gwen felt such incidents needed to be pursued in order to maintain Jaden's safety.

Gwen participated in one Parkhurst staff meeting, building on her information sessions from previous years. This was a much more targeted meeting addressing transgender issues and the potential for harassment, including inadvertent harassment (e.g., "If you didn't act so girly, this wouldn't happen to you"). After that meeting, Naomi took over the staff-wide communication, continuing the dialogue at regular staff meetings and sharing some information via e-mail. Gwen met with some smaller groups, once with the student services team and once with the fifth grade teaching team. She also was available for consultation over the lunch hour one day in the teacher's lounge. Naomi too made a point to meet with a smaller group after faculty meetings on a voluntary basis a couple of times.

Gwen and Naomi knew they would want to first work with the students and families of Jaden's classroom, and they felt it was important to offer information sessions to parents before meeting with the class. They crafted a letter (composed by Gwen, edited by Naomi, and signed by Darcy and Naomi) to send home to parents and guardians letting them know of Jaden's situation. The letter conveyed an overview of Jaden's circumstances, paraphrased below:

This note is to let you know about a situation with a student in our class. This child has been struggling with an issue for quite a while, and believes now is the appropriate time to share this struggle with others. The student, Jaden, was born male, but has felt strongly for many years that he is a female. Beginning next week, she will present as a female. The Parkhurst community is joining with Jaden's family and physicians in helping support her through this transition.

The letter went on to describe the work Gwen would do in the classroom the next week, extending an open invitation for parents and guardians to attend those sessions as well as an evening parent information session

earlier in the week. With great anxiety Gwen prepared for the evening meeting, and waited for the parents to arrive. Much to her surprise, not a single parent came that night.

Later that week, Gwen conducted the meeting with Jaden's whole class. The gravity of the lesson really weighed on Gwen; of all the important conversations she's had with students over the years, she felt with this "it was so important to do it right." She first spoke about her job and the meaning of "all those letters"—L, G, B, T, and Q. She explained about the Q meaning someone who is questioning his or her identity. She explained the T for transgender, what gender means, and the implications of "trans" meaning changing or switching. She explained that at birth, the biological sex usually matches the gender of the baby, and when it doesn't a person may come to realize that they need to transition.

Gwen then discussed Jaden's specific case and her planned transition for the following week. She said that as of Monday, Jaden would be female. She told the class that what would change for them would be Jaden's appearance (clothing, etc.) and how they talked about her (pronouns—she, her). Jaden's body wouldn't be changing for the time being, nor would she be changing her name; having serendipitously received a gender-neutral name at birth, she could continue to use that given name. She asked them, "How would you like Jaden to respond if you make a mistake [with pronouns]?" She said it's okay to make a mistake, but you should show that you are trying to remember; if you call her a him on purpose, that is hurtful and would be considered bullying. Gwen later described a concrete example she gave the class to help them embrace curiosity rather than fear when learning about differences:

We made it clear that this [transition] was something different, but different isn't bad, it's just something we should be curious about. We had all the kids fold their hands in front of them [demonstrates, with fingers interlocking], and then had them shift their hands over one finger [demonstrates moving hands so the opposite thumb is on top]. We had them describe what it felt like—it's different, it's weird, but not necessarily bad—and said when you get that feeling, you should tell yourself to be curious, ask questions, find out more. There is nothing wrong with being curious, and it's okay to ask about it.

Gwen reported that the class was very respectful and asked some good questions of her. Then Jaden had the opportunity to share a poem she had written, "The Truth In My Heart," which helped her classmates to have a greater emotional understanding of what it was like to walk in her shoes. That sensitivity was useful as Gwen moved into addressing the possibility of Jaden being teased about her transition. She had the children tap into that

empathy, trying to imagine how they might be thinking and feeling if they were facing Jaden's situation.

As in all of her classroom presentations on harassment, Gwen addressed three main points: (1) People have a right to their own opinions; (2) People cannot harass others in schools; and (3) When bystanders are empowered they can stop harassment. According to Gwen's lesson plan, her first step was to "really lay it on thick about what a wonderful and amazing concept it is" that in our country it is okay to have different opinions and beliefs, something that isn't true all over the world. The lesson plan script continued, "I honor the fact that people can have different opinions and this is a safe place to express those opinions. Stating your belief is not harassment."

Next she addressed definitions of, and implications of, harassment. "While you have every right to your own opinion, here is what you do not have a right to do. You cannot tease, harass, or put down anyone who is (or who you think may be) LGBTQ. And you can not harass using those kinds of put downs just because you are angry or want to get someone else angry (even if you don't think that the person is LGBTQ)," making it clear that this is not only a school rule but also a school board policy and a state law.

She walked the class through a scenario in which one person loudly says something offensive in the hallway, considering all the potential, even unintended, victims. "It's harassment if the person is hurt by what I say, even if I didn't know it or mean it against them." Then she got to the heart of it, the academic bottom line. "So now the bell rings and everyone goes into class. Tell me, what happens to students when they have been harassed and are feeling scared, hurt, or upset?" She reinforced how all these reactions negatively affect learning, and can even keep students from graduating and getting their diplomas. She firmly concluded: "We do not harass people because it hurts our ability to learn."

The third point, empowering bystanders, started with exploring bystander behaviors that are not helpful. To move away from these, Gwen had Jaden's class brainstorm some expectations, which Darcy recorded in her journal: Team/community/support; Defenders of each other; No teasing, no bad talk; Don't just be a bystander, be a defender, an ally.

Next Gwen gave them a handout, adapted from an unpublished lesson plan created by Brian Juchems and Beth Franklin for Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) for Safe Schools, entitled, "What Would You Do?" The instructions read:

A lot of people fail to take action when they see name-calling or harassment because they don't know what to do. The good news is that you have lots of options [to] help you move from being a bystander (someone who does nothing) to an ally (someone who helps the target of the behavior). Below is a blank table for you to write down what you think you can do when you hear name calling. Remember—what might be easy for one person can be really challenging for another. The goal of this chart is to help you think of options.

Using Gwen’s instructions to think of ways to be an ally for Jaden or anyone else being teased, each student filled in their own personal copy. This was followed by a discussion in which volunteers could share some of the ideas they had come up with. Darcy took some notes on the suggestions the children shared (see Box 1). Gwen also gave them a handout with some other suggestions (see Box 2). She emphasized that these ideas for how to be an ally applied not just to Jaden or transgender people, but to providing support any time they notice someone being hurt.

**BOX 1** Darcy’s notes on the “What Would You Do?” discussion

	Now	Later
Easy	Confront/stop	Tell a teacher
Not so easy	Tell harasser that [the target] doesn’t deserve that	Take the person being bullied to a teacher & explain
Challenging	Stick up for person when your friend is doing the harassing	Report & then stop being a friend to person harassing

**BOX 2** Filled in “What Would You Do?”

Gwen prepared this for the class. She wrote, “Below is a sample of some options you have when you encounter name calling. Remember—what might be easy for one person can be really challenging for another. The goal of this chart is to give you some examples of what you might be able to do.”

	Now	Later
Easier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I would walk away.</li> <li>• I wouldn’t laugh.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Afterwards, I would talk to the person being bullied to make sure they’re okay.</li> </ul>
Not-So-Easy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I would try to change the subject and take the focus off the person being bullied.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Afterwards, I would get a group of my friends together and go talk to a teacher about what happened.</li> </ul>
Challenging (But worth it!)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I’d tell the person doing the bullying to quit it, or that it’s none of their business.</li> <li>• I would tell the person doing the bullying that they’re discriminating and that everybody is different.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [If my friend is doing the bullying] I would talk to my friend when we were alone and tell them that I have a [another] friend who is _____ [name identity, e.g., transgender] and it hurts me when people make fun of [others] for _____ [e.g. being transgender]. I would tell them I want them to stop.</li> </ul>

The day of the sessions a follow-up letter was sent home to remind parents that the sessions had taken place that day, provide them with an overview of the information, encourage them to discuss the ideas and hand-outs with their children, and to give them Gwen's contact information in case any of them wanted to follow up.

