

# School districts given guidance for transgender students

CAROLYN THOMPSON

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Teachers of transgender students should follow the students' lead when deciding which names or pronouns to use and schools should avoid practices rooted in stereotypes, like having color-coded graduation gowns for girls and boys, according to state-issued guidance for accommodating transgender students in New York schools.

The 12-page document released Monday draws from real-life situations, addressing issues like students' use of restrooms and changing spaces and which pronouns to use. It's meant to help districts create a safe and inclusive environment and comply with laws covering bullying, harassment, discrimination and student privacy, according to the state Education Department.

"This new document gives administrators practical guidance to ensure their schools are places where transgender and gender nonconforming students can focus on academics, friendships and their interests instead of worrying about how they will be treated by school staff and their peers," said Merryl Tisch, chancellor of the policymaking Board of Regents.

The new policy was praised by advocacy groups, including the New York Civil Liberties Union, which released a report in June calling discrimination and harassment of transgender students pervasive and accusing education officials of failing to carry out a legislative mandate to protect them.

"New York schools should be a haven for all students," NYCLU Lead Organizer Lauren Frederico, an author of the June report, said Monday. "Now that schools are clearly on notice on how to follow the law, we are hopeful that today's announcement will be a turning point for transgender students in New York."

The guidance directs schools to keep the birth names of transgender students who are new to the school confidential while publicly using a student's preferred name. For students who transition while attending the same school, educators should develop a plan to begin using the chosen name and consistent pronouns.

School officials should be careful when communicating with parents, the guidance said, because students don't always share their gender identity with their families.

In the 2012-13 academic year, schools statewide reported 24,478 incidents of harassment under a state law to protect students from bullying, of which 19 percent were related to gender stereotypes, the NYCLU report said. "We have a moral responsibility to foster civility in our schools, and to ensure that every student has equal access to educational programs and activities," Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia said. Empire State Pride Agenda, which was among groups that contributed to the guidelines, said they "offer our schools a much-needed map pointing the way toward a safe and supportive educational environment for transgender students."

The guidance, for example, says schools should offer private changing spaces or unisex bathrooms if students request them but should never force them on students. Federal Title IX law prohibits keeping a student from accessing a restroom that matches his or her gender identity.

School districts and administrators are to use the guidelines to develop individual district policy, the Education Department said. The document complements the 2010 Dignity for All Students Act aimed at ensuring that students have access to educational programs and activities free from discrimination. The document is separate from athletic guidelines also being considered.

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