



HENRY McMASTER
GOVERNOR

September 20, 2022

The Honorable Eric Mack
Chairman of the Board of Trustees
Charleston County School District
75 Calhoun Street
Charleston, South Carolina 29401

Dear Chairman Mack:

It has come to my attention that Charleston County School District (“CCSD”) personnel recently distributed copies of the enclosed article, titled “I am Leo,” by Leo Lipson, to one or more health classes at Camp Road Middle School without parents’ prior knowledge or consent. After learning of this issue from understandably upset parents and reviewing the article in question, I share their concerns.

I have enclosed an example of one parent’s recent correspondence with my office, which includes additional details and context regarding this matter and the corresponding parental shock and concern. According to the enclosed letter, students were also assigned questions to answer based on their reading. I have not received a copy of any questions or other materials provided to children; however, I am told CCSD has thus far refused to provide this documentation to parents upon request.

Parents know what is best for their children, and that includes whether, when, or how to address topics like those raised in the article. If parents decide to introduce their children to the ideas discussed in this article, then it is in their sole discretion to do so, at the time (or age) and in the way they deem appropriate. It certainly should not be done by a public-school teacher without parents’ knowledge.

Particularly on topics as critical and sensitive as health education (and especially for elementary and middle-school students), CCSD should respect the fundamental role of parents in the education of their children. Parents should be allowed to analyze these issues in advance and be afforded the opportunity to review course materials at the beginning of the year.

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I call on CCSD's Board of Trustees to take action immediately to prohibit these types of instructional materials from being distributed or utilized in the classroom without parents' knowledge and consent.

Yours very truly,



Henry McMaster

Enclosures

cc w/ enc: The Honorable Molly Spearman
Superintendent of Education

The Honorable Thomas C. Alexander
President of the Senate

The Honorable G. Murrell Smith, Jr.
Speaker of the House of Representatives

“I Am Leo”

Leo Lipson, 16, shares what it's like to grow up transgender—and how you can be an ally to trans people like him.

By LEO LIPSON

EDITOR'S NOTE:

In 2019, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that almost 2 percent of high school students identify as transgender, meaning their gender identity does not align with the sex assigned to them at birth. The actual number is probably even higher, since many kids are afraid to tell anyone they are transgender, and it's no wonder: Nearly 27 percent of transgender teens report feeling unsafe at school, and even more (35 percent) say they've been bullied. Our goal with this story is to raise awareness and understanding and to let transgender teens know they are not alone.

How do you know what gender you are? You just have a sense, right? Chances are, people probably identify you as a girl or a boy, and you think of yourself the same way: Your mind and body feel connected.

Well, in my case, things weren't always like that. When I was born, I was designated female (the same as my twin sister). But for a long time I knew I wasn't a girl . . . and yet, I didn't immediately know I was a boy, either.

SOMETHING'S UP

When I was little, my parents used to make me and my sister put on dresses when we'd go to special events. My sister seemed fine with it, but I always wondered why I didn't have the option to wear anything else. (When I got old enough to pick out my own clothes, I'd choose hoodies, sweatpants, or something black—things that didn't scream girls' department.) I also had long hair until I decided to have it cut off one day in sixth grade. It seemed like something I had to do to feel more like myself. I didn't know how to describe my feelings, so I didn't talk about them. Instead, I just thought of myself as weird.

Puberty hit in sixth grade, and that's when I really started questioning my gender. I found a way to describe the strangeness I'd been feeling thanks to Instagram. Someone I followed called themselves →

A young man with red hair and glasses stands on a bridge railing, looking towards the camera. He is wearing a white t-shirt with a colorful graphic of three stylized figures in red, green, and blue, and dark corduroy pants. The background shows a city skyline with a large bridge structure.

"For a long
time I knew I wasn't
a girl...and yet,
I didn't know I was
a boy, either."

—Leo Lipson, 16

VIDEO:
Hear more
from Leo at
[scholastic.com/
choices](https://www.scholastic.com/choices).

Photography by ANNIE TRITT

● REAL TEENS

a term I'd never heard before: *non-binary*. I went to Wikipedia and it said, "Non-binary is a spectrum of gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or exclusively feminine." I was like, "Oh, interesting."