A few weeks later, the whole process was repeated for the other fifth grade classrooms (this was planned for week five, but a significant crisis in the district required Gwen's time and attention that week, resulting in a delay).<sup>6</sup> Of the decision to hold separate classroom sessions for each room, Gwen said, "For the kinds of issues I discuss with students, I want to make sure they have at least the safety of their own classroom group, with the hope being that they will be more comfortable to ask questions." The next section of the article will address the extent to which these decisions, as well as others, were effective at Parkhurst.

### MAKING THE CASE FOR KEEPING KIDS SAFE

To gather the data for this portrait and analysis of the district's facilitation of Jaden's gender transition in school, I conducted individual interviews at the end of the school year with Jaden, Dyann, Gwen, Principal Naomi, classroom teacher Darcy, student teacher Jesse, social worker Helen, another teacher, Kim; and a parent, Tory. These ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) were conducted from June through August of 2009, and covered themes such as timing, decision-making, school strategies, resources, challenges, and concerns. Each interview was transcribed immediately, and participants had the opportunity to review transcriptions and edit for clarity and accuracy. Open coding was used to develop categories and establish shared perceptions and recurring themes.

The analysis revealed that there were notable successes, and points of floundering as well, both in terms of the actions taken, and in terms of the processes for carrying them out. For everyone involved, there were advantages in the planful way each step was undertaken. Naomi in particular noted the systematic implementation, "the problem solving, the step-by-step communication," and how beneficial this was for Jaden. She praised Gwen for keeping Jaden central to the whole process: "It was clear you weren't just doing things for Jaden but working with her. It's like we were wrapped around Jaden—she was at the center, and then her friends, her teachers, her classroom, her grade, the school, the larger community—it spiraled out in layers wrapping around her."

As a gender variant child going through a gender transition, Jaden was in a fragile position, yet many felt the success could in part be attributed to her incredible strength. Helen describes her as "a very good advocate for herself." One way she did this was through the agreements sheet outlining

the expectations for key stakeholders. All interviewed participants shared the perception that this document was beneficial to Jaden and themselves.

In response to the question, “What was most beneficial for Jaden’s classmates?” Naomi responded, “What was most helpful for them was Jaden herself, working with her peer group. She has the personality to answer questions, to be strong about her position . . . Jaden herself is very verbal, good with words, so her peers don’t want to verbally challenge her.”

One time this became evident was in the Yearbook Club, for which another teacher, Kim, is the advisor. The club meets after school, so sometimes the students arrive before Kim gets there, and as they were waiting for her the second day after Jaden’s full transition, one boy said “I know how you can change; they do surgery, and it hurts a lot.” The aide who was there reported to Kim that Jaden’s response was fabulous, very calm and well rehearsed. The boy continued to probe Jaden, asking, “Why do you want to be a girl?” Kim arrived in time to see Jaden reply, “very factual and methodical in stating it, ‘Because I am a girl’.” Kim had the boy apologize, then took Jaden aside to ask if she would still feel safe in Yearbook Club, to which Jaden said yes. Kim concluded, “I think she really understood that it had a lot more to do with the boy’s issues than anything about her.” The kids got along great the rest of the year, Kim said. This incident shows not only Jaden’s strength and resolve, but also her wisdom and maturity beyond her years. Her ability to discern external causes for the boy’s behavior demonstrates her insight into the lives of others, and her perspective taking.

This situation also demonstrates the substantial support and unity of the larger Parkhurst community. When Kim called the boy’s mom, the mother was “mortified” that he had behaved that way, given that she had talked with him about supporting Jaden. Kim said she suggested the mom have another talk with him, encouraging him to ask questions of the staff rather than of Jaden. This is a message Gwen herself had articulated in her lessons with the classes (i.e., it’s okay to ask questions, but Jaden shouldn’t be the one you ask; ask an adult).

For the crucial element of communication among the adults there were moments of incredible synchronization, and there were mixed signals and times of breakdown. To some extent, the synchrony grew out of an existing sense of community among the faculty and staff at Parkhurst. In the words of one teacher, “When things happen, you know you’re not alone. In other buildings where I’ve worked, you see support among the grade level teaching teams, but not so much in the school at large. We have a real community of support here . . . we really trust each other and respect one another’s judgment.”

Ensuring that the intervention was school-wide by addressing the entire faculty and staff at meetings was an important element for Gwen in working to create a climate of continued safety. “All of the faculty and staff have been made aware of what’s going on, helpful ways to respond, and the fact

that [hurtful language such as teasing or name-calling] really is harassment,” Gwen said; and she lauded the Parkhurst team “in terms of the extra attention faculty and staff members are giving, making sure there’s always an extra pair of eyes in the hallway, on the playground, in the lunchroom.” Unlike many schools, where teachers and staff exacerbate the dangers for gender variant students by failing to intervene and even contributing to the harassment (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009), the Parkhurst faculty, so cohesive already, was a team united in keeping all children safe from gender harassment on school grounds.

However while they knew what to do, they didn’t always know what to say. For example Darcy said one of her greatest challenges was “answering questions from skeptics, those not quite convinced; I wanted to make sure my answers did the situation justice.” She went on to say,

What happened was that the news got out to other kids [beyond the fifth graders], and then there was lots of confusion, lots of side talk . . . So I think in terms of that communication piece, if the staff had been briefed, we would have handled it differently. There were some people who knew a lot and some who didn’t, and I wasn’t the one who knew a lot—sometimes the secretary knew more than me because she was working with Naomi—but people would come to me with questions.

Gwen takes the blame for this; if she could do it over, she would remain more directly involved in providing explanations and words to the faculty, much as she had so expertly done with the students.

The one thing I’d do is to be better about ongoing communication throughout the year. Naomi took it on, she offered to talk about it at staff meetings, saying I didn’t need to be there, and that made sense at the time, and she also notified the staff through e-mail. But I don’t know if it was clearly understood by all of the staff. Lots of teachers had questions, things like “My students’ parents are asking me about this because they have older siblings.” Some teachers didn’t seem to remember the staff meetings, and maybe more would have remembered if I had come in. And some had admitted that they don’t read the e-mails. I wish it could have been clearer with others in the building.

Even Darcy, who handled so much for Jaden day in and day out, said that some written materials would have been helpful. In the absence of published materials that fit the bill, having some “crib notes” with answers to frequently asked questions, and suggestions of reputable sources for more information, could have been an additional measure that would have increased their fluency in discussing the transition.

While the discomfort of the teachers was far from ideal, it was positive that they were giving voice to that discomfort rather than repressing it. As Helen sees it,

[Because] the climate of Parkhurst is very open, if people are really uncomfortable, if they disagree, they feel they can come forward and talk about it. That pre-existing climate has played a big role. Some people didn't understand what was going on but they knew they could talk, that there was a forum for discussion. This situation has made people think, and in some cases challenged them in a non-threatening way.

The very fact that people could speak up and share their frustration shows the healthy functioning of the faculty body. And eventually, "about a month in" as Darcy remembers it, they were able to "come together, to meet, and to develop some common words and phrases to use with all students at the school, things like, 'Some males or females have different feelings from the time they are born.'" Nonetheless, she felt it would have been helpful to have had a timeline of "what was happening when" so that she would know what to prepare for.

