

Gender Inclusion in the Clerc Center's Demonstration Schools

By Stephen Farias

When Roberta J. Cordano became president of Gallaudet University and began her term in January 2016, it was with an air of positive transformation. Kendall Demonstration Elementary School (KDES) and the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD)—the two demonstration schools under the umbrella of Gallaudet’s Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center and located on the University’s campus—took part in this transformation, which included making the entire campus a more inclusive environment for individuals of all genders.

In August 2016, President Cordano and her team paved the way for the university campus towards becoming more gender inclusive by implementing single-use bathrooms across campus. This was a big step by President Cordano and her team as it showed that the university truly is committed to providing an inclusive, safe, and supportive environment for all community members. At the time, I was responsible for overseeing the third-fifth grade and sixth-eighth grade departments in my role as the coordinator of teaching and learning at KDES. In our leadership meetings at KDES, we all wanted to move towards a more inclusive approach with how our bathrooms were set up. Prior to President Cordano’s push for a more inclusive campus, we had the typical male-female bathroom arrangements.

KDES Pushes for Change

In the spring of 2017, the KDES leadership team (KLT) agreed that it was time to switch things up and work together to ensure our bathrooms were more gender inclusive. In our ensuing meetings with our chief academic officer, Marianne Belsky, and our chief administrative officer, Nicole Sutcliffe, full support was given for us to conduct research in our efforts to update our restrooms at KDES.

In the weeks that followed, the KLT quickly came together to identify ways in which each bathroom could be updated. We had the benefit of already having a long-standing practice that only one student was allowed to use the bathroom at a time. We also had the advantage of having smaller-sized bathrooms. With these in mind, we went ahead and changed the bathroom signs to “blue” and “yellow” instead of the binary “male” and “female” titles. Students who needed to use the bathroom would go to the common area in their respective departments and collect either a “blue” or a “yellow” bathroom pass. Then they would head to the bathroom that matched their pass and, using the magnet that was attached to the pass, place their pass on the

*Photos by Cat Valcourt-Pearce
Screenshot courtesy of the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center*

Stephen Farias,

MS, is the manager of instructional programs at the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center’s Model Secondary School for the Deaf on the campus of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. He received his bachelor’s degree in history from Gallaudet and his master’s degree in deaf education from McDaniel College in Westminster, Md. Farias welcomes questions and comments about this article at Stephen.Farias@gallaudet.edu.



From left: In KDES, there is a wheelchair-accessible bathroom designated “for everyone” available; bathrooms for the students have been renamed “blue” and “yellow” and painted as such—they are designated as gender neutral and used by only one student at a time unless a teacher is present.



door frame of the bathroom so others knew it was occupied.

We explained this approach to the KDES parents at one of our evening events with the school community, and there was a strong show of support from them for us in making this happen. As the semester went on, this implementation was a smooth one for the community; students quickly adapted and embraced this positive step forward.

Clerc Center Leadership Projects

The Clerc Center is made up of three respective major teams: KDES, MSSD, and the National Deaf Education Center. Leaders from each team have long since convened on a regular basis for Clerc Center leadership team (CCLT) meetings. In these meetings, a wide variety of topics is covered ranging from budget and operations-related

work, to professional development planning, to in-house training for the leadership.

In meetings that took place during the spring of 2018, CCLT members were tasked with undertaking several leadership projects. My role at the time had shifted—I was now the interim manager of instructional programs at MSSD. I was assigned to work with Rosalyn Prickett, deputy Title IX coordinator, and John Skjeveland, director of operations. Rosalyn, John, and I were tasked with researching and developing a new set of guidelines for the Clerc Center that focused on creating a more gender inclusive school environment. We quickly came together and devised a game plan for how we would do this. We agreed that we absolutely had to research current D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) policies and that, perhaps most importantly, we had to gauge the pulse of other important

stakeholders throughout the entire drafting process. With that in mind, we set up a schedule of regular meetings and identified projects we each would tackle as we went along.

Researching Policies

One of the first steps we took was to research the policies already in place here in Washington, D.C.’s public schools. We discovered that DCPS is progressive and has been striving for inclusion for the past several years as a core value. In 2011, DCPS created and released *A Plan to Create an Inclusive School Community* (DCPS, 2011), and in 2015 they released their *Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Policy Guidance* (DCPS, 2015). Another very helpful document that provided the necessary framework for us in our efforts was the *Model School District Policy on Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students* (NCTE &

GLSEN, 2018), released in September 2018 in a collaborative effort between the National Center for Transgender Equality and GLSEN.

Among the many highlights and areas of emphasis in both documents, we especially appreciated the way they shared key points specifically for parents and families, for students, and for school staff. We also appreciated the way both documents were extremely thorough, covering aspects that ranged from a glossary of various terminology to requirements for school facilities. Seeing this put into place inspired us to ensure we worked to build a policy for the Clerc Center that was equally as comprehensive.

Focus

When we were working to develop our guidelines, one of the biggest priorities for us was to set a clear purpose and focus for doing so. These would, in turn, serve as a beacon for us as we moved forward.

Our purpose for developing the gender inclusive school policy was to:

- Foster an educational environment that is safe, welcoming, and free from stigma and discrimination for all students regardless of gender identity or expression.
- Facilitate compliance with local and federal laws concerning bullying, harassment, privacy, and discrimination.
- Ensure all students have the opportunity to express themselves and live authentically.

