

**WHEN THE WHITE DRESS DOESN'T FIT:
WHAT ARE OTHER GIRLS' SCHOOLS DOING
ABOUT TRANSGENDER STUDENTS?**

A Research Project

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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Educators and parents are struggling to play catch-up with a 21st century gender revolution which replaces categories of male and female with a spectrum of gender identities – and refutes the longheld notion that gender is determined by sex (specifically, by external genitalia). Nowadays, youth can choose from over 50 gender categories on Facebook, and some common applications for colleges and independent schools offer prospective students the option to claim a gender identity which is different from their biological sex. Facing a viral pace of change around gender, single-sex schools have been challenged to stay true to mission while responding to the students of today.

Administrators face such fundamental questions as:

- **What IS a girl?**
Is a girl someone who identifies as a girl?
Or, is a girl someone who was born with female genitalia?
- **If gender is a spectrum, then are single-sex schools soon to be extinct?**
- **How do we stay true to our girl-centric mission if we include transgender students?**

Considering the needs of multiple constituencies (alumnae; donors; students; parents; faculty), with differing allegiances to traditional notions of gender, becomes a high-stakes delicate balancing act on such a mission-critical issue.

In 2015, the National Coalition of Girls' Schools pioneered the discussion of transgender students, issuing a Position Statement which outlined areas of consideration for schools. In just two years, many girls' schools have taken up the challenge of single-sex education in a multi-gender world with courageous, thoughtful, and prudent consideration. As they strive to develop best practices, administrators have sought guidance and inspiration from peer schools. Yet because this remains a controversial topic, many schools have been reluctant to share their approach publicly.

To provide schools with this crucial data, I initiated a research study in the Spring of 2017, gathering confidential information in phone interviews with 33 independent girls' schools. Schools ranged in type (boarding/day), age of students, and location -- urban, suburban, and rural, south and north, east and west and in between in the U.S. and Canada. No self-identified Catholic or religious schools are represented, but there are schools with religious affiliation or origin.

While the schools varied in type, philosophy, and degree of engagement with the topic, several key findings emerged:

- **Almost all (29 out of 33) schools reported that they currently have or have had trans students.**
- **Only eight schools had gone the distance to approve final guidelines or policy (though many were in process).**
- **Many girls' schools are finding their way to both admitting MTF transgender girls (natal boys) AND allowing FTM transgender boys (natal girls) to remain as students, under certain circumstances which are mostly yet to be worked out.**
- **Twice as many schools report that they would admit MTF self-identified trans girls with male genitalia as those which report they will definitely support FTM current trans students with female genitalia until graduation.**
- **Most schools acknowledge that nonbinary/genderqueer students are the next outpost on the gender frontier -- one which they have yet to consider.**
- **Reportedly, high-level administrators at three schools lost their jobs at least in part because they were perceived to be too progressive around transgender inclusivity.**

Most of the schools had initiated some discussion of the topic, but varied widely on where they were in the process of developing policy and practice. A few schools were just beginning their discussions.

In the not-so-distant past, it was a student coming out as trans that would occasion the school initiating some exploration of the topic. However, more and more schools are beginning to tackle the process before being in the thick of it with a student. Most schools (27) have had training or policy consultation from outside consultants or have it planned for this year; almost all said they had out LGBTQ faculty or staff; only one said they had an out faculty member who was not cisgender.

There were some outliers as well: administrators from three "No Biggie" schools couldn't see what all the fuss was about, as they saw the issue as fairly straightforward. For them, sometimes it was simple because the school decided that once a student identifies as male, he is asked to leave; for others, sometimes it was simple because, "You have to identify as a girl when you get here, but once you're a member of our family, we'll support you no matter what."

WHO ARE THE TRANSGENDER STUDENTS?

TRANS is an all-inclusive, umbrella term which describes all gender-creative people whose gender identities or gender expressions do not traditionally match with the sex they were assigned at birth.

GENDER NON-CONFORMING kids (formerly known as 'sissies' or 'tomboys,' terms which are now seen as problematic) go against stereotypically gendered behavior in their play choices, dress, appearance, movements, or choice of playmates. They do not experience distress about their bodies or feel that they have a different gender identity from their sex assigned at birth.