Not only did the teachers not know what to say in communicating with their students and parents, they were also unnerved when they started getting e-mails from colleagues around the district. Naomi strove to support the teachers in her handling of the matter:

There were multiple staff e-mails, and they were all forwarded to me. I told the staff that it's important not to communicate with others outside of the school because of the rumor mills. It's a high interest story and it spreads quickly; I knew it was important to put a stop to it, to stop sharing information with other schools. The staff had a heightened awareness, and some were fearful. I had them redirect every inquiry to me.

A principal's roles in managing her staff, as well as in managing crises, are crucial to maintaining the community of the school. Ideally a principal considers the needs of the community in developing responses, but in a time-sensitive situation her first instinct may be to take the burden onto her own shoulders, and that is what Naomi had done. In order to shield the teachers from the fallout, her solution was to take the burden on herself by having the teachers redirect all inquiries to her, and then let go of it themselves. Indeed, the needs of protecting privacy and complying with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act required that person-specific questions would not be answered; yet attempts to insulate all discussion of the issues in order to protect the school, the teachers, and ultimately Jaden herself carried a mixed message about communication. While the children were being told, "It's okay to talk about it," adult communication was suppressed. Had there been

time for a more calculated response, a more effective option may have been to craft some elements of scripted responses. Looking back, Gwen reflected that given the complications of the situation, there is still uncertainty about what the best alternatives might have been. Though the restrictions were functional in the short-term, silence is prone to feeding the rumor mills, and is not a long-term solution.

One positive component that wasn't a step, *per se*, was the role modeling that the adults engaged in. When asked what had been most beneficial for Jaden's classmates, Gwen relayed her perception: "The fact that the adults around them were able to be okay with it translated into the kids being able to be okay with it. The fact that we gave them permission to be curious and ask questions; the taboo was taken away."

Kim's interview echoed this sentiment; her observation was that "The fifth grade teachers have really set a good tone, that what's happening is completely fine, and that has carried over to the students." This is all the more notable when you hear from those teachers how unsure they were at times with their responses. Teachers were craving more information, wanting to know the "right" answers. The ability of each teacher to act as a calming presence, despite their internal conflicts, imparted a message as strong as any scripted words, and enabled the students to feel safe and remain engaged in learning.

While Naomi's good intentions in taking over some aspects of communication seemed inimical to the goals of transparency in the transition, the converse happened when the effort at open and honest communication in the letters to Jaden's class went awry. As a result of the first letter home to families, one person contacted three media outlets. When word got back to the district, everyone involved was pretty concerned that it was an upset parent who turned over the content of the letter. Gwen explained her anxiety about the safety of Jaden and the other children:

I have great faith in the teachers and their ability to handle the needs of students, but when it goes outside of the schools, our ability to protect the kids becomes endangered. I often think of it as holding something sacred [holds hands together, palms up, as if holding something fragile], and we can't hold the child sacred when the information gets outside of the school system.

Tensions rose when one reporter obtained a school directory and was contacting parents trying to procure a hard copy of the letter and other information. Gwen told me, "This reporter was trying to dig around and find a disgruntled parent in order to report on 'both sides' of the story, as if there could be a side against keeping kids safe."

This “digging around” caused a panic as both the school name and Jaden’s name were in the original letter. Gwen said later, “It’s so hard when [the students and families] know each other; it would have felt weird not to use her name.” Naomi edited and approved the letter as well, and in hindsight noted that she hadn’t caught the potential risk. One suspects, had Dyann had the chance, she would have raised the red flag. After all, she reasoned, “Even when we get a letter home for something like the Swine Flu it’s very general, says there has been an exposure from a ‘student or staff;’ that’s better than saying the person’s name, teacher, or grade.”

With the help of district counsel, a legal written response was prepared telling the reporter to cease and desist; the reporter still didn’t understand their objections, but did apologize and comply. District counsel also secured Dyann’s signature granting Gwen, Naomi, and the district’s Media Liaison permission to speak to the reporter. They crafted responses that were not specific to the school, but rather included broad statements such as, “The district supports any child going through a change.” Naomi then wrote out a script for herself so that she could redirect reporters, keeping the focus on broader issues and referring additional questions to the Media Liaison. She kept it handy, on her window ledge, throughout the crisis. She found the role of the legal counsel to be crucial, and advises others in this situation to find someone to take on this public relations role; as she said, “You need to have someone to deflect the inquiries to, so you can go about caring for the child.”

After discussions with two of the three reporters, it seems the parent had good intentions in trying to “toot the district’s horn;” the parent was supportive, and trying to get positive press for the district’s progressive stance. Nonetheless, it was a scary scenario for everyone, and the number one thing Gwen would do differently is withholding Jaden’s name in that first letter. She went on to say,

Maybe we could have used some kind of disclaimer, something like, “Despite your good intentions, please don’t release this document to the media.” I was really trying to elicit a sense of “we can all be helpful in this situation.” Maybe if I were to do it again I’d say something along the lines of, “The reason we aren’t stating the child’s name is because, while it’s not a secret within the school community, we need to protect the child and family in the larger community, given that anything sent home is public information.” You can’t run everything you send home past the media people, but maybe in hindsight I should have sent these letters past the Media Liaison.

While the content of the letters became quite contentious for a while, the timing of the letters and information sessions was seen as a success.

Gwen explains that by sending the letters in advance. “It gave the parents time to decide how they wanted to deal with it. When we had the class sessions with the kids, we could say, ‘We sent a note to your parents last week. How many of you talked with your parents?’ Well over half of the kids in each class raised their hands.”

Giving the parents opportunities for these early conversations kept them involved, and helped provide the students with background knowledge for the lesson; as Jesse said, because of the letter, “The kids knew about it, and that was great, really helpful, so when the time came for the class meeting with Gwen it wasn’t new to them.” It helped the parents to feel “in the loop,” and this in turn facilitated positive engagement in the lesson.

Nonetheless, Darcy picked up on a lot of parent anxiety among the families of her students; they were wondering things like whether the children were old enough to understand. One father, who hadn’t been able to make it into to the parent meeting, came in to the classroom presentation, and Darcy described it this way:

He was put at ease because Gwen is *amazing* [strongly emphasized]. She was so good at addressing everything in a way that people were capable of understanding. Parents were asking, “Is this a good time to tell them? With the transition to puberty, will they worry that this will happen to them?” But Gwen quelled their fears.

At the first meeting, for Jaden’s classroom, there was only one other parent present (in addition to the father mentioned above), a lesbian parent who remembered the struggles of her own childhood and was very concerned for Jaden; through this session she was put at ease.

Just as the letters were an important part of the communication, so too were the sessions themselves. As Gwen said, “They so effectively diffused the idea that there was something ‘bad’ going on.” The handouts on how to be an ally really made a profound impact on the students, and they wanted to make sure it stuck with them long term; several taped the papers on the inside of their desk lids where they would see it every time they opened their desks and it could be a reminder to them. However, some of the language in the handouts proved to be confusing to the students, so Gwen worked with a speech and language specialist to modify it for future use (see Box 3). The sessions were also a venue in which Jaden’s incredible strength came shining through. Kim noted how beneficial it was for Jaden to be there in the presentation to her homeroom. “She was able to pipe in with her opinions. Toward the end she made a statement about it not being a gay thing; she said ‘This is just who I am.’ So she could speak, hear their responses, and be supported in all of those interactions.”

**BOX 3** Revised version of “What Would You Do?”

How to change from a Bystander to an Ally  
 What would you do?

A **bystander** is someone who does nothing when he or she sees a person getting bullied. Often, bystanders fail to take action when they see name-calling or harassment because they don’t know what to do. Just standing and watching someone get harassed can make the problem worse! Instead of being a bystander to harassment, you can become an ally. An **ally** is someone who helps the person being harassed or bullied. The good news is that you have lots of options to help you move from being a bystander to becoming an ally. Below is a blank table for you to write down what you think you can do to become an ally. Think of how to become an ally **when** you see someone getting bullied, and think of steps you could take **after** the person was bullied. Consider whether each step would be *easy for you to do*, *not-so-easy*, or *hard for you to do*, and then write it in the box that best fits. The goal of this chart is to help you think of options for how to change from a bystander to an ally.

	Something I could do <i>when</i> I see someone getting bullied	Something I could do <i>after</i> I see someone getting bullied
<i>Easy For Me To Do</i>		
<i>Not-So-Easy For Me To Do</i>		
<i>Hard For Me To Do</i>		

Darcy felt that the session in her classroom was very helpful for Jaden’s classmates, but in particular, she said what they learned the most from was Jaden’s reading of her poem. “It really said it all. The kids learned that you can be who you are and it’s okay. It’s important for them to learn this before middle school—stay who you are.”

The strong impression Jaden made on her classmates carried over to the end of the year, when the class created recognition certificates for finishing fifth grade. Darcy said, “For Jaden a lot of people noted that she is brave, courageous—they gained that perspective.” Seeing how empowered Jaden was in that venue, Kim even wondered if Jaden would have liked to participate in the same way for Gwen’s presentations in the other fifth grade classes. This might be something to consider for future situations, if it could be done without contradicting the message that it shouldn’t be the transgender child’s responsibility to educate others.

Jaden too spoke of the value of the meetings in the classrooms. Her own classmates knew her well from being together for the better part of a

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year and were able to receive the information before her transition. However the sessions with the other fifth graders did not take place until after Jaden's transition. This lag time between Gwen's meeting with Jaden's class and meeting with the other fifth graders contributed to the rumors, and on a more personal level led to a bumpy couple of weeks for Jaden: "At first when I transitioned kids looked confused, and some stopped talking to me. Then after the meetings they started talking to me again, and said 'Hi' and told me how pretty I looked."

In addition to tightening up the timeframe, Jaden had one additional suggestion for improvement: "It would have helped if some kids did a skit, with characters that were transgender, a bully, and an ally. We did a lot of ally work and it was really helpful, there were lots of written examples, but it would have been better to have examples shown in front of us, not just on paper." This may well have more effectively reached students across a wider range of learning styles.

We can learn much from Jaden's insights, and it would have been beneficial to have the other students who were involved voice their own perceptions of the processes (Jaden's transition process, the school involvement in the information sessions) as well as the results (e.g., the extent to which they saw things differently as a result of their participation in this process). However, Dyann was understandably so disconcerted by the media leak that she withdrew consent for the phase of the research project involving interviews with Jaden's peers and their parents, with the exception of one parent of a friend. This parent, Tory, said her daughter Shelly has been friends with Jaden for many years. She said all of Shelly's friends had been very accepting of the transition, and seemed to understand. Despite the closeness of the girls, they did have one concern: "Initially the girls were worried about what bathroom Jaden would use, but the school worked it out well so that she would use a specific teacher's or nurse's bathroom and not use either the boys' room or the girls' room."

Several facets of this comment are interesting. For one thing, according to Gwen, Jaden had already had access to an alternative bathroom since a previous grade, so it is of note that her peers hadn't picked up on this. But the fact that Tory brought up this concern points out how rarely participants remarked on the bathroom issue; generally it was brought up in casual comments such as, "Oh, Gwen already resolved that." This is a huge success that should not go unnoticed. After all, "The stick figure man and the lady in the triangle dress are ubiquitous, and they signal fear for many transgender people" (Beam, 2007, p. 179). When the San Francisco Human Rights Commission surveyed transgender people about their experiences accessing public bathrooms, they received reports of damaged bladders and kidneys under pressure from "holding it too long." Beam, who worked with transgender high school students, summed up, "Even kids I know actively limit their water intake throughout the day just to avoid having to go to the

bathroom. Considering that most people urinate an average of six times a day, that's a lot of mental stress to repeatedly face" (p. 179)

Just as Gwen explains that a student worried about bullying probably isn't learning much math, this, too, is true for the student under stress over bathroom considerations. Some gender variant children may feel stigmatized by bathroom issues even when a "unisex" option is available, for example one boy continued to wet himself rather than use this option (Saeger, 2006). Thus it is quite significant that a substantial logistical issue has been finessed into a virtual nonissue for Jaden, minimizing the disruption of her learning. Letting her classmates know it was resolved also prevented them from devoting energy to worry—though the source of their worry was unclear. Were they initially concerned that Jaden, a biological boy, would be in their bathroom, which would make them uncomfortable, or were they as friends concerned that Jaden would be uncomfortable in the boys' bathroom? To the extent that the former might be the case, it's interesting that even friends who had been with Jaden at a sleepover would have this concern.

Another effective strategy was focusing on peers as a support system. "It's very important that Jaden have the support of her peers, that they move with her as a support system. So far it's been smooth." The goal of facilitating the development of classmates as allies and defenders seems by most measures to have been successful. One example of how Jaden's peers have supported her comes from Kim, who often sees Jaden get dropped off early in the mornings before school. "One morning when I walked in I heard a kid screaming, 'Back off, she's a girl.' This kid was really sticking up for Jaden. Jaden was a ways off, and she seemed okay. It seemed like the other kid was doing a good job of defending her, and it stopped there, so I didn't [need to] get involved."

Kim offered this example to demonstrate the importance of the education that had taken place with the students; because of Gwen's sessions, Jaden's defender had both the words and the motivation to be her ally. Darcy felt this was a more powerful lesson even than that of acceptance; what she really saw in the students was that "they saw how to gather around and protect a classmate. They got the message that any time you see bullying, you need to let someone know; it's not okay."

Jaden too has seen her peers "rally the troops." She said, "Some kids correct people who say 'he,' telling them to say 'she.' That makes me feel better." As Lee writes, "When the children begin to teach each other and to teach us again, we realize the sustainability and richness" of these lessons (2007, p. 10). Jaden appreciates the way her peers are willing to take on these "teaching" tasks and stand up for her. She also noted that a new student joined their class after her transition, and "She doesn't know about it. She just knows that I'm a girl, and that's how it should be."

The use of gendered pronouns has been a minor challenge for the faculty. Naomi called it "the language issue" and said "we catch ourselves

sometimes.” In fact, one school employee used the male pronoun to refer to Jaden throughout her interview. At one point she caught herself, saying, “I mean she,” stating that it was the first time in the conversation that she had slipped and used the male pronoun. Because she saw herself as using the female pronoun, it was recorded that way throughout the transcript. Clearly this is something that will continue to be an issue for those who have known Jaden a long time, and ideally those involved should accept this and be willing to graciously offer corrections, as well as receive them. It’s fortunate in this situation that Jaden had been given a gender-neutral name that she could continue to use; more commonly schools need to adapt to a new chosen name as well.

In terms of providing guidance to the adults, many faculty and staff identified Gwen as the glue that held them all together throughout the process:

- “Gwen has always been there for us. When we don’t have an answer, we call Gwen. When a child has issues, we call Gwen. When we need to talk to someone, we call Gwen. She understands the academic, social, and emotional development of kids—she gets the whole picture.”
- “What’s helped the most have been the talks with Gwen. I haven’t needed anything else. We always know that she will answer our questions quickly and we can trust the information she gives us.”
- “The fact that I already knew Gwen and that we had a history was crucial. If it had been someone new in her role it would have been totally different. With an unknown person . . . I wait to see how someone works and interacts with kids before I can trust them. I had so many interactions with Gwen—lots of meetings, talks, e-mails—and the comfort of knowing that top resource person was huge. It’s important to know a person’s motives, and if I had felt that person were in it for the wrong reasons it would have been much more difficult.”
- “We would have floundered without Gwen. She knows so much. You can ask her the simplest question and she will give an answer that is explicit.”

