

Local schools respond to transgender legislation

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - This school year, children will legally be allowed to use restrooms based on the gender with which they most identify instead of based strictly on the sex they were assigned at birth.

This recent legislation will restrict the ability of school districts to discriminate against children based on their gender preferences. The opposition to this new legislation is very vocal, however. Pastors **Danny Holliday** and **Ralph Blake** held a rally against the legislation last Saturday at **Lincoln-Douglas Square** in Alton. Under the banner, "**Citizens for Child Safety**," Blake and Holliday vowed to spread awareness about their

perceived "dangers" of this new legislation until it is repealed or local school districts refuse to comply with it.

Video of the rally below:

Blake and Holliday said they were concerned children could get molested or assaulted by other children and even adults who are in the restroom because they claimed to be transgender. They said they would begin protesting the new laws at school board meetings. Currently, they have had three speakers at the July meeting of the **Alton Board of Education**, which warranted this response from **Alton Interim Superintendent Mark Cappel**.

"The board of education and administration of **Alton School District** intends to protect the rights of all students to free public education in an environment conducive to learning and free from discrimination. We recognize the directives from the **U.S. Department of Education** in this area and intend to address this matter on a case by case basis as the situation arises. There is no need to develop a specific policy at this stage and the district will continue to monitor and evaluate this issue."

Southwestern School District Superintendent Brad Skertich shared this sentiment as well.

"It's not going to affect the way we do everyday business," he said. "We already have anti-discrimination rules. We have to make sure kids feel safe. If this situation arises, we will act accordingly and provide each child with a safe environment. At this point in time, to my knowledge, such issues have not occurred."

Skertich said he has not experienced any backlash due to the new laws. He said regardless of concerns, complaints and worries, he is obligated to educate kids in a safe environment.

"Kids have different beliefs and cultural backgrounds, and we have the responsibility to educate them in an environment in which they feel safe to learn," he said.

Jersey Community School District 100 Superintendent Lori Franke-Hopkins said, "Jersey CUSD No. 100's Board of Education policy outlines specifically that we will not discriminate based on color, race, nationality, religion, sex, sexual orientation, ancestry, age, physical or mental disability, gender identity, status of being homeless, immigration status, order of protection status, actual or potential marital or parental status, including pregnancy.

"It is Jersey CUSD No. 100's obligation to educate all students in a safe and comfortable environment," she said. "Regarding transgender students, we will work collaboratively with students, staff, parents, and the Board of Education to ensure the needs of all students are met to this end."

The **Roxana School District**, who was listed among the targeted board meetings by Citizens for Child Safety said they have not appeared to protest at this time. **Roxana School District Superintendent Debra Kreutztrager** said the following regarding the transgender bathroom legislation:

"The Roxana School District is committed to protecting the rights of all students. At this time, the district has not been notified of any **Title IX** issues. If the need arises, we will work with students and families to make necessary accommodations to ensure all students can attend in a safe and discrimination-free environment."

East Alton-Wood River High School Superintendent John Pearson said: "The Board has no official position on this, but I think our position (regarding the transgender facility issue) would be that we will address any such facility request in accordance with Federal law and, in doing so, seek to accommodate the requesting student's preference (as per the law) while seeking to insure the safety of all students. We have had no such requests to date."

The **Bethalto School District**, which was also on the Citizens for Child Safety's list of school board meetings to protest said they have not experienced any protests from the group at this time. The superintendent was not available when contacted by Riverbender.com, and a representative said she was not aware of an official statement from the district regarding the new legislation.



New law to allow gender bathroom use becomes hot button

ALTON - After an anti-transgender rally was held Saturday at **Lincoln-Douglas Square**, participants under the banner of "**Citizens for Child Safety**" promised to spread their message to local school boards in the days and weeks to come.

Their newly-found fear and concern branches from another hot-button issue currently gripping the hearts and minds of Americans. A new law passed is taking effect for the upcoming school year which will allow students to use bathrooms based on the gender with which they most identify instead of being forced to use the bathroom of their biological sex. This new law has many people "fired up" because they worry about their children being exposed to the opposite genitalia of their own, and even being raped or sexually molested by students who identify as transgender.

According to the data, however, these fears are unfounded. The **United States Office of Justice Programs** website detailed the statistics involving sexual assault, and the numbers do not favor those rallying against the transgender bathroom legislation. In fact, it does quite the opposite, painting a grim picture of sexual violence utilized against

people who identify as transgender at much higher rates than people who identify as their assigned biological sex.

"Statistics documenting transgender people's experience of sexual violence indicate shockingly high levels of sexual abuse and assault," the Office of Justice Programs states on its website. "One in two transgender individuals are sexually abused or assaulted at some point in their lives. Some reports estimate that transgender survivors may experience rates of sexual assault up to 66 percent, often coupled with physical assaults or abuse. This indicates that the majority of transgender individuals are living with the aftermath of trauma and the fear of possible repeat victimization."

The percentage of the population who identifies as transgender is listed at 0.3 percent, which is the percentage rally co-organizer **Danny Holliday** cited at his event. He said 99.7 percent of the student population should not have to sacrifice their safety for only 0.3 percent of the student body. That number, however, could be much higher than reported.

According to data compiled from a study conducted by the **American Foundation of Suicide Prevention** and the **Williams Institute**, being an openly transgender person can be very arduous and dangerous in the United States, a fact which may prevent more than the often-cited 0.3 percent of the population from being out and open about their gender confusion or discrepancy.

