



## Student Transgressions

Justin Hauver

<http://justiceinschools.org>

Ms. Regis, the counselor at Redline Middle School, took a deep breath and settled back into her chair as the conference room door softly clicked shut. She glanced at the 8th grade teachers sitting around the table and felt uncertain about how to begin. In her two decades at Redline, she had never encountered a transgender-questioning student, at least not one who was open about it. Times were changing and she wondered if she could keep up - or if she wanted to.

Mr. Guler, a veteran science teacher, saved her the trouble of starting the meeting, "So, what do we do about Keith?"

"That's what we're here to figure out," Ms. Regis responded. "I've spoken with his mom" - should she say "her mom" Ms. Regis wondered - "and Ms. Carter is at a loss. She has tried talking with Keith and taking away his phone and his Xbox. Nothing seems to work. She did make clear that she did not want Keith to be allowed to wear the wig at school and she's going to try to prevent him from posting any more pictures on social media."

Last month, Keith had come to school wearing a blond wig and asking to be called "K'Brianna." The results had not been positive for Keith or for his teachers. Other students at Redline had bullied him mercilessly during breakfast even though teachers, somewhat dumbfounded, had tried to intervene. Keith's first period class had been so disrupted by his appearance that Mrs. Thomas, his math teacher, had sent him to the office just to get the class calm. When he refused to take off the wig, he was sent home for violating the school's prohibitions of hats and "provocative clothing." He came back the next day without the wig, claiming that the whole thing was an experiment.

"Call me Keith, stupid," he said when students made jokes about "K'Brianna."

His teachers continued trying to enforce Redline's anti-bullying policy whenever they heard someone making fun of Keith, but they were left confused by the whole event. Many staff members came from the local community, a very conservative town in the southern United States, and they had no direct experience with transgender issues. Some were also reluctant to defend transgender expressions for personal or religious reasons.

To further complicate matters, Keith had recently posted a picture on social media wearing the same blond wig. Ms. Regis and the teachers only found out about it after someone anonymously reported that Keith was being cyber-bullied. When asked about the picture and the bullying, Keith explained, "I'm just trying to have some fun. Other people just don't understand me." Keith's mom ultimately forced him to delete the picture, but students were still sharing screenshots of Keith's post online—a practice that Keith seemed to encourage one day and condemn the next.

His self-presentation in school was equally unpredictable, further unsettling teachers and students at Redline. Just yesterday, he had arrived wearing bright pink nail polish, sending his first period class into an uproar. He was again sent home. In response, Ms. Regis had pulled together this meeting to figure out what should be done if Keith kept experimenting with traditionally feminine modes of expression.

"I don't think this is only about punishment, or stopping Keith from doing stuff," Ms. Dean nervously offered. As a first-year social studies teacher, originally from New York City and placed in the school by

Teach For America, Ms. Dean was painfully aware of her youth, inexperience and outsider status at Redline. She didn't want to seem pushy or alienate her colleagues. But she believed strongly in gender rights as human rights, and felt compelled to defend her values and Keith. "We should be figuring out how to support Keith through this identity crisis. He or she is clearly questioning a lot of things and needs our help."

"He is just trying to get attention," Mr. Guler responded sharply. "You weren't here last year, but the others know what I'm talking about. His whole purpose in life seems to be getting a rise out of people. For two months, he used sharpie markers to draw fake tattoos on his arms and claimed they were Wiccan initiation rites. This is just another way for him to disrupt our classes so people will focus on him."

"I'm not sure that's fair," Ms. Dean interjected.

"Having to spend so much time and energy on Keith isn't fair to us or to our students," Mr. Guler continued, brushing aside his colleague's comment. "His mom knows that as well as we do. That's why Ms. Carter doesn't want him wearing that wig or going around as K'Brianna or whatever. And if we really want to support him, we should discourage such outrageous expressions, which only earn him a lot of negative attention and make our jobs that much harder."

"I see your points, Mr. G.," Ms. Regis said diplomatically, "but I have to wonder, as a counselor, whether or not such behaviors indicate something underneath that needs to be addressed. Is this normal teenage attention-seeking, or evidence of something deeply wrong? Kids who feel like outsiders, which may very well be how Keith is feeling, have a higher chance of dropping out and of harming themselves. How do we take that into consideration and make sure that we are not turning our backs on Keith by simply saying, 'act normal?'"

