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## Strong Parent Turnout Stops Vote On CCSD Transgender Policy

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The large theatre hall at Valley High School in Las Vegas was filled to capacity on Monday night, January 29 for a special meeting of the Clark County School District (CCSD) Board of Trustees. Tension in the room was high because of the controversial issue on the agenda. The board was discussing whether to begin drafting a new policy regarding gender diversity.

This subject has been a hot-button since it was introduced last year by CCSD trustee Carolyn Edwards. Concerned with school administrators handling a growing number of gender diverse students, Edwards asked district staff last spring to consider a written policy on the matter. A workgroup was formed and met for several months last year to draft recommendations.

At last week's meeting, CCSD Chief Instructional Services Officer Greta Peay presented the resulting recommendations. Peay said that a majority of the workgroup agreed that a new written policy should be adopted.

Specific policy language was not submitted by the workgroup. But loose subject areas were recommended. These included allowing transgender students to use preferred name and gender on "unofficial" school records, the right to be addressed by a preferred pronoun; allowing students access to restrooms or locker rooms of the gender with which they identify; a possible revision of CCSD dress code; methods to support parents, students and families in transitioning of transgender students and more.

A series of six public meetings were held in December to present the recommendations and get public input. More than 1,000 people showed up with more than 600 comments, both written and verbal, Peay said.

An online survey was also taken on the subject and over 2,000 responses were received. The survey indicated that around 58 percent of respondents were in favor of a new gender equity policy at CCSD. Peay said that 42 percent of responders claimed to be CCSD parents.

Peay did clarify that the survey was informal and not in any way considered scientific. There were no guarantees that respondents were all residents of Clark County and no controls were placed in the system to limit how many times a single computer terminal could take the survey, she said.

Peay said that the workgroup had purposely kept its recommendations broad and somewhat vague, in order to allow for further discussion and instruction from the trustees.

“Now we are here to determine what the next steps will be,” Peay said. “We are here to receive guidance from you on whether to write a policy.”

The board then opened the meeting to nearly two hours of public comment. Names were drawn at random from audience members who had expressed an interest to speak. Equal time was given to both sides of the issue. Each speaker was allowed only one minute.

The first round of comments allowed those opposing a new policy to speak. This position had a clear majority among those attending the meeting.

Many of these commenters expressed the feeling that a new policy, designed specifically for transgender students, was unnecessary.

“A policy is already in effect that addresses these issues,” said Rachel Paola, one of many CCSD parents who spoke. “If the current anti-bullying laws are carried out how they are supposed to be, there will be protection for all students. The rights of the majority of students should not be infringed upon because of the concerns of a few. That is what this would do.”

Many commenters called into question the validity of the workgroup’s online survey.

“A person could be in China and take it 500 times for all we know,” said parent Elizabeth Scalafani of the survey. “The actual (input) cards turned in at the meetings, and the attendance at the meetings, show a strong majority against this policy. But you don’t want to listen and don’t want to hear. We have shown up repeatedly and told you we don’t want it.”

Though about 30 Moapa Valley residents travelled to attend the meeting, only two were drawn to make public comment.

“How much time have we spent going through this process?” asked local resident Kyle Waite. “We are spending money on researching something that parents have already clearly said that we don’t want. The Board of Trustees is bowing to a vocal minority group here.”

In another comment, Logandale resident Lindsey Dalley asked all those in the room who were opposed to a policy to raise their hands. More than 75 percent of those in attendance did so.

“I think that it is really important that you look at this,” Dalley told the trustees. “This represents the concerns that the CCSD community has about the dangers of this policy and the damage it threatens to their family and cultural norms.”

Many also stood up to support the drafting of a new CCSD policy on gender diversity.

“All students deserve to learn in a safe and inclusive environment,” said Erika Castro, a

lesbian who graduated from CCSD schools. "I suffered with depression in high school because I didn't feel I could be my true self. Trans kids are being harassed and, because of rejection they face, they are taking their own lives. This needs to be addressed."

"I am a human being, I exist!" said Christine Hernandez. "I urge CCSD to understand that, without a policy, diverse people will continue to suffer in silence. This policy is not about bullying, but about ensuring that schools have a safe space for people."

