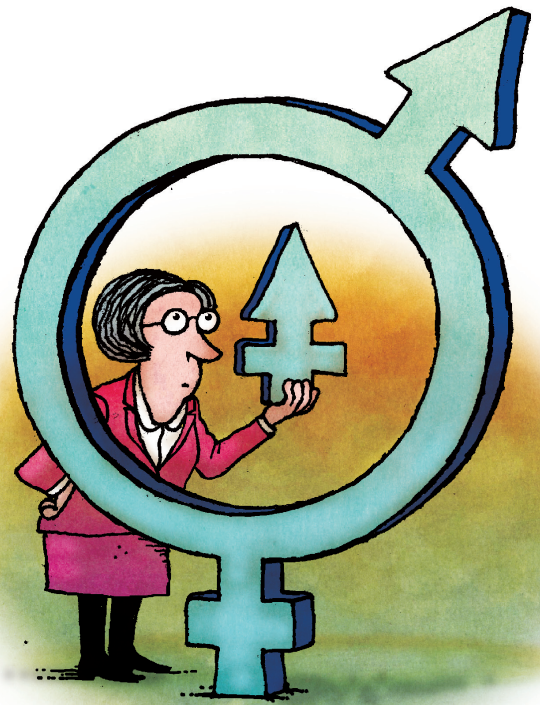


Preferred Pronouns

SCENARIO: About a dozen students in an after-school high school club that supports transgender rights ask all of their teachers to refer to them individually by their preferred pronoun “they” — even though some do not identify as trans or nonbinary. They choose to use “they” in solidarity with fellow students. The school district has no policy on the matter, and several teachers object to this request and complain to their principal. How ought she respond?



ARTHUR SCHWARTZ: I would love to teach at a high school where students are empowered to stand up for what they believe in. But in this scenario, I have a lot of empathy for the principal. The easy step would be for her to ask the school district to develop a policy on this matter. Pronto.

In addition, the principal could work with the students to explore other ways for the staff to show support for transgendered students. However, what if these students demand that all students at their school use the pronoun “they” to describe themselves? Ethical dilemmas often examine how a “tyranny of the majority” can repress and trample minority groups. Yet this scenario made me realize there are times when a “tyranny of the minority” also can impose its will.

My advice to the principal: Advocate for the Golden Mean — the middle point between two extremes.

SUSAN ENFIELD: The principal should begin by affirming the students’ right to self-expression. Pronoun use, even in solidarity, is a form of personal identity and speech. Teachers may not understand the motivation, but honoring students’ chosen pronouns is a simple act of respect — one aligned with the broader educational mission of dignity and belonging.

Next, she should address staff concerns directly. Teachers are not being asked to

endorse a belief but to respect a student’s request in a professional setting. Just as educators use preferred names or accommodate language needs, pronoun use is about fostering an environment of psychological safety. The principal should frame it as a matter of respectful classroom practice, not personal ideology.

The principal should elevate the issue to district administration, advocating for clear guidance that aligns with state and federal non-discrimination laws and best practices in student support.

MARIA OTT: Use of “they” as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun is now accepted in academia and reflects the use of this pronoun to avoid assumptions about gender. Academic acceptance of singular “they” as inclusive of all people provides support for how the students are requesting to be addressed.

The principal should commend the teachers for creating an environment of respect and inclusivity. By explaining the acceptance of singular “they” by scholars, the principal can help the teachers see beyond the controversy and appreciate the way their students are supporting transgender rights.

The principal should notify the superintendent to avoid any surprises if the issue rises to the level of the school board or creates public interest.

SHELDON BERMAN: The principal should communicate to the teachers that our job as educators is not to question students’

identities or intentions but to create safe, respectful and inclusive learning environments. If a student requests to be addressed with a specific pronoun, that request should be honored, whether the student identifies as nonbinary or transgender or is using the pronoun as an expression of solidarity. Respecting student pronouns is a matter of dignity, not debate.

We protect all students by honoring their name and pronoun requests. Affirming all students consistently contributes to a safer school climate. Resisting may validate exclusion and increase the chance of harm to vulnerable students, including those who are quietly navigating their identity.

To promote clarity and consistency, the principal should recommend that the district develop a policy and provide professional development on students’ identity rights.

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.; **SUSAN ENFIELD**, executive director, University of Washington’s Center for Educational Leadership, Seattle, Wash.; **MARIA G. OTT**, Irving R. and Virginia A. Melbo chair in education administration, University of Southern California; and **ARTHUR SCHWARTZ**, president, character.org.

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