

EMPATHY, EVEN IF NOT UNDERSTANDING:
Supporting Trans and Nonbinary Members of Our Community

By Tiffany Dupont Novak

When I was in eighth grade, my parents gifted me the two-disc soundtrack of the revolutionary Broadway musical RENT for Christmas. As a 13-year-old, white girl from the Midwest, I couldn’t have had less in common with the rag-tag group of New York City 20-somethings the musical followed. Nevertheless, I danced around the house Christmas morning with my CD player in hand, aspiring to be one of the Bohemian artists I heard belting through my colossal late-90s headphones.

For me, the most captivating character in the story was Angel. A high-energy performer, Angel’s creativity and tenderness could be felt in every lyric they sang. Flipping through the pages of the CD jacket, it didn’t strike me that sometimes Angel was wearing feminine clothing and sometimes masculine. Instead, I was compelled by their personality and their love – RENT was one of the most impactful stories I had experienced up until that time.

While attending Fruitport High School and later Grand Valley State University, I participated in theatre, eventually making my career in the arts. As an arts administrator, I’ve met many inspiring people, some of whom are transgender or nonbinary. These folks are undoubtedly some of the most kind and creative people I’ve had the privilege of knowing. They deserve to feel welcome and safe in our schools and communities.

While many educators, administrators, students, and parents do not understand what it is like to be trans or nonbinary, promoting inclusivity in schools is proven to be more beneficial for all students’ well-being. To offer a general understanding, transgender people are those whose gender identity is different from the gender they were assigned at birth. Nonbinary people are those who don’t necessarily identify as entirely male or female or whose gender identity shifts over time. Many trans and nonbinary folks change their pronouns to match their identity. The most commonly used pronouns are he/him for male folks, she/her for female folks, and they/them for nonbinary folks or people who don’t see themselves as singularly male or female. For example, I am a cisgender person or someone whose gender is the same as it was assigned at birth, and my pronouns are she/her.

According to Kathleen Ethier, director of the Division of Adolescent and School Health at the Center for Disease Control, curriculums that include respect for others regarding gender diversity are more effective. And that’s true not just for LGBTQ students, she said. “When you make a school environment safe and supportive for the most vulnerable youth, you improve the school environment for everyone.”

For Brittany Carrier, a local licensed therapist with Unity Counseling, curriculums focused on empathy and inclusion promote kindness and connection among students. Practicing empathy is thinking about what life might be like in another person’s shoes. “When students are aware of the unique differences of their peers, they are given a greater opportunity to develop positive relationships, decrease their bias, and can develop a true understanding of one another. This allows students to develop friendships based

on trust, see things from the perspective of other students, and become more compassionate individuals,” said Carrier.

Research shows that support and affirmation from educators and administrators can have an even more significant impact on trans and nonbinary students than the acceptance of their peers. Therefore, we as adults have a responsibility to model empathy and inclusivity in our schools and community. “As an educator, we want to create an environment where the student feels welcomed and safe. When they

feel this way they will not only be able to have a strong educational experience, but will be able to thrive as humans who will one day be adults in our society,” said a Fruitport educator about their experience. “I’ve seen students who were once depressed, self isolated and withdrawn flourish when they show their true selves,” they said.

Recent policies enacted to remove “gender ideology” from schools and the false narratives pushed to support these policies have a profoundly negative impact, inflicting measurable damage on some of our most vulnerable students. A study conducted by the Trevor Project, the nation’s leading suicide prevention and crisis intervention nonprofit organization for LGBTQ+ young people, showed that the recent uptick in anti-transgender laws significantly increased incidents of past-year suicide attempts among transgender and nonbinary youth by as much as 72%. For many educators, the impact of policy and legislation targeting transgender students is not a statistic; it’s the reality of their experiences with students on a daily basis.

“There is the constant battle of bathroom usage, athletic participation, medical treatment, allowance of preferred pronouns and names and I’m sure many more. To me, that sends a message that transgender humans don’t belong in society [...] If they do exist, something is wrong with them. This has an extremely detrimental impact on transgender students,” said a Fruitport educator. While inclusivity is proven to be a more positive approach for students and community members’ well-being it is not being modeled at the highest levels of our government.