Gwen worked hard to ensure there was a unified front at the school, and yet a sense of unity was apparent at the district level as well. Gwen knew that she could not have acted in isolation; she always knew that her administrators “had her back.”

[Most beneficial for me has been] the support from the administration—both the folks downtown and [Parkhurst principal] Naomi. She really knows her school and her staff; she listens to all the voices and melds it all together into something cohesive. And I always know that I have strong support from my boss [a director in the district office], telling me, “You go girl!” The superintendent knows about this situation because

of the media incident, and has been extremely supportive, saying we'll work it through. He has consistently said we'll support this child and this family the best we can. His bottom line is that taking care of these kids is more important than the image of the district.

Naomi completely agreed with this assessment: "I knew what was on my shoulders and I was okay with it because I knew this district was going to support my decision."

With cohesion on so many fronts, it made it that much more bewildering when differing perceptions of an incident led to miscommunication and a rift in the community. The first I heard about this was from Naomi, when I asked about challenges. She reported that Dyann had talked to "multiple people" about a third-grade teacher allegedly badmouthing Jaden. Naomi said, "I spoke to the teacher in question and she can't imagine what she would have said that might have been construed in this way. She is feeling awful." Later, Dyann told Naomi it may have happened when Jaden was in that teacher's classroom; Dyann heard about the incident from another parent, and she wasn't clear on the other parent's story. Jaden felt like the teacher was avoiding her and wouldn't say "Hi" to her anymore. Dyann tried to ease Jaden's mind over the situation, saying "Sure, it takes time for some people." She compared it to Jaden's dad, who thought he was fine with it and then found himself crying for his son. Dyann talked to the teacher, telling her how sad Jaden felt about the teacher no longer greeting her. The teacher told Dyann she didn't remember making a hurtful comment. After this conversation, Naomi called Dyann, who reported that Naomi and was "furious" about the charges she was making.

Naomi admitted her frustration. While striving to be sympathetic, she was searching for a way "to let Dyann know that it's not okay to make serious charges based on hearsay ... I really do care about Dyann—she is so kind; but I want her to have some guidance. What she has put this teacher through is very hard, and my job as an administrator is to support this teacher." This is yet another example of how strong, multi-directional communication is the key to keeping kids safe. Had all the parties been able to communicate respectfully with each other, perhaps Jaden could have been spared this feeling of alienation.

## MODELING RESEPECT, TEACHING RESPECT

"In virtually every case where lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth reported that their school experience has been positive, they attribute that fact to the presence of supportive teachers." (Bochenek & Brown, 2001, p. 79)

The faculty and staff of a school can make or break it for LGBTQ students. On one level, much of a school's climate can be attributed to the tone set by a principal. As Vanderburgh writes, "Acceptance is a top-down attitude, and if the school administration sets a tone of not tolerating intolerance, the child's experience at school can retain the focus it should—on learning and social development" (2009, p. 149). Unfortunately, attorney David Buckel of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund has instead seen two typically unsupportive administrator responses to LGBTQ harassment (cited in Bochenek & Brown, 2001): "The first response is that boys will be boys . . . there's a notion that a boy should be fighting back as a man. Second, you'll hear the response that . . . you have to expect this kind of abuse, because you'll face it for the rest of your life." (p. 79)

These hurtful responses couldn't be more removed from the incredible support Jaden had from her principal Naomi. Throughout her years at Parkhurst, Naomi has made it clear that no one deserves harassment, and it will not be tolerated. Ludeke posits that administrators must create "a backbone of support for students and staff members" (2009, p. 14), and by all accounts Naomi accomplished this. As Jaden transitioned, Naomi made herself available to all of the students, knowing that many would have questions or concerns. Naomi said, "I stressed to students that I was always there for them," but no students ever took her up on this offer. This reticence can be attributed in part to the thorough and systematic pathways for building understanding through Gwen's presentations, but also to the close relationship between the students and their classroom teachers at this level of education. While there have been many cases of young people transitioning at the secondary level of schooling, there are factors unique to an elementary environment that do provide some advantages, such as heightened parental involvement leading to more conversations at home, smaller, tight knit classes where children spend the majority of their time, and a close relationship with a primary teacher.

Indeed, many elementary schools possess these qualities, but also crucial are the nature of Parkhurst school in general, and Darcy's classroom in particular. Many people suggested that the progressive nature of the Parkhurst community itself played a significant role in the success of Jaden's transition. Naomi described it this way: "Part of it is just that we have such a unique community at this school, with diverse families . . . People here are very accepting . . . It would have been much more difficult for her in a conservative school." In an environment where all family types are accepted, children understand that there is so much more to the world than what they see on TV; and they understand that individual differences are not a justification for ridicule. School parent Tory saw that this is a pretty consistent message at the school: "They do reinforce anti-bullying a lot at gatherings, and they have signs posted around the school." This kind of school-wide effort, involving staff, students, and parents, is precisely what renowned bullying

researcher Dan Olweus (1993a) and others have identified as essential in the anti-bullying literature.

Schools that effectively address and prevent the perpetration of harassment and bullying also are proactive at the classroom level, and this is evident in Darcy's teaching. In terms of classroom teaching, Jesse perceptively described how their approach to gender variance integrated into the framework of their classroom:

It's almost like anything else new that you work with kids on, maybe a little different and bigger, but if you teach respect, if you couch it in terms of difference and diversity, [then] it's just another aspect of that. Darcy is huge on building respect and she had done a great job of weaving that throughout the classroom community from the beginning of the year.

In a setting where respect for difference has been taught all along, the concept that gender diversity needs to be respected will make sense. While Jaden experienced minimal teasing in her years at Parkhurst (especially compared to her time in the rural school), everyone reported a drastic reduction in incidents once the classroom presentations took place.

The adults interviewed all shared the conviction that, because nothing has been reported to them, they could be assured that there has been no more teasing, harassment, or put-downs around transgender themes. Naomi, for example, stated, "I haven't heard from Jaden or through the system that there have been any problems—I haven't seen any referrals or 'fix-it' plans come across my desk." Helen shared a similar sentiment, and Darcy opined, "I'm sure if something had happened on the playground Jaden would have told me or another one of her safe people." And while they can't address a problem they don't know about, it may be naïve to presume an absence of information represents a lack of incidents. Even Tory pointed out, "In all honesty I know even my own child has been teased and bullied because she's a special needs kind of kid. It does happen a lot more than the teachers, principals, and so on know about, so I wouldn't be surprised if it does go on."

Indeed, many studies have shown that much more bullying takes place than adults are aware of. For example, Olweus found teachers and parents to be "relatively unaware" of specific incidents of physical and verbal bullying (1993b). In another study, nearly three-quarters of teachers said they usually intervene in bullying situations, whereas only one-quarter of students agreed with this assessment, suggesting the adults are missing many incidents (Charach, Pepler, & Ziegler, 1995). While it's encouraging that Jaden and her supporters haven't heard or directly experienced the verbal harassment one might expect in this situation, there is a high probability that derogatory conversations are still taking place (especially considering the communication breakdowns as mentioned above), and it's only a matter of time before

something is overheard. It's important that school personnel not rest on their laurels, but rather be proactive in continuing to communicate the "different isn't bad" message across all the grades.

