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From: **Janney Elementary** <norah.lycknell@dc.gov>

Date: Thu, Jul 17, 2014 at 10:07 PM

Subject: Supporting a Janney Faculty Member's Gender Transition

Dear Janney Community,

As over 150 parents gathered for our final evening Community Meeting and morning Principal's Coffee at the conclusion of the 2013/14 school year, we were privileged to engage in a powerful and personal story. Robert Reuter, an intermediate grade writing inclusion teacher, bravely stood in front of this community to share that he is transgender and would be transitioning from male to female at the conclusion of the school year. The fact that this story was told and welcomed says much about this esteemed individual and our community as a whole - that our values around equity and inclusion are strong and that we will embrace all opportunities to live those values, growing and learning as people living in an increasingly diverse and honest world.

Even when we are so willing, new situations like this one carry wise wonderings about how to move forward with thought, compassion and caring. This letter strives to outline the path that we will follow, highlighting our most important assets: our children.

The Language of Gender Transition

Although the language of gender is further explored in the resources cited later in this letter, there are a few key terms (sourced from the Human Rights Campaign's Welcoming Schools project) that will help us establish a common and respectful dialogue:

- *Gender*: Refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Gender varies between cultures and over time. There is broad variation in how individuals experience and express gender.
- *Gender Identity*: How one feels inside. One's internal, deeply felt sense of being girl/woman, boy/man, somewhere in between, or outside these categories.
- *Sex*: One's biological and physical attributes - external genitalia, sex chromosomes, hormones, and internal reproductive structures that are used to assign a sex at birth (female/male/intersex). Also referred to as biological sex, anatomical sex or assigned birth sex.
- *Transgender*: An umbrella term, which describes a wide range of identities, expressions, and experiences. It includes those whose gender assigned at birth does not

match their internal sense of gender identity. A child who is transgender will assert firmly and over time that their gender identity is not that which was assigned at birth. They will insist that they are in the wrong body. Not all gender nonconforming individuals consider themselves transgender.

- *Gender Transition*: The experience by which a person goes from living and identifying as one gender to living and identifying as another. To affirm their gender identity, one may go through different types of transitions:

- *Social transition* can include name changes, changes in pronouns, and changes in appearance (e.g., clothes or hairstyle).
- *Medical transition* includes use of hormone blockers or cross-hormones to promote gender based body changes.
- *Surgical transition* modifies the body to remove or add gender-related physical traits. It is a very individual process.

Over the summer and with the start of the school year, we will use the name Rebecca Reuter (Ms. Reuter to our students) and female pronouns to recognize this individual and her gender identity. Ms. Reuter will return to her role as an inclusion writing teacher, but will move from her position in the fourth and fifth grades to that of a third grade co-teacher.

We appreciate Ms. Reuter's willingness to share her personal story and the need for a larger conversation. Yet we also understand we must balance her privacy, hosting these conversations as described and as a community, away from listservs or similar public forums that have the potential to deteriorate this balance.

Conversations at Home

We strongly recommend that all Janney families begin this discussion at home, providing space and time for our children to safely process what may be a previously unknown way of considering the gradients between sex and gender. Though it can be a difficult conversation to initiate, it will undoubtedly be a important chance to extend understanding. You are the experts on your children, and you have every reason to trust this expertise as you introduce this conversation. At your discretion, please contemplate these guidelines:

- *Educate Yourself*: Take some time to grow your own understanding and to explore the resources provided. Everyone will enter this conversation at a different place.

- *Rehearse*: When confronting a new situation, we tend to do best when we have had time to rehearse. Just as we practice in front of a mirror before a big speech or prepare for a marathon with a series of long runs, so it is important to rehearse this conversation before engaging in the real thing. Consider scripting your approach before trying it out with a spouse, family member or trusted friend. Rehearsing before your discussion with your child will allow you to focus more on your child's response.

- *Start Simply and Concretely*: We understand that the starting point for any learning is the concrete. For example, when we introduce counting, we ask children to correspond numbers with actual objects they can touch and hold. We know that this concrete foundation will allow them to extend their understanding to a variety of increasingly abstract situations. To start simply and concretely, introduce the topic by

saying something like: "There are different ways that people express their gender. Ms. Reuter feels happiest and most comfortable as a female."

- *Provide Language:* Having the appropriate language is empowering. Giving our children the language of sex and gender will deepen the discussion and prompt critical questions. Introduce the key terms and then weave them into the discussion to add meaning and context.
- *Revisit the Discussion and Stay Open to Questions Over Time:* As with any complex dialogue, expect to have this conversation over time (and likely in small pieces) so that your child has ongoing opportunities to ponder. After the initial conversation, revisit Ms. Reuter's story and the concepts of sex and gender. Though we bring a history of adult learning and experiences to the conversation, our children do not. While it is helpful to anticipate questions and your planned response, it is essential to answer the questions that are asked, avoiding the temptation to introduce history or perceptions that are not yet part of our children's wonderings.
- *Be Comfortable With Not Knowing:* It is okay and even constructive to not know the answer to every question. Be transparent about the things you do not yet know, for true inclusion is often about curiosity - being comfortable with seeking answers about the unknown. Promise to research and come back to such a question or, if appropriate, engage in that research alongside of your child. We do not have to know every answer; rather, it is our aim to show that we want to wonder and discover together.