Take the executive order, *Defending Women from Gender Ideology and Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government*. At the federal level, the order calls for the removal of resources created by experts to support LBGTQIA+ Americans, including items like “U.S. Department of Education Toolkit: Creating Inclusive and Nondiscriminatory School Environments for LGBTQIA+ Students” and “Confronting Anti-LGBTQI+ Harassment in Schools: A Resource for Students and Families.” These resources protect students by supporting teachers in creating welcoming environments for all students and dispelling mistruths about LGBTQIA+ people.

For example, there’s a common idea that gender being expansive, fluid, and complex is a modern evolution when records of transgender individuals can be traced as early as 5000 B.C. “Teens and pre-teens are exploring who they are, which helps in the development of critical thinking. They are finding out what they like and don’t like and who they want to be,” offered a Fruitport educator about their experience. Of course, the process of exploring your identity as an individual is anything but new.

While more young people identify as trans or nonbinary than in years past, overall, the population of trans individuals has been steady over the past several years, according to an extensive study by the Williams Institute at UCLA. Among U.S. adults, 0.5% (about 1.3 million adults) identify as transgender, and among youth ages 13 to 17 in the U.S., 1.4% (about 300,000 youth) identify as transgender. And while there’s little research with regard to trans athletes, according to Charlie Baker, President of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), out of more than 500,000 total college student athletes, he believed fewer than 10 were transgender.

According to internationally recognized health expert, medical journalist, and Ob/Gyn physician, Dr. Jenn Conti, LGBTQIA+ identities were often historically misclassified and associated with mental illness, which stemmed from a combination of fear, stigma, and misunderstanding. The World Health Organization states, “trans-related and gender diverse identities are not conditions of mental ill-health, and classifying them as such can cause enormous stigma.”

At odds with recent policy targeting “gender ideology” is the declaration that, under the current administration, the United States will be universally “merit-based.” With this thinking, students should not be judged for their gender or pronoun usage. Instead, they should be judged on merit. And so, transgender students in a public school setting should be evaluated based on their work, the same as their peers. To that end, the positive contributions of transgender and nonbinary people speak for themselves.

I recently listened to a podcast featuring a Fruitport student who identifies as nonbinary. They talked about how much they love being involved in the arts at school and how they received the highest score possible at a regional arts competition. Ben Barres, a neuroscientist who revolutionized how we view the human brain, was transgender. Lynn Conway, a computer scientist and electrical engineer who invented microchips that made modern computers possible, was transgender. Janet Mock, a writer, producer, and New York Times best-selling author is transgender – the list goes on.

What can we as community members do to support trans and nonbinary people locally? As allies, we can start by educating ourselves. It’s okay if you have questions about the evolving conversations around gender. There are many credible resources that support education on these topics; some are linked at the bottom of the article. You can stay up-to-date on policy that impacts Fruitport Community Schools by reading Board of Education meeting minutes or attending school board meetings, which are held monthly. If you find something you disagree with, do not be afraid to ask questions. Even if you do not fully understand nontraditional gender, you can still offer support and respect to transgender and nonbinary people in our community.

If you want to engage in a community where you can learn more, the Muskegon Pride Festival hosts events year-round. Be mindful of what events are welcome to all and what events are specifically for various genders, identities, or groups. Listen and learn in a way that prioritizes the needs of the LGBTQIA+ folks in the room. “Every individual’s story is unique and is their own. It’s their story to share,

not ours. Be willing to learn, be respectful, do your best, keep learning, and just be a kind person,” said Carrier.



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In RENT, Angel and their partner Collins sing a song called “I’ll Cover You.” The song has layered meaning in the context of the story, one of them being that they will do what they can to support and care for each other. “The key point is, it’s not just trans people whose lives are improved by your love and support, it’s everyone’s,” says Kenny Ethan Jones, activist and author of Dear Cisgender People. Let’s practice empathy, if not understanding, so local trans and nonbinary students and community members know that we’ve got them covered here.

Scan the QR code with your phone or visit https://docs.google.com/document/d/1besQC0fpf8ADfj6gI6_FbsTRUIoYF95-BIXE1eSzjas/edit?usp=sharing for a list of resources and article citations.

