



FAQs - Student Gender Identity Policy

Where can I find this policy?

All board policies can be found on the Okemos Public Schools website (www.okemosk12.net). Under the “Board of Education” tab, select “Policies.” The policy is also linked [here](#).

How different is this policy from what is already happening in Okemos schools?

The policy describes and institutionalizes our current practices, which have been used for years. This policy does not add any new practices in our schools.

This policy is focused on students. How do caregivers/parents fit in?

The district always prefers and strives to work in partnership with students’ and their caregivers - academically, socially, and emotionally. When a student informs us that they want a name or pronoun change, they meet with a counselor, administrator, or other trusted staff member to complete a support plan. Part of that conversation centers on how the student wants their caregivers/parents involved with and informed of the change. Helping students build and/or maintain positive relationships with their caregivers is part of how we support their safety, health, and well-being.

Caregiver support is critical for all children, but some may not support a gender identity or name change. What should we, as a school, do if this is the case?

The ideal solution is for the student and caregivers to discuss a compromise that works for everyone. It is, however, a reality that LGBTQ+ students are disproportionately experiencing housing instability/homelessness, and their homes could be physically and/or psychologically unsafe. The school can use a nickname for a student without parental consent, but this practice could have negative consequences. Working with caregivers is always our primary goal; we want to work in partnership with families. School personnel should talk to the student about the realities of going by a name that their caregivers don’t support, and they will help students develop a plan for communicating with their caregivers.

Two resources for talking with parents who aren't fully supportive are the [Family Acceptance Project](#) and [A Practitioner's Resource Guide: Helping Families Support Their LGBT Children](#).

Why was this policy drafted?

The policy responds to requests from students, staff, and community members for creating an inclusive environment for transgender and gender non-conforming people.

The policy expresses the district's strong commitment to providing a safe and welcoming environment for all community members regardless of gender identity or expression. A policy-level statement is important given the vulnerability of transgender and gender non-conforming populations to discrimination, harassment, and threats to their safety and well-being.

The [Trevor Project's 2021 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health](#) captures the experiences of nearly 35,000 LGBTQ youth ages 13–24 across the United States. Here are some of the key findings, including risk and protective factors:

- 42% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, including more than half of transgender and nonbinary youth.
- 75% of LGBTQ youth reported that they had experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity at least once in their lifetime.
- Transgender and nonbinary youth who reported having pronouns respected by all of the people they lived with attempted suicide at half the rate of those who did not have their pronouns respected by anyone with whom they lived.
- Transgender and nonbinary youth who were able to change their name and/or gender marker on legal documents, such as driver's licenses and birth certificates, reported lower rates of attempting suicide.
- LGBTQ youth who had access to spaces that affirmed their sexual orientation and gender identity reported lower rates of attempting suicide.

What was the process for developing the policy?

The policy was drafted by Thrun Law Firm and reviewed by staff from the Michigan Department of Education's LGBTQ+ Student Project. It was then presented to the OPS leadership team, which consists of all administrators in the district, for review and revision. Prior to review, administrators had collected feedback from students, teachers, counselors, and social workers. The Board of Education's Policy Committee examined the policy before recommending that it be presented to the full BOE for approval.

Is it legal to change a student's name within the district's student information system (PowerSchool)?

If a school can say it's acting in the best interest of the student by using their preferred name and pronouns, then they are on firm legal ground, specifically when it comes to Title IX. Thrun Law Firm presented [this webinar](#) with the LGBTQ+ Students Project for the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals earlier this spring on this topic.

When a student changes their name in PowerSchool, our registrars preserve the legal name within the system. Their chosen name will be used for in-district things like class rosters, but their legal name will be used for state testing.

Does changing a student's name in PowerSchool result in a legal name change?

Our process does not affect a student's legal name. If a legal name change is desired, students/families must apply through government offices (see the [State of Michigan's "Legal Name Change"](#) and [Ingham County's "Information for Name Changes"](#) for more information).

If school staff refuse to call a student by their chosen/preferred name, are they in violation of any district policies?

Okemos Public Schools [Board Policy 4121/5121](#) prohibits discrimination and discriminatory harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, or sexual orientation), national origin, disability, or any other legally protected class. A student's name is a significant part of their identity and expression, and students who attend our schools should be addressed by their preferred name and personal pronouns.

Why is it important for us to use a student's chosen/preferred name and pronouns?

Studies indicate that when a student's chosen/preferred name is used, their risks of depression and suicide decrease. [This article](#) provides an overview on the impact on the mental health of transgender students when students' correct names and pronouns are used. There is also research from the Trevor Project that speaks to [gender and LGBTQ-affirming spaces](#) and the impact they have on reducing suicidality.

What guidance have schools received from the Michigan State Board of Education regarding transgender and gender expansive students?

In 2016, the State Board of Education passed a [Statement and Guidance on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments for LGBTQ Students](#). The second half of the document focuses on transgender and gender expansive students, with specific language about how schools should handle names, pronouns, and student information systems. The State Board of Education's recommendations align with Title IX and its interpretation by the Office for Civil Rights.

How can people learn about the pronouns, gender identities and/or names of their students, family members, colleagues, etc.?

People can ask about someone's names and pronouns in a respectful way. For example:

- When welcoming someone, you can say, "Hello, my name is [insert name] and my pronouns are [insert pronouns]. Please introduce yourselves by sharing your name and pronouns if you are comfortable doing so."
- When introducing yourself, you can say, "Hi my name is [insert name] and my pronouns are [insert pronouns]. May I ask what your pronouns are, if you use them?"

Consider the following strategies:

- Share your own name and pronouns first;
- Ask everyone in the group the same questions, rather than only asking people whose pronouns you have a question about;
- Do not limit a person's choice of pronouns or require them to share their pronouns.

One helpful resource to learn about pronoun usage is [my pronouns.org](#).

Key terms: Source: [State Board of Education Statement and Guidance on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning \(LGBTQ\) Students](#) - Michigan Department of Education

Gender identity—a person’s deeply-held internal sense or psychological knowledge of their own gender, regardless of the biological sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender expression—the manner in which a person represents or expresses gender to others, often through one’s name, pronouns, behavior, clothing, haircut, activities, voice, mannerisms, and other distinctive cultural markers of gender.

Transgender—an adjective describing a person whose gender identity or expression is different from their biological sex assigned at birth.

Gender nonconforming (GNC)—an umbrella term for people whose gender expression differs from stereotypical expectations of the biological sex they were assigned at birth. GNC people may identify as girls, boys, neither girls nor boys, or some other gender.

For further information:

Mccann, E., & Brown, M. (2018). Vulnerability and Psychosocial Risk Factors Regarding People who Identify as Transgender. A Systematic Review of the Research Evidence. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 39(1), 3-15.

James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality.