AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION of RHODE ISLAND

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Cumberland School Committee
Cumberland School Department
2602 Mendon Road
Cumberland, RI 02864

BY EMAIL AND MAIL

Dear Cumberland School Committee Member:

I am writing to express the ACLU of Rhode Island's strong support for the "Policy Affecting Students Who Identify as Transgender or Gender Non-Conforming," to which the school committee has given preliminary consideration. We look forward to its formal approval on Thursday.

As the Committee is aware, federal law has been interpreted to prohibit discrimination against students on the basis of their gender identity or gender non-conforming behavior. School districts nationwide are making progress in recognizing the needs of transgender students, but for many gender non-conforming children the process is painfully – and dangerously – slow.

Many blanket anti-discrimination policies fail to address the day-to-day practical issues transgender children face, from what to be called, to where to dress, to whether or not they can play sports and what they can wear. Failure to proactively address these issues in a comprehensive and respectful way means many districts are unprepared to provide appropriate education of transgender youth. Since the stigma and lack of understanding around transgender and gender non-conforming students means they likely already face harassment and intolerance, a welcoming environment at school is especially critical.

By recognizing, respecting and setting out the particular needs of transgender students in a variety of school settings, this policy will help to ensure that all children receive a quality education and equal treatment by school officials who might otherwise not know how to properly respond.

We do encourage the committee to expand the policy in the near future to include language regarding dress codes and children's transitions. A gender non-conforming child's clothing may be among the strongest ways they express their new identity; ensuring these children may do so without issue is an important factor in the child's overall sense of acceptance and ease at their school. In addition, clear language in school district policy regarding the rights of a child during their transition, and the actions of staff and faculty –

including when and how to discuss a transition with a child's parents – will ensure that every child both knows what to expect as they move through their transition and feels comfortable in their day-to-day experience in the Cumberland schools. In order to make the school district's policy as comprehensive as possible, we hope these two issues will be addressed as well in the coming months.

The ACLU of Rhode Island once again commends the Committee and the school district for working to adopt this policy to support transgender and gender non-conforming children. We hope other Rhode Island's school districts will follow in your footsteps in the near future.

Sincerely,

Steven Brown
Executive Director

cc: Supt. Robert Mitchell