ENGENDERING EQUAL EDUCATION
OREGON LEADS THE NATION IN LGBTQ INCLUSION IN SCHOOLS
Words: Zachary Silva
In early 2016, both the state of Oregon and the Obama administration released an unprecedented set of rules enforcing equal access for transgender students in educational facilities. These policies for access have been applauded by some and faced pushback from others.

But before this topic saw nationwide legislation, similar policies had gained momentum in Eugene. A policy adopted in Eugene’s 4J School District has been creating safe spaces for transgender students from kindergarten through high school, and gender-inclusive programs at the University of Oregon have marked the school as a national leader in LGBTQ acceptance.
On Tuesdays during lunch, the atmosphere inside Spencer Butte Middle School’s room 13 is lively. Students, ages 11 to 13, sit atop desks, couches and chairs in casual conversation about everything from upcoming school assignments and weekend plans to the complexity of understanding gender and sexuality. Posters promoting activism and acceptance adorn the classroom space.

This is the gathering place of Spencer Butte Middle School’s Gay Straight Alliance.

When their weekly meeting begins, the 20 or so students in attendance introduce themselves with their names and personal pronouns, which vary from he and him, she and hers, to they and them. Students vote on what signage they’d like to see on gender-inclusive bathrooms throughout the school district before GSA advisors Teresa Myers and Margaret Albright ask the group how are things going.

One student explains that a classmate recently “used the no-no f-word.” She notes that she slapped the student who made the remark, and the advisors discuss why this could be a problematic reaction.

A seventh grader shares that she is nervous about coming out as bisexual to their religious grandfather.

A sixth grader talks about her mom being concerned about her identifying as pansexual, assuming it is just a phase.

As the bell rings and students disperse, one student stops another to ask their sexual identity as they head to fifth period.

This safe space that has been created at Spencer Butte Middle School is not typical.
According to the national organization Trans Student Educational Research, 80 percent of trans students feel “unsafe at school” because of their gender expression. The same source reported that 41 percent of transgender individuals have attempted to commit suicide.

“We have plenty of outcome data to know that these kids are not safe in our schools,” said 4J psychologist and policy maker Brianna Stiller. “They endure harassment, they leave school, they miss school, their attendance is poor. There is an achievement gap.”

To address this issue, the 4J School District implemented a gender inclusive policy designed to help students feel welcome and understood. The 27-page document titled “4J Best Practices for Serving Gender Nonconforming Students” was not only the first in the state, but one of the first of its kind in the country.

The document articulates that “gender non-conforming is not the issue – safety is.” This policy explains that intolerance around gender identity is similar to any other forms of discrimination in school, against 4J policy and subject to legal action. The policy emphasizes that students who identify as gender-nonconforming be referred to by their preferred pronouns. The policy encourages teachers to proactively reach out to these students to offer support and assures that students “shall not be required to use a restroom that is incongruent with the student’s gender identity,” among other guidelines.

For students like Rylan, 13, who identifies as transgender, this policy reiterates the acceptance that has been promoted at Spencer Butte.

“To me, gender identity is who you feel like you are in your mind,” Rylan said. “No matter what anybody says, you can be who you want to be.”
The 4J policy came about after the 4J directors of elementary and secondary education asked Stiller, who identifies as transgender, and another staff member to create a policy for gender non-conforming. After a year of looking at various other model policies, resources from local and national therapists, YouTube videos and books, they wrote what they considered to be a best practice guide for working with and supporting these students.

They passed their work along to the superintendent office and the policy was approved in May 2015.

“It doesn’t just say if you feel like it be nice, it says you have to be and it’s policy,” says Stiller. “That means people have to be trained. That goes even further to raising awareness.”

The policy recently proved effective, following an issue with a teacher who was not willing to refer to a transgender student by the name and gender with which they identified.

“[The teacher] had the student the year prior as a male and had the student again as a female but refused to acknowledge her,” said Randy Bernstein, a former 4J principal who now works as the Director of Secondary Education in the district.

“It went through the personnel process and there was a resolution. And I can say that teacher is following the policy now,” said Bernstein.

While the implementation of this policy is celebrated and held in high esteem by supporters and some school districts, creating it was far from easy.

“This is Eugene. This is probably one of the easiest places in the world where it would be possible to pass a policy like this or to have an employee who is openly transgender,” said Stiller. “But it took us seven years of intentional work before we put a policy in front of the school board.”

New policies, speakers coming to school and gender-inclusive bathrooms were all met with a wave of resistance.
When North Eugene High School students created a gender-neutral homecoming court in 2015, more than 30 parents complained through emails, phone calls and appearances in the school office. When Ivan Coyote, a renowned storyteller who identifies as a transgender male and speaks to schools about finding a sense of belonging, spoke at Cal Young Middle School, 60 parents held their students out of the event and 30 formal complaints were filed to the school district.

