

New policies for LGBT students ignored by most Idaho schools

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — The majority of public schools in Idaho have not adopted new policies on gender identity and gender expression protections for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students.

Only a handful of public school boards have rejected the proposed guidelines — submitted for the first time this year by the Idaho School Board Association — but many more have not even broached the issue while going through their annual policy updates.

Out of 115 public school districts, only the Teton School District in eastern Idaho has included the new sweeping sexual orientation and gender identity protections against discrimination that apply to education opportunities, school-sponsored activities and specific situations involving bathrooms and overnight trips.

Fourteen others include LGBT non-discrimination policies in their educational practices, but these policies do not offer much detail for implementation.

A separate 33 schools have anti-harassment policies that include gender identity and sexual orientation protections, but they speak only to hazing, bullying and threats. Fewer than 40 schools have no mention of LGBT student protections in their policy handbooks.

This is according to school policy handbooks posted online — out of those 115, 29 districts did not post their policies.

The non-profit ISBA submits policy suggestions to school districts four times a year. In July, schools received proposals for the first time on specific gender identity and sexual orientation situations.

"Our executive board looked at what was going on across the nation and decided it was time to send out some model policy," said Jess Harrison, spokeswoman for ISBA. "These are a guideline."

Public schools already must abide by federal laws requiring equal treatment for all students. But rather than rely on a blanket anti-discrimination policy, ISBA's model policies dived into every day school life: Dress codes were to remain gender neutral, same-sex couples were not to be treated different during school dances and school principals were encouraged to meet with their transgender students to help meet their needs.

In fact, the policies focused particularly on transgender students' needs and protections. Elementary teachers were to check with school administration first before approaching a student's parents on possible gender transition. Other policies stated student cannot be denied to participate in overnight trips because of their transgender status. Another policy ruled that transgender students may be given the option to use a separate bathroom or for changing, but made it clear no student be required to use separate facilities for being transgender.

Failure to abide by the policies would result in disciplinary action, according to the proposed guidelines.

"We have some questions that we wanted clarified," said Eric Anderson, superintendent of the Hagerman School District. "This is the first time we've seen anything like this."

Hagerman School District currently has a policy that requires the school to offer equal opportunities for education and school activities to students, but it only bans discrimination against sex and religion, and doesn't mention gender identity or sexual orientation.

Anderson said the board will likely vote on the new policy on Monday.

There's no deadline on when school boards can update their policies, but determining how many schools in the future will adopt these new gender identity and gender expression policies is unknown. Neither the Idaho State Department of Education nor the ISBA track districts' anti-discrimination policies. This means the only way to check is through the school's website or calling the school.

School boards aren't the only groups grappling with how to approach gender identity and sexual orientation policies in Idaho. Idaho's Human Rights Act doesn't include protections for gay and lesbian residents from housing or employment discrimination. Advocates have fought for nearly a decade to add the protections to the state law, but their efforts have been stymied by Idaho's religious and conservative legislative leaders.