The study showed 41 percent of transgender people attempt suicide. Trans men, who were born as biological women, have a 46 percent rate of attempted suicide. Trans women, who were born as biological men, have a 42 percent rate. Of all the groups polled in the study, male cross-dressers assigned male at birth have the lowest suicide attempt rate, which is 21 percent. The attempted suicide rate across the entire nation is only 4.6 percent.

When broken down further, the study showed young people who identified as transgender are most vulnerable to suicide attempts, at a rate of 45 percent. When transgender people disclose to everyone how they identify, the suicide attempt rate is as high as 50 percent, according to the study.

Studying the data further shows an even more disturbing trend. While Holliday spoke about "normal" children being assaulted in the bathroom by what he perceived to be a looming threat of molestation and sexual assault by transgender people, the data again proves the opposite. In fact, if Holliday's message was for child safety, love and unity, there are a few statistics he missed.

The study conducted by the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention and the Williams Institute showed people who identify as transgender are not only the subject of hot-button debates full of vitriol, ignorance and fear, they are the subject of violence, abuse and isolation in both institutional and personal realms. Here is a list of troubling statistics worth considering.

- 57 percent of transgender people polled in the study said their families chose not to speak or spend time with them.
- As many as 54 percent of them reported they were harassed or bullied at school.
- As many as 59 percent of them reported experiencing work harassment or discrimination.
- 60 percent reported a doctor or health care provider refused to treat them.
- As many as 65 percent reported suffering physical or sexual violence at work.
- As many as 78 percent reported suffering physical or sexual violence at school.
- As many as 61 percent reported being disrespected or harassed by law enforcement officers.
- As many as 70 percent reported suffering physical or sexual violence from law enforcement.
- 69 percent reported experiencing homelessness at some point in their lives.

"Overall, the most striking finding of our analysis was the exceptionally high prevalence of lifetime suicide attempts reported by respondents across all demographics and experiences," the study stated. "Based on prior research and the findings of this report, we find that mental health factors and experiences of harassment, discrimination, violence and rejection may interact to produce a marked vulnerability to suicidal behavior in transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. More research on suicidal behavior among transgender and gender non-conforming people is needed."

These statistics are shocking when compared to national averages. According to statistics found on the United States' **National Sex Offender Public Website** (NSOPW), which cited the Center for Disease Control (CDC), one in six boys and one in four girls are sexually abused before the age of 18. The data continues to say an estimated 60 percent of perpetrators of this abuse are known to the child, but are not family members. About 30 percent of the perpetrators of abuse are family members. Only 10 percent of the perpetrators of the sexual abuse are strangers to the child. Given these statistics and the percentage of transgender people in the population, the odds of anyone's child being assaulted in the bathroom by a transgender individual are astronomically low, but not impossible. However, given the statistics regarding sexual violence against transgender individuals, the odds of a transgender child being sexually assaulted or physically beaten while simply attempting to use the restroom are much higher.

Lesleigh Robins, a board member of the **Metro Trans Umbrella Group** (MTUG) was part of an opposition group assembled at last Saturday's rally. She said she was concerned about how the current heated rhetoric would affect transgender students. She was worried these divisive rallies, petitions, displays and pamphlets would cause an ever-increasing burden on transgender students to grow exponentially. Hatred based on gender identity could seriously complicate the already vulnerable psychological experiences all levels of schooling have on kids.

"We are going to go to the school board meetings they want to protest," Robins said of the Citizens for Child Safety. "We want to make sure that transgender students have a voice defending them as well."

Holliday and his crusade may be the most vocal opposition in the River Bend, standing on values based on "family" and the Bible, but his heated rhetoric is not shared by other members of the local ministerial community.

Peter Hough, the pastor of the **Alton Mission**, who sits on the **Alton Ministerial Alliance** did not wish to contribute to the hard-line nature of this issue, but did say it needs to be addressed by love and communication.

"I don't know what the schools are planning to do or what the mandate is exactly, but I feel like I trust our communities, school districts and elected officials to be able to do what's best for students," Hough said. "I hesitate to come down on an issue when people's hearts, identities and beliefs are involved and say an outside opinion or judgement. There's got to be a way to be able to ask if we've really listened to each other, loved each other and addressed our issues as a local community."

"I don't know if political fighting and rallies are the answer. I'd rather sit and have a dinner with people to find out how they tick and what's going to be the best way forward for all of us. This issue is already so depersonalized. How do you maintain that this is an incredibly personal thing? For me, I'm in favor of protecting it as a very personal thing. We should listen to each other about it. I haven't listened to it enough. I have not been able to sit down with a transgender person and hear their side of the issue."

Alton Police Department Chaplain Jason Harrison said the missing part of the issue is love as well. Harrison is hosting a crusade for unity, which will culminate in a march for unity and job fair on Aug. 6 at the Liberty Bank Riverfront Amphitheater.

"In the light of everything going on, there is too much division as is," Harrison said. "What's a better way to show unity than love? This is not a time to be hateful, this is a time to show love."

Holliday did offer to debate the "leader" of the transgender people assembled at his rally. He was able to cite the statistics regarding the popularly recognized population of transgender people. He also stated the rate of suicides was 20 times higher for transgender people than that of people who identify as their biological sex. He attributed that to transgender people having "sick minds" while comparing them to pedophiles and enthusiasts of bestiality and group sex. One of the transgender activists assembled interrupted Holliday by saying the increased suicide rates was due to "people like and hate speech."

[Dan Brannan also contributed to this story.](#)