

A Mother's Muzzling Request

SCENARIO: A middle school counselor has been supporting a student who is transgender. Upon discovering their child's request to the school to be referred to as "they/them" and electronic communication with friends exploring this issue, the parents pull their child from school and transfer the child to a conservative private school. The mother e-mails the counselor asking her to tell their child's friends not to reply to any communications from the child. While wanting to respect the wishes of a parent, the counselor cannot imagine telling children to ignore a friend who is going through a challenging phase of life. She seeks guidance from her principal.



BARON DAVIS: While we must always respect parental rights and concerns, we must balance this with our ethical responsibility to ensure the emotional and psychological welfare of the child. Transgender individuals, especially adolescents, often face unique and significant challenges during self-discovery and self-acceptance.

Before taking any action, try to communicate with the parents. Express your understanding of their concerns and highlight the importance of maintaining healthy friendships and emotional support for their child.

While it is crucial to respect the parents' wishes, the counselor cannot instruct other students to ignore or cut off a friend going through a challenging phase. We must ensure the counselor maintains detailed, confidential records of their interactions with the student and their parents.

MARIA OTT: The mother of the transgender student is no longer a parent of the middle school when she chose to transfer her child. The counselor has a professional responsibility to maintain confidentiality and a moral obligation to do no harm to the child. It would violate confidentiality and be cruel to tell the child's friends not to reply to the child. These friends are the emotional support system that the child needs during the vulnerable middle school years, espe-

cially during a time of unexpected school change that could be viewed as a consequence for acknowledging sexual identity.

It would be best for the principal to respond on behalf of the counselor to ensure that confidentiality related to the counseling relationship is maintained. The principal can tell the parent it would be inappropriate to instruct students to cease communicating with the child. The principal can cite privacy issues that would prevent the counselor from discussing the child with other students.

ROARK HORN: The parents have made the decision to educate their child in a different environment, which is their right. However, it is unreasonable for them to then expect staff at their child's now-former school to honor such a request. The mother is obviously trying to sever her child's ties to former friends, yet these friends may be the lifeline the child needs now. Acting on the request would be morally wrong.

Furthermore, there is no way the counselor could monitor if the request is being honored by the child's friends. If it is not being honored, the fact she tried to do what the parents asked may open up the district to avenues of complaint — one from the mother whose request was not honored and another from parents of the other children who feel the school is infringing on their rights. The principal should tell the counselor to ignore the request in the best interests of the district and, most importantly, the best interests of the child.

SHELDON BERMAN: The counselor should inform the mother she cannot honor her request. It is not within the counselor's authority to manage children's relationships with other children outside of school nor her duty to support the parent's approach.

The transfer won't prevent the child from questioning their gender identity. Instead, it will sequester the child in an unsupportive environment. Preventing the child from communicating with friends will further isolate the child and could contribute to depression, self-harm or even suicide.

Since the student has been withdrawn from the school, the counselor must be cautious about any communication related to the child. However, she can offer to meet with the parents to discuss their concerns and how they might better approach the situation. She can also recommend family therapy to prevent irreversible damage to their relationship with their child.

Each month, *School Administrator* draws on actual circumstances to raise an ethical decision-making dilemma in K-12 education. This month's scenario is based on a case previously appearing in *The New York Times'* Ethicist column. Suggestions for dilemmas may be submitted to magazine@aasa.org.

The Ethical Educator panel consists of **SHELDON H. BERMAN**, retired superintendent, Redmond, Ore.; **BARON DAVIS**, senior adviser, Digital Promise, Columbia, S.C.; **ROARK HORN**, Pomerantz endowed professor in educational excellence, University of Northern Iowa; and **MARIA G. OTT**, Irving R. and Virginia A. Melbo chair in education administration, University of Southern California.

See the panelists' full analyses of this case at aasa.org/ethical-educator.