

## Sussex-Wantage schools' transgender policy clears hurdle

By Eric Obernauer New Jersey Herald

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The Sussex-Wantage Regional Board of Education has taken a first step toward approving a revised policy on transgender students, but will undertake further review of the proposed changes before deciding whether to adopt them.

The board, after nearly 90 minutes of deliberation behind closed doors, voted 5-2 with one abstention Wednesday to approve proposed policy revisions that would supersede the current policy, adopted in 2015, under which confirmation of a student's asserted gender identity must be given in the form of a letter from a child's parent to the school superintendent.

"We didn't create this law," board President Nicholas D'Agostino said, referring to the July 2017 state law on which the proposed policy change is based. "Our personal feelings aside, we're here to act in accordance with and follow the law, and that's what we're voting on."

Voting in favor of the proposed policy change, along with D'Agostino, were fellow board members Jenny Craig, Susan Fields, Coleen Ranzan and Megan Steele.

Voting against it were Dorothy Witte and Georgeanna Stoll, with Kenneth Nuss abstaining after first asking for additional time for the board to study the proposed changes. Board member Bob Heiden was not in attendance.

Wednesday's vote is not the last word on the matter, as the proposed policy change must by law be given a second reading, at which time a final vote will be required for it to be officially adopted.

Prior to the vote, the board engaged in an impassioned debate pitting those concerned for the privacy rights of transgender students against those concerned about the erosion of parental rights.

The proposed policy revisions, which are based on guidelines handed down recently by the state Department of Education, not only would enhance the right of transgender students to dress, participate in sports and other school activities, and use locker and bathroom facilities in accordance with their expressed gender identity, but would also remove the requirement that a child's parents be notified and would even forbid it in some cases.

The revised policy also would require that transgender students be addressed by teachers and peers according to their chosen name and gender identity, and have report cards and other school documentation prepared according to a student's chosen name and identity as well, regardless of whether parental consent was given.

School officials, in response to a question by parent Darryl Sparta, of Wantage, also acknowledged that the policy could extend to the requirement that a child on overnight class trips be permitted sleeping arrangements with other students consistent with that child's stated gender identity.

Witte, explaining her decision to oppose the policy change, said that in a hypothetical scenario involving her child, "it should not be the school district's place to withhold that information. ... How could I help my child if I don't know that my child is feeling that way?"

Craig, in response, said that "if a child says, 'I'm going to kill myself' -- and whether you believe it or not, it exists -- or says, 'I can't go home because my parents have called me an abomination,' it's our job to protect them."

Board attorney Mark Wenzel, when asked to clarify the "guidance" offered on the issue by the state Department of Education, described it as a series of "suggested practices," or recommendations aimed at ensuring compliance with state law and minimizing legal exposure, but acknowledged that adopting the department's recommendations was not mandatory in itself.

Witte, despite voting against the proposed policy revision, said that "if people have concerns, you need to take them to a higher level. I hope the public understands we didn't get together and write this up ourselves."