CROSS-GENDER IDENTIFYING kids tend to consistently, persistently, and insistently identify as the opposite sex from an early age and are likely to desire medical intervention. They see gender in very binary terms and feel distress at having been born into the wrong body.

NON-BINARY, GENDERQUEER, or AGENDER kids identify as neither male nor female, in both gender expression and gender identity. This rapidly growing population rejects the gender binary, instead viewing gender identity as a spectrum.

FTM/TRANSMASCULINE describes the direction of a shift in gender identity for a person assigned female at birth (AFAB) but moving away from a female gender identity.

MTF/TRANSFEMININE describes the direction of a shift in gender identity for a person assigned male at birth (AMAB) but moving away from a female gender identity.

THEMES

WE WANT TO BE SENSITIVE TO OUR TRANS STUDENTS, BUT AT THE END OF THE DAY WE ARE A GIRLS' SCHOOL.

Everyone spoke of their struggle to do right by trans students on the one hand, and to remain steadfast in their commitment to preserve the unique character, culture, and mission of a girls' school on the other. As one HOS put it, "I can't see kicking out a student but I don't really want trans boys here in numbers that would change our character as a girls' school." Another HOS worried, "I've seen a revering of masculinity as some students have come out as trans boys, as well as a sexual titillation around that masculinity – that feels like a danger to the unique character of the girls' school space."

WE WON'T GIVE UP CALLING OUR STUDENTS "GIRLS."

Administrators saw "girls" as more than a descriptor, but as a term of empowerment and crucial signifier that 'this community is one of those rare spaces where girls come first.' Heads of School spoke passionately on this point, including "We will not abandon the language of sisterhood," and "The second we stop referring to our students as GIRLS is a danger sign. We don't want to include trans boys to the extent that we're no longer empowering girls."

THERE'S NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH FOR TRANS INCLUSION AT GIRLS' SCHOOLS. Schools wanted to learn what others were doing, but frequently saw, for example, the guidelines of an upper day school in California as not applicable to a boarding school in the South. Each school had to consider the changing gender landscape in the context of their own institution's mission, history, values and priorities, stakeholders – as well as their local legal restrictions.

WE NEED TO ALWAYS KEEP THE STUDENT AT THE CENTER.

With 87% of transgender high school students reporting bullying and the CDC reporting that fully half of transgender individuals attempt suicide by age 20, administrators recognize that these students are among the most at-risk kids in their schools. Heads of School spoke of the need to balance general policy and practice discussion with constant attention to the experiences of their trans students. Five schools had developed a Gender Support Plan – a protocol to follow when a student comes out as trans – as a way to support the student and work with the community.

DO WE WANT TO DEVELOP A PHILOSOPHY? POLICY? PRACTICE? PARAMETERS? A PROCESS?

Administrators mostly resisted the creation of policies that could be overly constraining. Instead, they favored something like guidelines or parameters that would offer a measure of flexibility that can adapt to various student situations and to the rapid changes we're experiencing around gender diversity. At the same time, they also acknowledged the hazards of people not knowing where the school stands -- students may be afraid to be out as trans, and faculty may stray far afield in one direction or the other or feel unsupported by the leadership.

WE NEEDED TO BE EDUCATED, AND SOME OF US NEEDED IT OVER AND OVER.

Almost everyone spoke of the grown-ups needing to catch up with the kids on this topic. Many noted that the adults' learning needed to be scaffolded and take place over time.

THE PROCESS OF COMING UP WITH OUR GUIDELINES TOOK MUCH LONGER THAN EXPECTED. Administrators were surprised by how complex the issues were, and that stakeholders often needed time to come to terms with change.

U.S. SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS WERE SURPRISED THAT THE 2016 ELECTION COMPLICATED THEIR COMMUNITY'S CONSIDERATION OF THIS TOPIC.

As one HOS put it, "The political climate is so hot right now that we're walking a tightrope around every social issue." Many schools experienced an emboldening of some more conservative voices in their communities which altered the discussion of trans students and sometimes required a slowdown in policy development.

SPECIFIC ISSUES

ADMISSIONS

(See chart on page 9)

Schools were actively tackling the question of whether biological boys who identify as trans girls would be considered for admission. Most schools hadn't changed their policies; for those who had, they shifted to consider "anyone who identifies as a girl" as eligible for admission, signaling their willingness to admit transgender girls who had been assigned male at birth. However, as one HOS recognized, "We haven't made any changes, but in effect, we've actually always had a transgender admissions policy. Since we don't 'look under the hood' or require proof of biological sex, anyone who says she's a girl can apply."

Administrators often brought up the importance of the age of the student. For example, they worried that very young (MTF) trans girls might later change their minds and identify as boys. Others raised concerns about admitting MTF students who might ultimately go through male puberty. As one Head put it, "It's one thing to graduate a student wearing a tie – it's another to hand a girls' school diploma to a senior with a beard."

Most schools had not taken up the question of admitting non-binary or gender-fluid natal female FTM students (who may go by they/them/their pronouns), but many acknowledged that such a discussion is warranted since this is the fastest-growing group of trans youth. One Head of School who's spent four years developing an approach to trans students commented, "Just when we thought we'd figured it all out with the girls who were transitioning to boys, now there's this whole other category of kids we have to consider."

RETENTION

(See chart on page 10)

Around the question of what to do if a girls' school student comes out as trans, administrators reported that where they started was often quite different than where they ended up. On the one hand, some initially felt that it was self-evident that a trans student should leave a girls' school. On the other hand, there were many administrators who started off by feeling that every student is a cherished member of the community, so they would never ask a trans student to leave. Both groups agreed, however, that once they started educating themselves, they learned that the retention questions were far more complex:

If we allow trans students to stay, will that change us somehow?

Are we ready to welcome and support trans students?

In 2017, retention practices remain usually informal and rarely codified. **Most schools were still figuring out what their guidelines around current trans students should be.** Seven schools reported no policy on this question, and six reported that they would support the trans student until graduation.

Most schools (20) are opting for a case-by-case determination of whether trans students should remain at their girls' school, but they are preparing themselves by setting parameters which will guide that determination. Most administrators echoed, "We will support each student on their exploration and journey insofar as it does not conflict with our mission as a girls' school." However, many administrators raised the concern that asking one trans student to leave while allowing another to stay might ultimately provoke disastrous legal or public relations consequences.

Factors to consider were the student's age, the initiation of medical transition, and self-identification as male (as opposed to transgender). Some administrators were more likely to ask younger trans students to leave, or to allow a trans student to stay until the end of a division, while a few administrators mentioned their reluctance to kick out a trans student during the college application process. Several administrators mentioned that if

students initiated cross-sex hormones, they would not be invited to return. Many schools said they would draw the line at students who publicly self-identify as male (as opposed to trans, transgender, genderqueer, or gender-questioning) being not a good match for a girls' school, but few schools had actually had those students.

Length of time of trans gender identity was also cited as a factor by a middle/upper school head: "If I had a 7th or 8th grader transitioning to male, we'll work with you to help you develop your identity. But in my head, if the student is still identifying as male a year later, I'd feel like, 'maybe this isn't the right place for you.' But the student is likely to want to stay."

Trans students becoming student leaders was a sticking point for many administrators, who expressed concern about (FTM) trans male students in leadership positions representing or being seen publicly as 'the face of' the school.

On the other hand, one Head said, "We need trans students to be willing to work within the constraints of being at a girls' school – even to embrace it. But it won't work if they're treated as second class citizens."

BATHROOMS, LOCKER ROOMS, BOARDING, AND OVERNIGHT TRIPS: For as much discussion and media attention as the topic of trans people and bathrooms gets, it seems to be a relatively easy fix for schools. Most looked for the opportunity to turn single-stall bathrooms into all-gender bathrooms and mark them "Restroom," "All-gender," "Gender-inclusive" etc. For now, many schools would offer a private locker room changing space, knowing that not all trans students would opt for that.

Boarding school administrators were eager to learn of others' experiences. Around boarding and overnight trips, schools really didn't have this figured out yet, and of course some are more constrained than others due to their housing stock or customs around not providing single rooms. Administrators were mindful of the possibility that MTF students might not be publicly out as trans, which would certainly complicate rooming assignments. For FTM boarders, many administrators were concerned about reactions from the parents of potential roommates -- including more traditional families or international families -- who might not be familiar with trans people.

