

Dear Board Members of Wisconsin Association of School Boards,

The Wisconsin School Counselors Association (WSCA), the Wisconsin School Psychologists Association (WSPA), and the Wisconsin School Social Workers Association (WSSWA) support school policy which is aligned with our ethical standards, informed by knowledge of healthy child development, supports the safety and mental health of all students, and partners with families in a child-centered approach. We appreciate the school board's position of representing the community interest while also having a legal responsibility to ensure the best possible outcomes for the district, but also we feel it is important to contribute our expertise to the conversation around school board policies which impact the health and safety of students exploring their gender identity.

We know identity development is a normal part of growing up (Erikson, 1963; Marcia, 1966). We also know that it is important to support student mental health, whether through providing social emotional learning at the universal level for all students, or in small group or individualized interventions. This means including caregivers at every step of the process, and partnering with them as the expert of their child. It also means determining the safety of the child's home environment. Historical and current research has continually shown LGBTQ+ youth are already identified as an at-risk population due to victimization, discrimination, and rejection by family, peers, and the community" (Russel & Fish, 2016). Additionally, gay and transgender young adults who were highly rejected by family as youth were eight times as likely to attempt suicide as compared to those who were not at all or a little rejected, who were twice as likely (Ryan, 2009). If a policy requires school staff to disclose a student's orientation or gender identity to their caregivers before they are ready or without their consent, we may be putting these students in danger.

WSCA, WSPA, and WSSWA support the best practice of working with the student at school on their gender identity while assessing safety at home. The CDC reported that last year 20% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth experienced physical abuse by a parent, in comparison to 10% of heterosexual youth, as captured in the Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey (ABES), making the assessment for safety an important step (Krause et al., 2022). Once safety is determined, student services professionals work alongside the student on preparing for a conversation with caregivers, providing a space to talk, resources for education, and ongoing support from school, parent support groups, or other resources in the community to place the family on a path to acceptance (Ryan, 2009; Ashley, 2019). We encourage partnership with caregivers, however on a case-by-case basis using discretion to meet the unique needs of the family, rather than a one-size-fits-all policy of notifying caregivers without sufficient assessment and preparation.

School counselors, psychologists, and social workers are guided by ethical codes, which include confidentiality. The American School Counselor Association states that "This right to privacy and prohibition of disclosing students' gender identity extends to students' parents/guardians, with whom schools should work collaboratively, directed by students' comfort about what and with whom to share their confidential information." Additionally, the National Association of School Psychologists states that they "do not share information about the sexual orientation, gender identity, or transgender status of a student (including minors), parent, or school employee with

anyone without that individual's permission" and that above all they are required to do no harm. Lastly, the School Social Workers Association of America says "Laws or school district policies that require parental notification for students who may be LGBTQ+ directly challenge social work's ethical standards of self-determination, privacy and confidentiality." When districts pass policies that contradict these professional guidelines, it puts both student services staff and the district in a difficult position. This practice can also put the district at risk when professionals are asked if they are members of their professional associations and follow their ethical guidelines. Our respective associations are also hearing that due to this conflict between district policy and professional ethics that many are moving to different districts.

The impetus for such policies around pronouns, names, and even book challenges divide or distract from other real problems facing our students and families, especially when they may be the voices of a select few and not a majority. Ultimately, we are all on the same side, which is ensuring that our students can be their best selves. Even the act of proposing these policies, whether or not they pass, cause harm. Eighty-five percent of transgender and non-binary youth report that news of state bills restricting the rights of trans people have a negative impact on their mental health (Trevor Project, 2021). Every student has the right to learn in a safe and accepting school environment and it is our job to act as protective agents committed to the safety and wellbeing of all the students we serve.

We implore you to work with your school boards to further educate them on all of the issues surrounding how to best support LGBTQ+ students while balancing community input and parental involvement. Our professional organizations are ready and willing to work in collaboration with the Wisconsin Association of School Boards to create safe, supporting schools for all students.

Sincerely,  
Wisconsin School Counselors Association  
Wisconsin School Psychologists Association  
Wisconsin School Social Workers Association

#### References

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[Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists](#) - NASP

[The School Counselor and Transgender and Nonbinary Youth](#) - ASCA

[School Social Work and the Privacy of Minors in Ethical Decision-Making](#) - SSWAA