This is a message that lies at the heart of the curriculum Gwen has been teaching throughout the Fairtown Schools and indeed through the greater Fairtown community for many years. The other faculty and staff were in agreement with Dyann that for them, the fact that this had been a positive experience rested on Gwen's involvement as the person who "knew what all the pieces were." They saw a need to have someone in this role, and also appreciated Gwen's work beyond her instructional capacities. She was effective at coordinating the curricular efforts and coalescing the faculty and staff, but her role in supporting Jaden (and Dyann) cannot be overstated; she was an important presence as a "specific supportive adult" to whom Jaden could turn when necessary (Ludeke, 2009, p. 16).

As Dyann put it, "The biggest thing Gwen does is she listens to Jaden, which even the [private] counselor has not done. Really, it's been Gwen guiding us, listening to Jaden. We couldn't do this without Gwen, no way, no way, no way." Gwen on the other hand saw herself as one important gear in a well-oiled mechanism: "I think the systems we put into place really reassured Jaden, even more so than Dyann, that we were all in communication; she really felt listened to. She knows that all the people involved have met each other, we're working together."

This "continuity of caregiving" (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006) is predicated on Gwen's community involvement (an explicit part of her job description) as well as her own commitment to meeting the needs of the whole child, for example working with the summer camps Jaden is attending and at the respite center where Jaden and her brother go for child care to provide inservice training for the staff and counselors. Gwen recognizes the importance for Jaden of knowing that with all the various parts of her life, someone really "knows the big picture."

Another person with a pretty good sense of the "big picture" is Dyann, and needless to say, this couldn't have happened without her whole-hearted support. As Helen pointed out, "Dyann's response to Jaden made all the difference." In fact, Jaden probably wouldn't have been the strong, outgoing, articulate person she is without Dyann. As Caitlyn Ryan of the Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University summarizes, "Transgender and gender non-conforming children who are supported by their families have higher self-esteem [and] a more positive sense of the future" (2009, p. 17). These qualities, which Jaden has in spades, were able to flourish in the consistent affirmation she has received from Dyann. One study found that when sexual minority children and youth are not supported but instead are rejected by their families, they are 8.4 times more likely to report suicide attempts, 5.9 times more likely to report extreme depression, and 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs and engage in unprotected sex (Ryan et al.,

2009). According to Ryan, rejecting families are often the most ill equipped to discuss issues effectively or advocate for their children, such as issues of bullying and harassment at school (cited in Sadowski, 2010, pp. 14–15). Yet when parents and caregivers understand the impact of their rejection on their children's health, mental health, and well-being, they demonstrate the capacity to increase supportive behaviors (Ryan, cited in Sadowski, 2010). Sadowski (2010) references the work of Stephen T. Russell of the University of Arizona in arguing that schools can play a role, in particular through including parents and families in the discussion of LGBT issues, much as Parkhurst attempted in the invitations for parent participation. Schools could also consider making documents available to families, such as the Children's National Medical Center pamphlet *If You Are Concerned About Your Child's Gender Behaviors* (Tuerk, Menvielle, & de Jesus, 2003), or the Family Acceptance Project brochure *Supportive Families, Healthy Children* (Ryan, 2009).

In Jaden's situation of strong familial support, all faculty/staff felt that the actions taken by the school were overall worthwhile. However in terms of the role of the school, the decision to include only the fifth grade in the intervention was questioned. Jesse pointed out, "The fact of the matter is that we mix with [the other fifth grades] for only one subject, and for that subject we really mix across three grades. So if Jaden's whole grade was included then it seems the other two grades should have been included too."

Because the school does have some multi-grade grouping in one subject, the fact that information wasn't made available to all created more questions for some, and led to other teachers feeling even more "on the spot" with questions they couldn't answer. Had those classes not been "kept out of the loop," perhaps many of the rumors could have been prevented, Jesse speculated. The decision of whom to involve, and to what degree, is something districts should carefully consider, weighing the benefits and drawbacks at each level.

Another consideration might be whether all schools should be laying the groundwork for all children to learn to "question the ways in which gender is operating and what the consequences are" (Rands, 2009, p. 426). In Horn's surveys of nearly 700 high school students, she found that adolescents view peers who are nontraditionally gendered as "less acceptable" than those who are gender conforming, regardless of orientation (2008, p. 141). Her interpretation of these results is that to reduce harassment of all LGBTQ students "schools should be doing much more work around adolescents' understanding of gender, gender conventions, and gender roles" rather than focusing solely on gender identity or sexual orientation (Horn, 2008, p. 142). This work would be in line with the transgender subjects of Gutierrez's study, who said their ideal school would have a class in gender studies, "Because a lot of people don't really know much about gender" (2004, p. 77). Such work should start in the elementary school, if not earlier. One model is that established by Lamb et al., (2009), in which an intervention teaches

children strategies for challenging gender-stereotyped comments (see also Moss, 2007). Rands (2009, p. 426) proposes that schools should go further; rather than creating separate units or courses, what she terms “gender-complex education” would be an integrated outlook that encourages taking action toward gender equity for all:

The gender-complex teacher does not expect children to fit into a dichotomous classification of gender. Gender categories are acknowledged as fluid. Gender-complex teachers work with students to analyze at the micro level the ways in which gender is constantly being socially constructed in the classroom as well as macro-level influences on this process.

Students enmeshed in such a “gender-complex” education would need much less explanation when one of their peers transitioned, making some of the “who to include and when” discussions more peripheral. Furthermore, “including as a matter of course information on issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity helps to remove social stigma against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals” and should help combat feelings of isolation and depression (Bochenek & Brown, 2001, p. 118). Such lessons no longer become an add-on targeting an individual, but are elevated to a standard component of the curriculum, carrying a significant message about their importance. This will benefit all students by raising their awareness and understanding of diversity in our society (Bochenek & Brown, 2001).

Another component about which there were lingering concerns was the timing of the transition. Jesse posited that having a “somewhat random” change date may have seemed odd to Jaden’s classmates, causing them to wonder, “What changed? What’s different now from last week?” Kim too considered whether Jaden might have transitioned at the beginning of fifth grade.

I don’t know what all the considerations were . . . maybe there would have been some advantages to doing it at the beginning of the school year. The kids did already know Jaden from past years, so I don’t know if it’s better at the beginning of the year or if it’s better to wait until the relationships and community of the classroom are established.

Many young people do transition over the summer, or even more commonly in the passage from one phase of schooling to another (high school to college, middle school to high school, or elementary school to middle school). Jaden herself was adamant that she couldn’t put her transition off any longer, and Darcy felt that respecting this need was the most important thing the school district did for Jaden:

To transition before middle school was *crucial* [strongly emphasized]. Think about it; if she did it in middle school it would be with kids from a lot of different schools. It would *not* have gone well. I was *more* than happy, really honored, to be the teacher to help her through this process. An elementary school is like a close-knit family, and especially here where we have a small school, a tight staff with little turnover, it was a much safer environment. It was critical that the timing was in fifth grade for her or we may have missed a critical spot. There is such a narrow time window before the hormones kick in, and children are starting puberty earlier and earlier.

Darcy's perception of the urgency of acting before puberty is supported by Vanderburgh (2005, p. 2), who writes:

Throughout childhood, gender is not that big a deal, somewhat easily ignored. At puberty, however, there is a "gender divide." The girls go one way, boys go another, and the transadolescent is left at the starting gate . . . So the transperson simply stops developing emotionally and shuts down. Many trans people go through adolescence in a state of quiet depression.