"I agree," Mrs. Thomas eagerly affirmed. "Something is going on with Keith that demands more than academic attention—and more than I can offer him in my math class or that any of us can offer in this school. I want to support Keith through whatever is going on with him, but we have to be realistic. Our school community's values - the values of our students *and* our parents - do not really support transgender questioning or whatever is happening here. That makes it pretty much impossible to keep him from being bullied, either in person or online, if he stays here. That's painful for me to admit because I don't want anyone to be bullied, but reality is what it is. I don't think we are the right people or that our school is the right place for Keith."

Mrs. Jackson, Redline's long-standing Dean of Discipline and Keith's English teacher, nodded. "I agree—Redline isn't the place for this kind of foolishness. When Ms. Carter came to school yesterday to pick Keith up, she actually thanked us for working with her. Even though she had to take another day off work to come get him early, she was grateful to us for contacting her. Not many parents react like that when called to come pick up their child."

Ms. Dean struggled to keep her voice calm and respectful, "Well what do you all suggest we *do*? Ignore him? Keep sending him home whenever he deviates from traditional norms?"

"No," Mrs. Thomas replied, picking up on her earlier point. "I think it'd be best if Keith take advantage of school choice and go somewhere with values more aligned to that kind of thing, somewhere with the resources and the community to support him. I have a friend who works at Leadership Academy Middle School and she tells me they recently opened a gender-neutral bathroom for kids like Keith..."

"So we kick him out?" Ms. Dean felt herself getting emotional but pressed on. "We are a public school. Shouldn't we be teaching our students to interact respectfully with others who are different? What message does this send to our students, some of whom are probably going through similar things?"

“I’m sorry, but boys dressing like girls isn’t normal at Redline, Ms. Dean,” Mrs. Jackson responded emphatically. “I’ve taught here 37 years and I’ve never seen anything like it. We need to be clear with Keith, just as Ms. Carter is, that it’s time for him to mature into a productive member of this community. *That’s* how we can support him and fulfill our responsibilities as educators.”

“See, Ms. Dean,” Mrs. Thomas followed up, “this is why our school environment isn’t the place for Keith—especially if we want to support kids like him. There’s no way our school community is going to get behind a gender-neutral bathroom. And I’ve already had two parents call me worried about ‘some boy acting like a girl’ in the same classes as their children. Don’t those parents have some rights, too?”

“We can deal with the bathroom issue later,” Ms. Regis said, trying her best to keep the conversation civil. She knew that major protests had broken out over transgender people using their preferred bathroom and wanted to sidestep that question, at least for now. “I think what we need to do is figure out how to protect Keith by stopping the bullying, without being seen as advocating for any particular position.”

“We stop the bullying by stopping Keith’s outrageous behavior,” Mr. Gulen interjected. “Mrs. Jackson is right. Keith is just taking advantage of the recent media hype to cut the fool. He doesn’t care about wigs or separate bathrooms any more than he cared about Wiccanism last year, or any other crazy excuse he comes up with to throw this school into turmoil.”

“I’m sorry, I just...” Ms. Dean’s frustration was palpable, even as she searched for the right words to respond to her colleagues. She took a deep breath and started again. “It just seems like we have some duty to make this work for Keith. You don’t have to agree personally with Keith’s choices, but I think we need to respect them—and those of other questioning students—.” Mr. Guler snorted, but Ms. Dean pressed on. “I don’t know if Keith is gay, or gender-queer, or Wiccan, or Christian, or what. He may not know either. It doesn’t matter. Our job is to support him, not judge him. And even if Keith might feel more supported elsewhere, Mrs. Thomas, do we have any reason to think he would want to change schools? Would his mom even entertain the notion of moving his school?”

“I don’t know,” Mrs. Thomas admitted. “Ms. Regis, you’re meeting with Ms. Carter when she gets off of work today, right? What are you thinking you’ll say?”

Ms. Regis felt her throat constrict as her colleagues’ eyes turned toward her. Should she go with her instinct to support Mr. Guler and Mrs. Jackson against Keith’s strange behavior? Work with Ms. Dean to create a school environment where all students can be themselves? How would she even go about doing that given the realities of the Redline community? Should she even try to go against the dominant parent and staff member values? But what about protecting Keith from bullying—no matter what the reasons were for his actions? Was Mrs. Thomas right, that she should try to convince Keith’s mom to transfer him to Leadership Academy? On the other hand, what about Ms. Carter’s own traditional values, which matched those at Redline better than at Leadership Academy? And could Ms. Regis even be confident Leadership Academy would be a better fit, if this was all a cry for help from Keith? What should her next step be?