MAKING CHANGES

I started to identify as non-binary. (At that time, I was still learning about what being transgender meant, and becoming male felt like a step I was not completely ready for yet). I didn't think anyone I knew in my life outside the internet would understand what was going on in my head—all the thoughts and questions about who I really was (I didn't even talk to my sister about it), which is why I confided in my online friends first. A lot of them were also questioning their identities and welcomed me with open arms. Their support gave me the courage to tell more people.

In the spring of sixth grade, I came out as non-binary to my mom. I told her in the most honest form I knew how: through text. I said, "Can you refer to me with they/them pronouns from now on?" She agreed, then told my sister and my father. My sister adjusted immediately; my parents made an effort but would slip up from time to time. I knew they were trying, but every time I got misgendered it felt like my identity was being challenged.

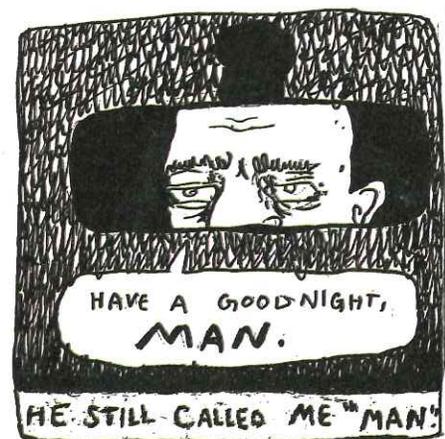
Over the next few months, I became more familiar with what it is like to live as a non-binary person. I went to sleepaway camp and was placed in the girls'



Leo with his twin sister, Vivian, at a New York City park

bunk where there was a junior counselor who was also non-binary. Seeing them living openly was really validating. I thought, "Here's another person like me—this is a real thing."

When it was time to head back to school for seventh grade, I emailed my teachers to let them



know about my pronouns. I'd assumed everyone at school would be understanding, but a lot of teachers and kids didn't get it. Every time someone referred to me as "she" or "her," it felt like being stabbed. I'd think, "I'm never going to be perceived as how I am." When I asked my teachers for help, they told me I needed to teach my classmates about gender. I thought, "Aren't you supposed to be the teacher?" I guess they saw gender as my thing, something they couldn't explain. So one day I got up in front of my class and tried to describe the gender spectrum. I was not happy about it, but I thought it was the only way to get people to stop misgendering me. I didn't have many friends in my grade, so not a lot of people listened, and some kids laughed. It was mortifying.

I spent a lot of time at school trying not to be called out for being different. During gym, the teacher would split us up between boys and girls. I chose to sit out or wander the halls. Life at school was lonely, so I looked forward to spending my afternoons doing things I loved: drawing, band practice, chatting online. Journaling—with words and illustrations—really helped me process everything I was feeling. Even if something not-so-great happened, I recorded it so one day I could look back and see how much had changed.

DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

As seventh grade—and puberty—went on, I hated my body so much I avoided mirrors. Meanwhile,

ANNIE TRITT PHOTOGRAPHY (LEO & VIVIAN); COURTESY OF LEO UPSON (CARTOON)



◀ A COMIC BY LEO: Drawing and journaling help Leo process his feelings.

GENDER GLOSSARY

Know these key terms so you can have informed—and respectful—conversations about gender identity.

SEX ASSIGNED AT BIRTH: This is typically based on a person's external genitals, which are used to determine whether the individual is designated male or female at birth.

GENDER IDENTITY: How a person sees and understands him, her, or themselves—it could be as a boy, a girl, transgender, non-binary, or something else; it does not always match a person's assigned sex.

GENDER EXPRESSION: This relates to a person's name, pronouns, clothing, hairstyle, and other things that help determine how the person is perceived by the world.

GENDER NON-CONFORMING: When a person's gender expression doesn't match the traits society typically considers masculine or feminine.

NON-BINARY: Term used by some people who do not identify themselves as strictly a man or a woman.

TRANSGENDER (OR TRANS): A term that describes someone whose gender identity is different from the sex the person was assigned at birth.

CISGENDER: A term used to describe someone whose gender identity matches the sex the person was assigned at birth.

MISGENDERING: Calling someone by the wrong pronouns.

TRANSITION: The physical and emotional process a person goes through to alter birth sex to match gender identity. This could include name changes, hormone injections, surgery, and/or hair and clothing choices. Every transition is unique.

SOURCE: glad.org

when I would see a guy's flat chest or hear his deep voice, I'd get jealous and want it for myself. Things like that helped me realize I wasn't non-binary, I was transgender. I was a boy. Figuring that out made me feel like I knew who I was—or who I was going to be.

