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N.J. School Reverses Position, Will Let Trans Teen Attend As Girl She Is

By Parker Marie Molloy

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A middle school in New Jersey has reversed course after allegedly telling a 13-year-old transgender girl that she could only attend classes if she dressed and

Rachel Pepe

acted like a boy.

Monday evening, Rachel Pepe received news that Middletown, New Jersey's Thorne Middle School will allow the teenager to attend school as herself.

In a blog posted yesterday evening, Garden State Equality announced it had been working with Pepe's school to ensure that administrators and staff are able to provide a safe, welcoming educational environment. After speaking with Middletown Township Public Schools Superintendent William O. George III, GSE Executive Director Andrea Bowen announced that the district has agreed to work with the LGBT rights organization in an effort to make their schools welcoming to all students regardless of gender identity.

"We applaud Superintendent George for taking the right steps to affirm the health and safety of students," Bowen said in a statement. "This is a victory for transgender students everywhere. This Middletown student and students like her are heroes for standing up for their needs. We're excited that the community came together in dialogue to bring this situation to a happy resolution."

A number of legal experts have questioned the legality of the initial stance allegedly taken by the school, noting that both state and federal laws would seem to prohibit a school from forcing students to conform to a certain gender expression.

"Every student in New Jersey deserves equal educational opportunities free from harassment and bullying," said Omar Gonzalez-Pagan, staff attorney for Lambda Legal, in the joint press

release from Garden State Equality. "Students in New Jersey are protected from discrimination, harassment, intimidation, and bullying under Title IX as well as New Jersey's Law Against Discrimination and Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act. We are pleased that the Middletown Township Public Schools have recognized their responsibilities under such laws and have agreed to work with the student and her family to ensure a safe educational environment for her."

Garden State Equality, Lambda Legal, and the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network have pledged to continue working with Middletown Township Public Schools, providing staff members with the proper training to ensure that Pepe and other trans students will be able to receive an education free from discrimination.

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