

School leaders mull transgender inclusion

By VALERIE ABRAHAMS

Scarsdale school personnel will meet May 12 to discuss how to accommodate transgender students' rights in terms of inclusion and value in the schools.

The district has not yet formulated specific policies, according to Eric Rauschenbach, Scarsdale's director of special education and pupil services, but a committee of school administrators, guidance counselors and psychologists will consider a range of questions, such as how to take into account guidance from New York State for accommodating transgender students, how to assure each student is feeling affirmed and valued, and how to inform other parents about transgender issues, if necessary.

The district's philosophy is "all students need to feel valued, affirmed and included," Rauschenbach said. "We are developing a policy as we need it."

As it stands, the latest guidance from New York State Department of Education is to allow students to use gender spaces — that is, bathrooms or locker rooms — according to how they gender identify.

"Often a student doesn't want to use the public bathroom and prefers a separate space," Rauschenbach said.

To accommodate a requested preference, single-seat restrooms could be made available at nurses' offices or staff bathrooms in the middle and high schools, he said.

This month, the district invited Santo Barbagiovanni, a social worker and the director of Center Lane program, to talk with staff at Scarsdale Middle School about terms and research concerning transgender students.

Center Lane, a division of Westchester Jewish Community Services in White Plains, is the only program serving LGBTQ youth in Westchester. It provides workshops in schools and government agencies through funding from the New York State Department of Health and Office of Family and Children's Services and a grant from The Westchester Community Foundation.

"It's really wonderful what [Scarsdale schools] are doing; being so open

and willing to invite support like ours," Barbagiovanni said. "It will help other school districts become more willing to start the process for their schools."

Center Lane's training program on transgender includes an introduction to sexual orientation and gender identity. Barbagiovanni explains terminology, defines what transgender is, and speaks to the social component that can help schools become more inclusive to the LGBT community.

Rauschenbach said the district would invite Barbagiovanni to train staff at the elementary and high schools as the need arises.

It is also necessary for the district to work with families on a student-by-student basis, Rauschenbach said. The goal, he added, is to make sure everyone "feels safe and feels like they have a place where they can learn and be valued for who they are."

In 2014 the U.S. Department of Education, through its Office for Civil Rights, extended protections to transgender people under Title IX, a federal law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender.

That declaration has led schools nationwide to begin to take steps to address gender diverse students' rights.

A few school districts have faced community opposition to supportive transgender policies, and courts recently have overturned policies restricting a student's right to access spaces based on gender identity.

If students begin to feel comfortable enough to grapple publicly with gender identity at the high school, Rauschenbach said, the school district is poised to lay out common principles on how to engage families and the wider community on transgender issues. Equally important, he said, is to educate the staff and make the process easier for families in the school system going through transition.

"Our charge," Rauschenbach said, "is to protect the emotional health and safety and security of our students ... by looking for ways to help our students and families feel affirmed and included."