"The anti-bullying policy does not protect the LGBTQ community," said Eric Christiansen. "I was bullied a lot in school and the policy didn't protect me."

"Sexually diverse persons are not going anywhere," insisted McKenna Cruz. "If this doesn't pass, there will be many who come forward again and again. We won't stop until something is done."

The board ended up splitting sharply on the issue.

Edwards asserted that the current anti-bullying policy doesn't adequately cover the concerns raised by the working group.

"At this point, gender diverse students are not protected in CCSD," she said. "They don't know that they have rights. They don't know that they can go to the principal. The principals don't necessarily know the procedures to handle it. There is nothing out there that guides administrators, students or parents. So I think that we need a clear public document so that everyone knows."

Edwards made a motion to direct staff to develop language for a policy/regulation/guideline that protects the rights of all students including the gender diverse.

Trustee Lola Brooks seconded the motion. "I have gotten to know a lot of people from diverse backgrounds and understand their fears and the need for protection," she said. "I think that we need a policy. I'm not sure that everything in (the recommendations) needs to be included. But there should be a process."

But trustee Kevin Childs questioned the urgency of having a policy specifically aimed at the transgender student population.

"Are we out of compliance on any federal or state law right now if we don't do anything on this policy?" Childs asked.

After the question was pitched back and forth among trustees and CCSD staff members, the district legal representative finally responded that the CCSD is currently in compliance with all existing law and would continue to remain in compliance.

"At CCSD we are proactive about having a safe and respectful learning environment," Childs said. "The bullying policy makes it unacceptable for anyone to bully anyone else. I don't think that we need to have another policy."

Trustee Linda Young also expressed her discomfort in drafting a policy aimed directly at transgender students. “How do we make it so I don’t have to instruct staff to single out one group with a policy?” she asked. “If we do this, why not a policy for kids that are too skinny, or too fat, or too tall, or too short? Why don’t we have a policy about everything that goes on? I’m just not supportive of trying to go with another big policy here. Once we go there, we are putting somebody in and somebody out and it can’t be that.”

Trustee Chris Garvey expressed concern that the district would be acting prematurely in creating a policy before being given regulation from the Nevada State Board of Education. “The state hasn’t taken a lead on this,” Garvey said. “For us to put policy in place and then we have to revamp it; or get spanked as we always do by the state when we take the lead; I think it is premature.”

In addition, with the state mandated CCSD reorganization placing more autonomy at the local school level, more focus should be placed on allowing the various School Operational Teams (SOT) to weigh in on what is needed in their schools, Garvey said.

“There should be some dialog with the leadership of each school and the SOTs,” Garvey said. “They can give us some feedback on what that guidance needs to be and how transparent that needs to be. I do not support going to the length of a policy.”

In the end, seeing that she didn’t have the votes to pass the measure, Edwards withdrew her motion before a vote was taken. But she did ask that a future item be placed on the board agenda to further discuss a written policy on the subject.

Local education advocates were pleased with the outcome.

“I see this as a win for us,” said Lindsey Dalley who is a member of the Moapa Valley Community Education Advisory Board (MVCEAB). “It is not a final win, but it is definitely a strong step.”

Dalley said that Moapa Valley parents had spend a lot of time and resources in fighting recent battles for education such as in the realm of gender diversity policies, sex education curriculum and reorganization of the CCSD. All in all, those efforts hadn’t seen a lot of visible return, Dalley said.

“But this was really the first time that I have seen our grassroots efforts begin to show a little influence in this matter,” Dalley said. “I think that the board had to be cautious, because of the turnout, about being a bull in a china shop. And it all just goes back to the idea that people have to show up, time and time again to these meetings, fill the seats and stand up for what is right. That is what makes the difference.”

Deborah Earl, of the state-wide Power2Parent organization, agreed. She praised Moapa Valley parents for their strong engagement in this issue.

“We have seen such a strong turnout from the people of Moapa Valley throughout this process,” Earl said. “We are grateful for the distance travelled and time taken to support this position in these meetings.”

Earl encouraged parents to write emails and letters to the trustees who backed up the majority voice of parents on the issue. “We need to give them political cover and support them,” Earl said. “We need to send the message that they don’t need to be cowed down by a loud minority into doing something that will adversely affect everyone else.”

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