THE ROAD TO ME

My transition was gradual. First I changed my pronouns on Instagram to he/they, then I changed my name. I felt like I had to change my name in order for people to start taking me seriously as a trans boy. I chose a name I liked and started saying, "I'm going by Leo now." It took a while for people to catch on, but when they did, it felt amazing.

To help me pass as male and make me more comfortable in my body, I started to wear a chest binder, a tight undergarment that flattened my breasts. You're not supposed to wear it all day, because it constricts your breathing. I asked my parents if I could start taking the male hormone testosterone, also known as T, to make me look more masculine, but they said no. For one thing, they were worried about health risks, like high blood pressure and diabetes, associated with taking it. They also wanted to make sure I wasn't having a moment—they had to know that I envisioned my future as male. I was crushed. As a

compromise, they let me take hormone blockers, which I got from an endocrinologist, a doctor

specializing in hormones. The blockers stopped my period and further female development.

NEW REALITY

I was perceived as a boy for the first time that summer (I was even in a boys' bunk at camp). My friends were supportive, but explaining myself to other people was exhausting. When they asked questions like, "What were you born as?" or "What gender are you really?" or "What's your real name?", it felt like I was under a microscope. Even if most people meant well, it was as if they were doubting me or trying to debate me. I wish they'd just said "Cool" and left it at that.

When I started eighth grade, I asked everyone to refer to me only with male pronouns. (If a substitute teacher took attendance and used my deadname—the one I had before—I wouldn't answer.) Some kids gave me a hard time, and when I used the boys' bathroom, I'd get a lot of looks. One time, a kid who had called me a transphobic slur came into the bathroom while I was there. I was so scared that I hid in a stall until he left.

I stayed home from school a lot because I wasn't comfortable with anything about myself. It was the worst I ever felt, but thankfully, there was a bright spot. After a year on hormone blockers, my parents finally said I could start testosterone. It's highly recommended by doctors that you see a therapist before starting T, but I was already seeing one. I'd had trouble conveying my feelings, but a therapist's job is not to judge you, and that helped me open up.



HOW TO BE AN ALLY Use these tips

RESPECT PEOPLE'S PRONOUNS AND NAME.

If others tell you their pronouns, it's not a suggestion—it's what you need to use. (Not sure? Ask!) Also, call them by the name they currently use—don't ask their "real name." Accept them for who they are now.

DON'T ASK IF A PERSON'S GENDER IDENTITY IS "A PHASE."

Realizing you're transgender is a big deal and can take a long time. Coming out can be challenging and emotional. Don't diminish that by wondering whether it's a temporary thing.

UNDERSTAND THERE'S NO "RIGHT" WAY TO EXPRESS GENDER.

Some people take hormones, some have surgery, some change their names—and some do not. Every transgender person is different, and the decisions they make are individual and personal.

"I used to spend energy worrying how I was being perceived. Now I can relax a bit."

—Leo Lipsan, 16

Leo drawing in his bedroom.



The testosterone made me feel much better about myself. My face shape changed completely, from soft and rounded to more square, and hair started to grow everywhere. My little mustache was my pride and joy. My voice dropped, and because I was beginning to like how it was sounding, I started talking more at school, which helped me make more friends and do better in my classes.

FEELING RIGHT

For ninth grade, I chose a high school with all new kids. My name was changed in the district's system, so everyone knew me as a boy from the start.

Today, I'm in 11th grade, and I have so much

more confidence—I've even been taking selfies! I used to spend energy worrying about how I was being perceived, but now I can relax a bit. Things at school and in my personal life are great, but it's difficult to be a trans person. With our rights being rolled back, protections being removed, and hate-crime rates going up, it can be scary. On the way home from school one day, a man stopped me and asked, "Are you a boy or a

girl?" I had no idea how to respond. I was so scared he might have a rude or violent reaction that I crossed the street. When I'm in a public bathroom, if somebody looks at me in a way that says "You don't belong here," I try to get in and out as fast as I can. I always try to remind myself that the world is changing and things will get better one day.

The trans experience varies for every person. I have a supportive family and the privilege of being open about who I am. It helps that I am white and pass as male. So many trans people can't live as themselves because it's not safe. What we can all do is stand up for people and be kind. Because let's be honest, we're all just trying to figure ourselves out.

educate yourself and others about gender identity.