“I think we are getting less and less [resistance] because by now, seven years later, everybody who would complain already has and they know the answer... They are hearing the same broken record,” Stiller said. “The fact that our kids are leaving school, are committing suicide, the whole range of negative outcomes makes it the business of well over a thousand kids.”

The district explains to the parents who complain, generally on a religious basis Stiller notes, that these policies affect a great deal of students and cannot be overlooked.

One particularly heated debate that comes up around transgender policies is the use of bathrooms. Recently, North Carolina passed a bill that mandates that individuals use the bathroom based on their gender at birth opposed to how they identify themselves. Shortly thereafter, the Obama administration issued a directive instructing public schools across the country to allow students to use the bathroom that coincides with the gender they identify with. Already, this has been met with an oppositional lawsuit from 11 individual states.

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Being ahead of this initiative, most schools in the Eugene 4J and Bethel Districts have implemented a gender-inclusive restroom or are in talks to make this happen.

The national conversation about bathroom use at schools would view this as a political move by the district. Others see it as simply going to the bathroom.

“If your gender viewpoint is that gender is not fluid, and you see [bathrooms] recognizing the fact that [gender] is fluid suddenly that feels really political to you,” said Willamette High School teacher and GSA coordinator Anthony Martins. “But peeing is pretty damn nonpartisan. It’s like freaking basic.”

National groups and 4J’s own research indicate that seven to nine percent of students identify somewhere along the LGBTQ spectrum.

After district policies were implemented, more students along the spectrum started to come out, according to Stiller. And through policy and community discussions, GSA membership quintupled. While this number also includes students who identify as LGBTQ allies, this additional support indicates a shifting culture in schools.

“Each kid that comes out has several friends. We’ll say five friends who are enough friends that they are going to be allies and not support harassment towards that kid,” said Stiller. “If 30 kids are out that means 150 are now allies. That has a profound impact on the culture of a school.”
Though acceptance of transgender individuals certainly isn’t universal in Eugene, Stiller has seen things change for the better. Stiller, 62, was born male and came out as female six years ago. Growing up, she did not have supportive resources and felt alone, lost and confused.

In 4J, at least, things have changed.

“If a boy goes to school in a dress at Spencer Butte Middle School, mostly it is old hat,” Stiller said. “Kids just go, ‘Oh, I’ve seen this before. Whatever.’”

This idea of culture is what helps drive schools forward. Policies help, but students have to buy into what is happening.

At the University of Oregon, efforts are being made, both to help ease that cultural transition and to promote inclusion and equality in a college setting.

In 2010, Julia Heffernan, a faculty member at the UO College of Education, helped start the program UOTeachOUT. This program began as a class for undergraduate students and now has annual events that bring middle school and high school students from around the Eugene and Springfield area each year to discuss, according to their website, “the ramifications of social inequality on LGBT youth.”

Tina Schmich, who serves as the equity coordinator in Eugene’s Bethel School District and was a part of the first UOTeachOUT effort, sees this program as a way to shift culture in schools.

“Policies are not enough. Trainings are not enough. It has to be some deep systemic change that I haven’t figure out how to do yet,” says Schmich. “That’s one of the things we are trying to do with TeachOUT.”
The University of Oregon is also on the cutting edge when it comes to acceptance of gender on college campuses. Through the use of a gender inclusive residential hall and 111 gender-neutral bathrooms around campus, UO is working to create an inclusive college experience for transgender students.

In 2015, UO ranked among the top 10 LGBTQ friendly universities, according to BestColleges.com

UO’s Director of LGBTESSP Maure Smith-Benanti calls this distinction “amazing and so exciting” but notes it “doesn’t mean we don’t have more to do.”

Smith-Benanti, who previously worked at Utah State University in a similar role, notes that what allows UO to excel in this area of acceptance is because the administration is on board. Last year, students and administrators from UO helped pass Oregon Senate Bill 473 which, according to the bill, requires all Oregon public universities to “allow all students, faculty and staff to identify the person’s sexual orientation on any forms used to collect demographic data.”

The effects of the bill, which passed in June of 2015 and went into law at the start of 2016, will be seen in the coming months as UO and other institutions around the state will have access to this new information.

What this ultimately means is that all public universities and colleges in Oregon will know how many students on their campuses identify as transgender. Smith-Benanti compared it to departments being able to identify how many individuals identify as part of a particular ethnicity.

“We’re going to be able to use data to tell whether or not we are retaining our LGBTQI students. We’re going to be able to make the recommendations based on hard facts and not just what we know in our gut,” said Smith-Benanti.

Although statistics and policy efforts help advance access for individuals who identify on the LGBTQ spectrum, Smith-Benanti believes that true momentum is due to individuals.

“I think the fact that we have been here and queer for so long, and willing to speak up and tell our stories, I think that is the single most influencing factor that has changed the national culture,” Smith-Benanti said. “People being willing to be out and tell their stories.”