Rather than watching as a child enters a state of heightened psychological distress, if we can help in the actualization of gender identity prior to puberty we "may well mitigate many of the mental health issues found in various studies" of gender dissonant children and adolescents (Vanderburgh, 2009, pp. 141–142). Another advantage was identified by Jesse, who pointed out that timing the transition as they did provided a "cushion" before the end of the year, giving everyone time to process it. More importantly, Jaden's case is a powerful demonstration of a school district listening to a child's voice. For varied reasons, Jaden had reached an internal turning point, and when she said, "It's time," the faculty kept safety in the forefront as her vision was actualized. One of the reasons yearbook advisor Kim was compelled to strongly advocate for Jaden was because of a personal acquaintance of hers who had worked through a gender transition as an adult. This is what Ehrensaft would call a "gender angel," a previous experience in confronting and negotiating gender conflicts that becomes transformative through being "internalized and woven into our adult gendered selves" (2007, p. 298). Kim's background with this "gender angel" has been pivotal in framing her perspective. "I know for anyone it's a difficult decision, and a lifelong thing, so why would a school ever want to get in the way of a child's development? How much more empowering it's been for her to take the lead."

So, too, other districts could follow the lead of Fairtown and move forward once they have determined that the child and family are really ready to initiate the transition. It is tempting to ask if the school is ready, but more important perhaps is asking how quickly you can *get* ready. Even

as Fairtown moved deliberately toward Jaden's transition, Gwen and Naomi gave themselves a quarter of the school year to lay the groundwork needed to ensure the transition would be successful.

Jaden herself has no regrets. For her, this was clearly the right thing to do and the right time to do it. When asked what advice she would give other kids trying to decide when to transition, she asserted: "Just do it! If you have someone good that you trust—and it would probably be best if it's an adult—just tell them that you feel you need to [transition]. Just do it. Don't be shy."

Her use of the word "need" is instructive. This was not something she merely wanted; it was a defining moment in acknowledging her need to stop repressing a foundational element of her identity. It was a change she needed for her own emotional health. Not surprisingly, then, everyone around her observed an immense reduction in Jaden's stress levels after the transition. They described her as much more focused, and seeming much happier in all environments. "When she formally went ahead with the change, she . . . became so comfortable and happy; she was much more outgoing, and felt free to be herself where she would have been very shy and reserved before. She played a solo in the music concert; she's been at public events like Family Fun Night."

This aligns with what Ehrensaft has seen in her work as well: "When children with consistent and cohesive narratives about their gender are allowed to match their gender expression with their inner gender identity, they relax and appear better regulated in most if not all aspects of life" (2009, p. 22). Jaden's experience is also supported by the survey findings of the GLSEN *Harsh Realities* report: "For transgender students, being out, and thus able to participate more fully in one's school community, was related to a greater sense of belonging in school" (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009, p. 30). This engagement logically leads to greater scholastic progress. Jesse recognized such a change in Jaden, and seeing her transform into an emotionally healthy and academically motivated student ameliorated any doubts he had had about the transition:

To the extent that I had not understood the gender issues before, if I had had any reservations before the change, they were totally erased by how great it was to see the positive changes in Jaden as a student. After Jaden made the transition, she was so much more focused in school, and it was good just to see her so happy. It was a night and day change. All of a sudden her hand was the first one up. There was a huge increase in her comfort level, paying attention and focusing in class, knowing the answer and always wanting to share it. After the change, it was like she was now consistently this new engaged student.

Helen, too, has watched as the district's acceptance of the "new" Jaden fed her blossoming self-acceptance. "Sometimes when I'm at school I take my contacts out, and if I'm walking down the hall and see Jaden from a distance, I can't tell if it's her, because there are a couple of other girls of similar stature. She is just all girl. She is entirely comfortable in her skin. I'm so glad that she can make choices about what she wears that are her own."

This is an important goal for all students—that school is a place where they are "comfortable in their skin." But beyond the environment is the curriculum, which can help students to see how important it is to be yourself, and how being true to your own inner voice you can be your best self. This is important work, work that can't be done alone; and the layers of community around Jaden at home and at school collaborated to create a reality in which these ideals were met.

Arguably the most significant conclusion is that both transitioning children and their peers need a "strong and significant network of support," as Ludeke (2009) writes, to help them navigate the unknown waters successfully. In contrast to the Massachusetts school district superintendent who insisted that gender identity is "beyond the comprehension" of elementary-aged kids (Jan, 2005), the administrators and teachers in Fairtown knew that, with the correct scaffolding and support, their fifth-graders could get it. The interventions undertaken made a difference not just for Jaden. The training the children received in responding to bullying and harassment is something they can carry over to other situations, and anecdotally many seem committed to doing so. This promises to pay off in future interactions with peers who find themselves in need of allies. Furthermore, it wasn't just the students who were profoundly influenced; the adults clearly learned a lot too, including Jesse, who said, "The whole explanation of the differences between gender and sexuality and issues around those identities was very helpful. Before getting the information from Gwen I think I had a lot of confusion about these issues, so it was good to learn about it from her."

Considering Jesse had just completed his undergraduate education without getting any guidance on these issues, it clearly points to the need for more preservice teacher education about gender identity and gender variance. Most teachers report that their teacher training programs didn't address harassment based on gender identity (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Lee, 2007). Just as children would benefit from a gender-complex education, so too should our colleges, schools, and departments of education consider gender-complex teacher education (Rands, 2009). Rands proposes several strategies for initiating this, such as building off Peggy McIntosh's (1990) article about White privilege into contemplating "gender privilege" and "gender presentation privilege," targeting discussions so that field work observations can allow for "more nuanced interpretations of how gender is enacted in the classroom," and posing "what-if" questions such as "What if all children in our society started out using gender-neutral pronouns and then chose 'he'

or ‘she’ at the beginning of middle school?” (Rands, 1990, pp. 428–29). In addition, simple lessons like the one Gwen implemented with the students could be used with pre-service teachers as a starting point in responding to harassment.

However, it’s not enough to focus on the next generation; work needs to be done with the personnel in the schools now “to improve rates of intervention and increase the number of supportive school staff available to transgender students” (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009, p. 47). A one-time intervention is not adequate; rather districts must provide ongoing in-service training on a range of issues from anti-bias education to legal responsibilities (Weiler, 2001). This must include student support staff (social workers, psychologists, and counselors), many of whom have been found to be biased and misinformed about transgender students (Bochenek & Brown, 2001). School counseling certification programs should incorporate LGBTQ content into the curriculum, and preservice as well as inservice instruction must specifically address the needs of transgender students; as one counselor put it, “We need even more sociological training dealing with young trans people” (cited in Bochenek & Brown, 2001, p. 103). And as Bochenek & Brown further point out, “Because youth are grappling with issues of sexual orientation and gender identity in the fourth or fifth grade, elementary school counselors must be prepared to address these issues in age-appropriate ways” (2001, p. 103). It’s no longer adequate that students are denied support services around these issues until they reach middle or high school.

Most of the adults clearly stated that one of the most far-reaching effects for them was an increased sensitivity to children in general. The question, “What changes have you made as a result of working with this child?” was intended to elicit perhaps strategies or changes in routine, but instead what many faculty members spoke of was how they had changed internally. For example, Kim said:

I would say it’s been subtle, in terms of being more aware as a teacher where kids are coming from, more sensitive to them in a holistic way. There’s a part of me that has always been very serious about teaching content, and I used to feel that getting involved in their personal stuff felt nosy. I feel like now I’m presenting myself more as someone kids can talk to about other aspects of their lives when they need to, someone who will listen to them.

Helen expressed that she had developed a similarly perceptivity: “The biggest thing is that I’m more in tune to kids like Jaden; I’ve learned not to dismiss the idea that there may be other underlying issues. I would say I view kids differently than I used to.” Darcy responded this way:

I'm more aware of, and more sensitive to, what kids might be dealing with on the inside that might prevent them from learning, from feeling free . . . Now I am constantly looking for kids who might be melting on the inside . . . I am always trying to grow as a teacher, and now I find I am more vividly observant, I almost see it all.