CURRICULUM: Many schools reported that the topic of the gender spectrum, gender identity, or transgender individuals is taught somewhere – for example, in health and wellness, history, social justice, or literature classes. Parents didn't seem to object to intellectual study of the topic. However, when older students came out to or began to inform younger students about trans experience, parents would sound the alarm bells. As a result, several administrators were considering how and when the adults could take on the task of introducing this material to the younger kids.

PARENT RELATIONS: Many participants acknowledged both the heartbreak involved in witnessing unsupportive parents with trans kids and the dicey position that puts the school in. Having unsupportive parents puts trans kids at high-risk for depression, substance abuse, and suicidality. Schools want to encourage self-exploration and authenticity among students, but then they struggle to take on the role of bridging the gap between trans students and their

unsupportive parents. Several administrators had already experienced parents unleashing antagonism toward the school for supporting their trans child.

DRESS CODE: Most of the schools had reviewed their dress code with an eye to making it more gender-expansive, usually by including pants as an option. Many schools complained that their students rarely wore pants, though – sometimes because the particular pants in the uniform were “dorky,” and often because the dominant student culture still favored things like long, straight hair and skirts. Several schools had shifted to allow pants for the older students but not in the lower school. The White Dress still dominated graduation attire, though most schools would allow pants when requested.

ALUMNAE were an important concern for girls’ schools, in two ways: On the one hand, Heads of School were hearing concerns from alumnae about what the school was doing about transgender students, and were facing current parents who are alumnae who seemed particularly conservative about trans inclusion at the school. On the other hand, administrators, aware of alums who’d come out as trans after graduation, were trying to include and embrace them within the school community. Several participants raised questions about whether to stop using alumnae and instead refer to graduates as alums in order to be more inclusive.

BOARD RELATIONS were seen as critically important on the trans topic. Many administrators stated that they generally prefer to determine policy and practice within the School and then run it by their Board. However, in many cases the Head recognized that this particular diversity issue had the potential to be mission-critical, and therefore chose to involve the Board in something that might otherwise have been viewed as strictly operational. For some schools, the fact that the trans topic touched on admissions issues meant that the Board had to be consulted. At a few schools, the Board had to be pushed to get involved in the topic, sometimes resenting doing so.

Many administrators emphasized the critical importance of finessing Board relations here, particularly because the Board/Head interface was the locus of many of the leadership changes that have occurred around trans inclusion. As one participant said, “My colleagues tell me, and I’ve learned, that the support of your Board Chair is make-or-break on this one.” Heads of School devoted much attention to how and when to educate their Boards, as well as strategic planning on how and who to include in decision-making bodies like a Transgender Task Force.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT: Most schools opted not to involve students in decision-making around trans policy and practice. Instead, students were involved in education and training (as leaders and participants) and invited to share input with decision-making administrators. At the one school where students were integrally involved in the process because that was in keeping with the school culture, it became very dicey and contentious to have students meeting with trustees to hammer out policy.

CONCLUSION: "IT'S COMPLICATED!"

Over and over, administrators pointed out the complexity of both the issues and the process around trans inclusivity at girls' schools. Participants faced competing allegiances – to girls' education; to supporting students' identity journeys; to feminism; to diversity and inclusion; to both staying current and honoring tradition. With 29 out of 33 schools reporting trans students on their campuses, administrators recognized that it's not a matter of whether girls' schools need to tackle this topic, it's a matter of when. The girls' school response to this need over just the past few years has been impressive in its scope and depth, particularly given this complexity.

Talented and experienced leaders in girls' education shared painful experiences:

- "This process has yielded the information that the faculty and the Board are on totally different pages, and I honestly don't know how we'll resolve that."
- "This topic is not for the faint of heart."
- "While our school was hammering this out, I didn't sleep for six weeks. This [development of guidelines around trans students] was the hardest thing I've ever done in my professional life, but it's also the thing I'm proudest of."

The gender revolution, with its rapid acceptance by this generation of students, poses immediate and significant challenges for girls' schools. And administrators have taken up that challenge by asking the hard questions, initiating a dedicated process of learning and self-reflection, and assessing where their particular school will land in the changing gender landscape.

It's complicated, but it can be done. While there's no one-size-fits-all approach, girls' schools have much to learn from and share with each other, as not just many of our students, but also our institutions, embark on this new gender journey.

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