LET PEOPLE COME OUT ON THEIR OWN TERMS.

"If someone shares with you that they're transgender, that's very personal," says Leo. "Never out someone unless you have specific permission, because you never know what the repercussions could be."

STAND UP FOR PEOPLE.

- You can join a march or a movement, or fight for inclusion at your school.
- You can also challenge bullying or anti-trans comments or jokes whenever you hear or see them. Don't be afraid to speak up.

SOURCE: Leo and glad.org

If you're questioning your gender identity and need information or help, visit The Trevor Project (thetrevorproject.org). It offers support via phone, text, and chat; links to resources; and even an online community (trevorspace.org) where teens can connect.

The Governor of South Carolina
South Carolina State House
1100 Gervais Street
Columbia, SC 29201

Dear Governor McMasters,

I want to be very clear of all the steps, measures and precautions I took in order to confirm my 7th grade son was being taught appropriate material in Health class. At the very beginning of the year, I requested Camp Road Middle Schools curriculum for 7th grade Health. I wanted to be sure it aligned with our beliefs as well as what I feel is appropriate for a 12-year-old child to be learning. The 7th grade administrator had no issues sending it to me in a timely manner. I was able to read over the material and not find any discrepancies between the verbiage and what I felt to be appropriate. Regardless, I told my son that if any assignment came across his desk that he knew to be inappropriate for school to please let me know as soon as possible.

On Friday, September 9th my son came home from school and informed me of an assignment he had been given in Health class. He explained to me that it was about a transgender teenager making his transition. As shocked as I was, I hoped that he was mistaken and that it was all a misunderstanding. I couldn't fathom that the school would hand out this kind of material without getting the parents consent, or really at all. I called the school to request a meeting with the principal, as well as have them send me a copy of the article. They sent the article over right away, and we set up a meeting for Thursday, September 15, 2022.

The article is titled "I am Leo". My son was correct. It is a story of a 16-year-old transgender female and his journey into becoming a male. Not only does it talk about taking hormone blockers and physically changing your body (wearing a chest binder to smash her breasts flat and taking testosterone), but it encourages children to seek help and advice from social media and the internet! It is completely dismantling family values! This article appears to glorify the gender changing process, without highlighting any of the well documented negative mental and physical changes. Nowhere in this article does it talk about the mental health struggles or the high suicide rate amongst transgender teens.

I met with [REDACTED] (the principal) and [REDACTED] (7th grade administrator) today. The meeting was very passive on their end. [REDACTED] was very agreeable for the most part, and assured me that this article was not meant to be given to the students. She stated "this particular lesson was not approved by anyone" and that the teacher that gave this assignment stated that "he was in a rush, and that this was a lesson plan that he had used a few years ago and didn't even realize the article was in there." She informed me that the teacher claimed it was an old lesson plan he had used about a year ago, and that he pulled it out for the substitute

to use and teach with that day. This is where I start to get a little confused. I have an email from the Health teacher, [REDACTED], stating his reasoning for giving this assignment. I can attach that as well. He specifically says "The article and questions were part of a larger assignment I had the kids complete. It does fall under the health standards of accessing valid information to enhance personal, family and community health, as well as advocating for the same." After discussing the article, I asked for a copy of the questions the students were given to answer referring to what they read. She showed it to me, but said she could not make a copy of it to give to me without consulting her superiors. Please inform me how the school can give my child a piece of paper to read and be graded on, but as a parent I am not allowed to have a copy? She promised to let me know what her superiors said, and she would get back to me regarding that as well as the copy of the sex ed tests I'd requested.

I have a copy of the South Carolina Standards for Health and Safety Education. I printed out all 30 pages of the 6th-8th grade portion and read every single word. I see where [REDACTED] found the verbiage he used, but in no way does this require the use of this article on becoming transgender. That is a HUGE stretch. An article on bullying would have sufficed. There are probably hundreds of other articles that would have sufficed. Nowhere in the Camp Road Middle School Health curriculum or the SC Standards for Health does it say it is ok to teach children about sexual identity.

I am not alone in my feelings. I have so many parents that are very upset by this. Parents of 6th, 7th and 8th graders all want something to be done about this. I'm not sure what's worse. The teacher not knowing the article was in his lesson plans, or the teacher knowing about it and giving the assignment anyway. Please help us. Our children need your help.

[REDACTED]