There is need for caring teachers who validate the individual and nascent gender identities of their students. The discernment required for this simultaneously emerges from and supports a kind of connected teaching; it is recognition that good teaching starts and ends with the relationships. This should be foundational for all students, but is especially so in a vulnerable population such as gender variant children. As Sausa reported in her study, "Trans youth who stayed in school were more likely to report that at least one educator or staff member believed in them, advocated for them, and cared about their well-being" (2005, p. 24). It's what Gwen calls "The Power of One." Ideally, students will be surrounded by supportive faculty and staff, as Jaden was at Parkhurst; but never underestimate the power of one committed advocate.

#### LEARN AS MUCH AS YOU CAN, AS FAST AS YOU CAN

Jaden, her family, and the Fairtown faculty members were incredibly gracious in providing this opportunity to learn from their experiences, and indeed several lessons can be culled from their collective stories. Gwen's skillful mediation of Jaden's public gender transition had multiple benefits for all stakeholders in the long and short term. Not all problems were resolved to a point of closure, however for the most part people were open to broadening their horizons. There can be no question that this work in the district will need to be ongoing. As Kim pointed out, "It's so important to open up dialogue around issues of equity and gender. We have to have safe conversations so we can say our true feelings, because if we don't it will come out in our actions. That kind of safe atmosphere is critical."

One uncomfortable conclusion related to this idea is that what a transgender girl craves may conflict with progressive notions of how we relate to boys and girls, particularly in light of the over-emphasis on body image for girls in today's overly commercialized childhood. For example, many of us have heard concerns about Barbie, her unrealistic body proportions (a five foot seven inch real-life Barbie would have a 16 inch waist), and the links to body dissatisfaction (Linn, 2004; Norton et al., 1996). Dyann, having heard of this debate, put off buying a Barbie for a long time: "I didn't really like buying Barbies because of the messages they give, but I gave in." Similarly, Helen reported that she started commenting more on Jaden's appearance because Dyann said that was very important to her. Helen explains, "My interactions

with Jaden have been contrary to what my typical response to a girl would be. I typically don't do this with girls because their feelings about themselves should come from much more than their appearance." Thus ironically, in trying to make Jaden feel more like a girl, or more accepted as a girl, Helen and others are treating her in ways they wouldn't consider for a cisgender (gender normative) girl. As Cris Beam (2007) writes in the book *Transparent*, "Many transgender women, especially when they're young, learn to use their beauty or their flirting to get the things they need—to the exclusion of their other skills—much the way exceptionally pretty genetic women learn that their looks are their best asset and begin to doubt their intelligence or internal value." (p. 143)

Of course such strategies wouldn't work if our society didn't capitulate to them—if so many advantages weren't conferred on the basis of beauty. If our society weren't awash in messages that what matters most about a girl is how she looks, we could all begin to step away from the artificial binaries. If we had really attained the ideal in society where girls weren't being given these messages, then girls like Jaden would not be craving them. But the reality is that many transgender girls do crave being seen as beauty objects, because that is the image they have of femininity. Alexis Rivera, a case manager for transgender girls, explains that because those who are female-affirmed were "socialized as boys who were objectifying women," they learn to see women through the eyes of their fathers or other male models, and thus it makes sense that to them femininity is equated with objectified beauty (cited in Beam, 2007, p. 145). Perhaps on some level Jaden does get it; after all, her advice to schools is to display posters supporting individuality through mantras such as "Any way you are is beautiful" or "Whoever you choose to be is okay." For the time being, Jaden may simply be reveling in her newfound recognition as a girl. However, as well-read, mature, and intelligent as Jaden is, she is well poised to benefit from a conversation with a trusted adult about not letting her self-esteem be too wrapped up in her body image. Preferably, she would get this message in the classroom, as it is a lesson that every child should have the opportunity to learn.

Another conclusion, and one that was drawn universally, was the necessity of having a person who can "take the lead" during a transition and serve as a resource for others. Coordination is crucial to a positive transition experience, and this was made possible because "Gwen has really been out there pushing, directing the orchestra right and left." Darcy pointed out that there are others who take key roles: a good social worker or school psychologist is invaluable, and the support of the principal is key; but the school administrator is often too busy to give the focused attention needed, and teachers "get too caught up in the middle of the day." Kim imagined what it would have been like without Gwen's leadership: "Just think, if we didn't have a resource person like Gwen and we resorted to trying to find an answer

on the web. You wouldn't even know if what you found was appropriate. Having Gwen available is so important in getting accurate answers."

Districts in which there is currently not an instructional resource for LGBTQ students should give serious consideration to developing such a position. As this study shows, Gwen's work benefitted not only Jaden, but also her classmates, teachers, principal, family, and community immeasurably. This would be a fiscally wise investment. In the short-term, or in cases where this is not a possibility, another option would be to find someone in the community to utilize as a point person. Some schools have had success with bringing in gender-variance experts to present comprehensive faculty/staff training programs (Lee, 2007; Saeger, 2006).

Once the "go-to" person is established, some lessons they could take from Jaden's story would be to safeguard confidentiality from the public eye at every step of the way, set up a common language earlier, and maintain good communication with families. Gwen's advice to other school professionals working with a transitioning child reinforces the need to build a community of support: "Find other folks [with expertise] to support you and to support the family. Learn as much as you can as fast as you can, so the child and family don't have to educate you. Take guidance from the family and child, and then meld what they say with the systems and bring them together as best you can."

It's certainly a fine line to walk—taking guidance from the family, but not putting them on the spot and expecting them take on a mentoring role. There are several national and local organizations that provide respected sources of information both in print and online, as well as a presence in many communities, such as PFLAG (Parents/Friends of Lesbians and Gays), GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network), TYFA (Trans Youth Family Allies) and GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) for Safe Schools. Schools should also be prepared to connect gender variant and transgender youth and their families with supportive individuals and organizations in the community, such as transgender-aware health providers and therapists, social and peer support groups, support groups for parents and families, and advocacy organizations (Ludeke, 2009, p. 16). And while it is a lot to learn, if districts can be proactive and start the work before a child presents as ready to transition, so much the better.

The next steps will include following Jaden into the middle school to interview her and her peers for a retrospective look at their experiences in elementary school, and to explore how they have fared in the new environment. It's important to celebrate that Jaden's transition didn't interfere with her academic learning, or with that of her classmates, and it will be important to determine the extent to which they continue on this trajectory. Their positive experiences in fifth grade are now woven into the fabric of their lives, providing them with "gender angels" that they can carry with them as

they find new ways to be supportive in their future interactions in middle school and beyond.

## NOTES

1. The terms male-affirmed (replacing female-to-male) and female affirmed (replacing male-to-female) are newer language intended to be non-pathologizing in recognizing that “these children have never identified as the gender assigned them at birth and are therefore not moving from one gender to another, but into an affirmation” of their gender (Vanderburgh, 2009, 136).
2. All student, faculty, and staff names are pseudonyms.
3. Because of Jaden’s persistent identification of herself as female, female pronouns are used to describe her.
4. A guardian ad litem is an attorney appointed by a judge to represent a child’s best interests (as determined by an investigation) in order to assist the judge in making custody, placement, and support decisions.
5. Darcy chose to use “he” when discussing Jaden before the transition, and “she” in discussing her since the transition.
6. The timeline was as follows: In week one, a notification letter was sent to parents and guardians for students in Jaden’s homeroom; the next week was the parent meeting and classroom sessions for these groups. Jaden transitioned in the third week, and the school was closed for a break the following week. In week six, parents and guardians of students in the other fifth-grade classes received an initial letter, with evening parent meetings and classroom presentations taking place in week seven.

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