These were the main principles that drove our work and, essentially, what these boil down to is ensuring every student, regardless of identity preference, feels safe, welcome, and at home here at the Clerc Center.

Collecting Feedback

As we worked through our various drafts, we collected feedback from a variety of community members and

stakeholders. We presented several drafts to the CCLT members in our weekly work sessions and also worked with individuals who identify as transgender or as gender nonconforming throughout the process. One of the key individuals who contributed to this project was Blake Culley, a school psychologist at KDES and a transgender person. Blake has a very nuanced and professional understanding of how to support, teach, and work with all students, and that includes students who identify as nonbinary. Their input throughout the stages of developing our policy was of monumental help.

It was through our work with Blake that we arrived at the realization that we also needed to present this document in an American Sign Language (ASL) format so as to align with the bilingual mission of the Clerc Center. When we released the ASL version of the *Clerc Center Guidelines on Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students* (Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, 2019) to the community (viewable on YouTube), Blake played a vital role in the development of this resource, and they can be seen on screen explaining many aspects of the policy in ASL.

Going Forward

These efforts at the Clerc Center are a part of the direction that Gallaudet University is undertaking in its efforts to make all of its facilities and programming inclusive for transgender students, staff, teachers, and faculty. Both Gallaudet and the Clerc Center are committed to a campus climate that is inclusive and supportive of transgender and gender nonconforming individuals.

Author's note of gratitude: Forming a policy as comprehensive as this one did not happen without the involvement of many key individuals, and due gratitude and recognition must be given. Thank you to President Cordano and CAOs Nicole Sutcliffe and Marianne Belsky for their undiluted support and belief in us as we worked to develop this policy for the Clerc Center. Thank you to Blake Culley, Alex Leffers, and Larissa Clapp for their willingness to lead professional development workshops for all community members and for providing guidance, feedback, and input throughout the stages of drafting the policy itself. And last, but certainly not least, thank you to Rosalyn Prickett and John Skjeveland for teaming up with me over the past year and a half as we worked to present this plan to the Clerc Center community.

References

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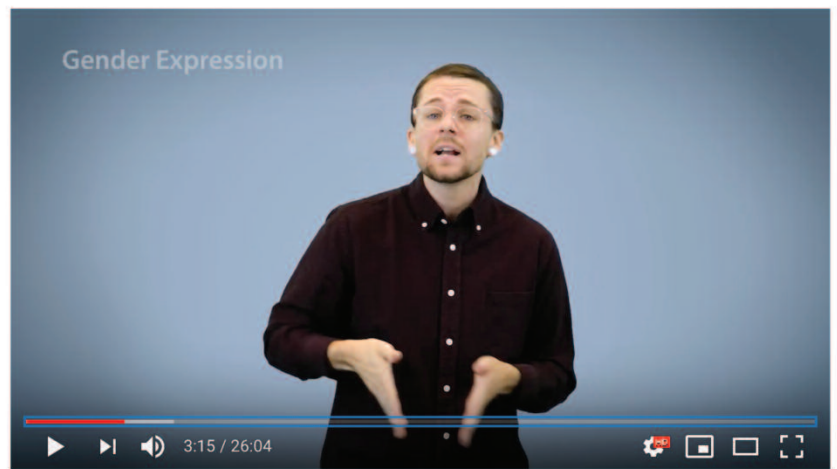
Key Highlights of the Clerc Center Guidelines

ON TRANSGENDER AND GENDER NONCONFORMING STUDENTS

Some of the key highlights from our new guidelines include the following:

- **Glossary**—Rosalyn, John, and I all felt it was imperative to include this part. In many of the documents we researched while developing our own policy, we found that the inclusion of a glossary to clarify common terminology employed was very helpful as a necessary step towards arriving at a common place of understanding.

- **Student transitions**—This was perhaps one of the most important distinctions we worked to include. By including this, we are hereby protecting students from veiled discriminatory practices that are shrouded in statements that call for certain diagnosis or treatment thresholds. At the Clerc Center, gender identities asserted by students will be accepted. Students here have the right to initiate a process to change their name, pronoun, attire, and access to gender-related programs, activities, and facilities that are consistent with their current gender identity. We will treat this on a per-person basis and will customize support to optimize each student's equal access to our educational programs and activities.



Gender Inclusive School Policy

- **Access to gender-segregated activities and facilities**—Since the Clerc Center currently maintains separate restroom and locker room facilities for male and female students, we felt this was another important distinction to make. With this policy in place, all of our students, including nonbinary students, will be allowed equal access to facilities that are consistent with their gender identity. Clerc Center students will, therefore, be empowered to determine which facilities are consistent with their chosen gender identity. This policy also protects students who feel uncomfortable using a shared gender-segregated facility; upon a student's request and regardless of the reason, that student will be provided with a safe and non-stigmatizing alternative. What this means is that we may add a privacy partition or curtain, allow access to use a nearby private restroom, or design a separate changing schedule for that student. As explained in other policies similar to ours, it is a threatening and stigmatizing practice when schools or organizations require transgender or gender-nonconforming students to use a separate space against their wishes. Under no circumstances will a Clerc Center student be required to use gender-segregated facilities that are inconsistent with that student's gender identity.
- **Physical education classes and intramural and interscholastic athletics**—As the world of sports is usually a very binary place, we felt it was important to make it clear what the Clerc Center's stance is on this as well. In all physical education classes and throughout our athletics program at the Clerc Center, all students will be permitted to participate in a manner that is consistent with their gender identity.