
Lacey Township High School's Discrimination Against LGBTQ Students

email: "aelmama@gmail.com Jennifer Leeman"

Thursday, November 14, 2019 at 10:17:06 AM Eastern Standard Time

To: email: "kevin.ahern@doe.nj.gov" , email: "nmirandi@laceyschools.org" , email: "ldowning@laceyschools.org" , email: "rriggs@laceyschools.org" , email: "rdiscenza@laceyschools.org" , email: "speters@laceyschools.org" , email: "fpalino@laceyschools.org" , email: "sgiordano@laceyschools.org pdegeorge@laceyschools.org tdeblasse@laceyschools.org sgiordano@laceyschools.org"

To Whom It May Concern,

Today I write to you in hopes of shining a light on a major problem at the Lacey Township High School, and possibly some of the other public schools in New Jersey. If you are a recipient of this letter it is because you are in a position of power, a position to make a change, to improve the lives of children, to SAVE the lives of children.

To begin, let me introduce myself. My name is Jennifer Leeman. I am a lifelong resident of Ocean County and I am a civil servant, working as a Clerk at the county Board of Social Services for the past 12 years. I am the mother of a 15 year old transgender boy, [REDACTED] who, until yesterday, was a student at LTHS. [REDACTED] father and I made the difficult decision to pull him from the public school system and home school him for the remainder of his high school years. We chose this path because of the negative impact the school environment had on his mental health and our concerns for his physical safety, and because of the district's lack of corrective action, even though we asked them repeatedly throughout the 2017-18 school year and again this year to bring training to faculty and students on working with LGBTQ students. There are several LGBTQ students at the school who are "out" and there is no way of knowing how many others who may not be "out". These students are not being treated with respect by their peers or by certain faculty members and certainly not by an administration which unapologetically turns a blind eye to their suffering.

My son started LTHS in the Academy for Leadership and the Humanities program, with grades of As and Bs. By the end of Freshman year he was failing some of his classes. He was being misgendered by one of his teachers regularly, but the teacher did stop when I emailed them. I made Principal Brandis aware of the situation without naming the teacher. [REDACTED] was also being bullied by other kids, but he didn't tell his father and me, except for one incident in which [REDACTED] was thrown violently to the ground and physically hurt. The incident was captured on video. The school's solution to the problem was to have the other student apologize to [REDACTED] in the school counselor's office. In addition to these issues Freshman year, Principal Brandis questioned the validity of a doctor's note provided by my son's trans care physician regarding his inability to participate in phys ed because of the dangers of exercising while binding. Principal Brandis also refused to create a GSA for the LGBTQ students despite my numerous requests made by email, in person and by phone to do so. He finally created one in May, one month before the end of the school year. Unfortunately during that school year I was unaware that all clubs in school must be treated equally and he was actually obligated to have a GSA for the students who wanted it.

At the end of Summer 2018, [REDACTED] started experiencing extreme anxiety about the impending start of Sophomore year. He had come forward to us over the summer about the harassment he'd experienced from some of the other students during Freshman year. I told him that I wanted to help this year, but in order to do that I needed him to tell me about each instance of bullying, which he did. Just about daily I heard about some form of bullying. The incidents ranged in severity from whispers and giggles in the hall to kids calling him "tranny" and "it" to gangs of boys terrorizing him outside the bathroom stall. [REDACTED] never knew who these boys were since he was terrified to come out of the stall, and the school administration also claimed ignorance, but I am not convinced as there is a teacher outside each bathroom with a sign-in sheet, as well as cameras in the hallways. Before the end of the first marking period we had initiated 3 HIB investigations. As of the writing of this letter we are still awaiting results of two of them.

While I am clearly writing to expose the blatant ignorance, prejudice and lack of concern from the LTHS administration, I do have to give credit where credit is due. There are some counselors and teachers in the system who are literally saving children's lives every day - children like [REDACTED]. I can say with certainty that when [REDACTED] attended Lacey Township Middle School, school counselor Abby Sly saved my son's life. I can say that Jessica Frandsen and Elyse Winkle were lifelines for him in high school. There were teachers at LTHS who he knew were a safe space and who made a positive impact on his life. Those teachers are Michael Olender, Samantha Dijon, Jamie Sassano, Morgan Devlin, Gerardo Valecillos. These counselors and educators are special. They are those once in a lifetime teachers that impact kid's lives in a positive way. They go above and beyond even with the lack of support they have from the district. They have made the effort to educate themselves about ALL their students - not just the ones who fit into a certain box. I am sorry for [REDACTED] that he will miss out on having teachers like these now that he isn't in school anymore.

I never thought I would be that parent that home schools my child. I was an average child with an average high school experience. I liked high school. I always believed the school environment was important for socialization, for learning how to be out in the world and in the job force. I can say with certainty that if the employees at my agency behaved in the hostile, hateful way the children at this high school are allowed to behave, they would no longer be employed. They would be violating NJ's LAD which we are trained on each year as public employees. Many of my friends and family members have encouraged me to speak to an attorney, to file a discrimination suit against the district. While I do think Lacey school system should be obligated to pay for [REDACTED] alternative education since he's unable to safely attend public school in our community, a lawsuit and settlement money can't bring light to this situation which is what I want to accomplish. I do not want another child, ANY other child to suffer the way [REDACTED] has suffered - emotionally and educationally. I would be happy to speak to you further and/or provide you with copies of email correspondence I've had with Principal Brandis since 2017, on all of which Superintendent Clark who is the also the district's HIB coordinator, was copied. I received hollow responses from Mr. Brandis, making promises which were never kept and offering support which didn't exist. I never once received a response from Dr. Clark.

As the parent of a transgender child I am aware that we are very fortunate to live in New Jersey under Governor Murphy's leadership. The laws are some of the most progressive in the nation and I am grateful for that every day. Yet, in our public schools discrimination against LGBTQ students and other students who don't fit the "mold" is still prevalent. The school environment is still toxic for these children. They aren't receiving the education they deserve because they are riddled with anxiety just walking through the front doors each morning. With teen suicide rates rising at alarming rates we MUST do something. If this letter ends up in the hands of one person who makes one change that saves one life it will have been worth writing. I think and I know we can do better than that. I will help any way I can. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Leeman
A Concerned Mother

Cc: Governor Phil Murphy
Senator Robert Menendez
Senator Cory A. Booker
Representative Andy Kim
Dr. Lamont Repollet, Commissioner, NJ Dept of Education
