

## **Methuen school faces parents' queries on student's gender issue Officials back girl who seeks treatment as boy**

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Dozens of parents flooded the Methuen school system with phone calls yesterday after a local newspaper reported that a fourth-grade girl had returned from the February school break requesting to be treated as a boy.

The child's parents told school officials that he had always considered himself a boy, rejecting feminine dress and name, and they were agreeing to raise him as a male.

The story has attracted the attention of local and national media, including a half-dozen television stations, according to Superintendent Phillip Littlefield, who spent most of yesterday fielding parent and media calls.

Many parents sought reassurance that "this wasn't just some frivolous happening with the youngster," Littlefield said. "There is a medical condition that exists here, and this is not something irresponsible on the part of the parents. These are wonderful parents who care very, very deeply about their child."

Most parents who called, however, simply wanted to know which bathroom the child uses, according to Littlefield, who said he told them the youngster uses a separate bathroom, and people say, "Oh, wow, that's cool."

Littlefield said the child has asked to be called a masculine version of his name, which the superintendent declined to disclose, upon the family's request. Other than that, nothing has changed, he said, and most of the 1,100 students at the Comprehensive Grammar School are taking the situation in stride. The child has not undergone sexual reassignment surgery, he said.

"For the kids who aren't close to him, it was Phyllis and now it's Phillip," said Littlefield, using other names for examples. "And it's OK. They want to know what's for lunch."

The child's parents told the Eagle Tribune on the condition of anonymity that their child, who was born with the body of a girl, has never identified as a girl. After consulting with medical professionals, they have decided to let him grow up as a boy and wanted teachers and other students to treat him as a boy.

"Obviously in the beginning we dressed him as female," the mother told the Eagle Tribune. "When he began identifying at 2 [as a male], he was ripping the dress off his back."

Dr. Norman Spack, clinical director of the endocrine division at Children's Hospital in Boston, said gender identity is formed at birth and is not a product of the environment. Much more research still needs to be done around how male and female brains differ and how transgenderism occurs, he said. Of the more than 100 transgendered people he has treated, many secretly cross-dressed as children and suppressed their gender identity because their parents were punitive.

"In many cases they went on to live a life that was a sham, getting married and having children," said Spack, one of the few pediatric endocrinologists in the country who specializes in gender identity and intersex issues. "They go through a difficult time of depression coming to grips with the fact that their body doesn't match their brain."

Most of Spack's transgender patients are adults, he said, but he is involved in the care of about five prepubescent children dealing with gender identity issues.

"It's the relatively rare child who will come forward and have the courage to say, 'This is what I am, even though it was not what I was born to look like,' " Spack said. "I admire the school for its acceptance. When schools set an example like this, it's a lesson for all."

In 1999, Brockton school officials barred a 15-year-old student who is biologically male, but identifies as female, from attending school dressed in girl's clothing. A school psychologist diagnosed the student with transgendered disorder when the teenager was 13, in seventh grade, and the student started wearing makeup, skirts, wigs, and padded bras to school. The state Appeals Court upheld a Superior Court ruling in 2000 that a transgender male student can wear female clothing to class.

The Methuen school has not discussed gender identity with students because "it really is beyond the comprehension of a 9-year-old," Littlefield said. Instead, a teacher told the two-dozen students in the child's fourth-grade class to call him by a different name. The child's friends call him by his initials anyway, he said.

Littlefield said the school has made appropriate accommodations for the child at the parents' request, but he said he has promised the parents confidentiality and could not be more specific. If students bring home questions that parents cannot answer, he said, they should call the school to speak to a staff member familiar with gender identity issues.

"I think sometimes when we don't understand something completely, we sort of react with fear," Littlefield said. "And this is a nice little kid. This is the same youngster that's been in the fourth grade all year."