We understand that many families may be approaching this conversation as new to the community or unfamiliar with Ms. Reuter. Still, it is important for us all to engage in this dialogue. It will prepare our children for discussions that may arise with their peers and, moreover, will help them broadly recognize gender as a continuum with many ways to express oneself as a person.

Conversations at School

As we approach this conversation at school, we will do so by keeping our central school rule in mind: respect. It is our goal to facilitate respectful conversations in planned and responsive ways. In the first weeks of school, we will host formal conversations with our fifth and third graders to reintroduce Ms. Reuter, the former representing her students from the previous school year and the latter representing her students for the coming school year. In addition, our rising sixth graders will be invited to the Janney campus should they and their families wish to participate in a similar discussion. Though we will not conduct formal conversations with classes at other grade levels, we will be comprehensively prepared to respond to in-the-moment student needs regardless of grade level. In all settings, our approach will be similar to the one suggested for conversations at home, focusing on an individual's story, the language of sex and gender, and an environment that welcomes questions, adjusted to the developmental stages of our students. We will share our progress with parents as these conversations occur, allowing them to be revisited at home as needed.

While we are so grateful to Ms. Reuter for her story and for prompting us to host these conversations, they extend far beyond the experiences of one individual. Therefore this conversation is placed in the larger context of who we are and how we grow as a community. We will continue to thrive as a Responsive Classroom school, a model of

social and emotional development centered around a sense of belonging, significance and joy with the goal of not just living in the world, but making it better, kinder and stronger. We will also broaden our commitment to our Identity Curriculum, a pilot started in the last school year. Our Identity Curriculum will become greater in scope and scale, encouraging our faculty and students to consider conceptions of self and the impact of self on others. We will explore the many other ways we express our developing sense of individual and collective identity.

Resources

Though there is a sense of immediacy to this conversation, it is grounded in months of thought and planning. We have been lucky enough to share this process with a wide scope of educators, experts and partners including (among others) Khadijah Tribble of Ground Game, LLC; Diana Bruce, the DCPS Director of Health and Wellness; Shanita Burney, a Director in the DCPS Office of Family and Youth Engagement (including the LGBTQ taskforce); and, Michael A. Giordano, a local licensed social worker specializing in gender identity. Many Janney parents have also provided resources with which they are familiar, and we welcome those connections as well. These resources represent a network of support that is larger than our Janney community, and they will continue to be essential to constructing our learning environment.

Each of these individuals welcomes direct communication with any Janney family, and I would be more than happy to make those connections at your request. We are ready to address any question without judgment. There are also a plethora of resources you can access on the Internet, including:

- *More on Language and Foundational Concepts:*
 - <http://www.glaad.org/transgender/trans101>
 - <http://transstudent.org/graphics>
 - <https://gaycenter.org/wellness/gender-identity#transgender-basics>
 - <http://www.welcomingschools.org/pages/a-few-definitions-for-educators-and-parents-guardians>
- *Books For Children and Adults:*
 - http://www.amazon.com/I-Am-Jazz-Jessica-Herthel/dp/0803741073/ref=sr_1_1_bnp_1_har?ie=UTF8&qid=1403448178&sr=8-1&keywords=jessica+herthel
 - <http://www.welcomingschools.org/pages/looking-at-gender-identity-with-childrens-books>
 - <http://www.welcomingschools.org/pages/gender-identity-and-children-books-to-help-adults-understand>
- *Testimonials and Educational Videos:*
 - <http://www.transpeoplespeak.org/>
 - <http://wehappytrans.com/>
 - <http://youtu.be/UXI9w0PbBXY>
 - <http://youtu.be/Xmq9dIQdsNE>
- *Creating Physically and Emotionally Safe Schools (many ideas apply to home as well):*
 - <http://www.welcomingschools.org/pages/gender-children-place-to-begin>

- *Talking to Children About Transgender Issues:*
 - <http://www.rainbowrumpus.org/grown-ups/publishers-letter-talking-kids-and-teens-about-transgender-issues>
- *Links to Other Resources, Transgender Organizations and Programs:*
 - <http://www.glaad.org/transgender/resources>

Of course, this list is not exhaustive. Should you need any additional resources around a specific topic or questions, our team of experts and partners will work to provide you with that information.

I am so proud to be part of the Janney community, a group of people so deeply committed to one another, whatever path we might follow. The sense of support already expressed for Ms. Reuter has been overwhelming, even as we learn together what that support looks and feels like. We realize that we have an opportunity to not only show who we are, but also who we want to be: a place that shows all children and adults in Janney's community that they will be embraced regardless of their subtle and explicit identities.

Most of all, please know that we are here to answer any questions you might have, to learn from the conversations you have at home, and to build on our collective process to create an even stronger community.

Sincerely,

Norah Lycknell
Principal

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