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Opinion: Adults take cue from students

Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary of Education

A recent decision by the US Court of Appeals, 4th circuit, confirmed that transgender students should be able to use the bathroom that is consistent with their gender identity.

This is the right decision. I think of a family friend, who spends every day worrying about whether his transgender child will still be alive at the end of each day. I think about some of the young transgender Vermonters I have met, who struggled with anger and frustration, until they were able to transition to an identity that fit their knowledge of themselves, and allowed them to live a coherent life. I think of parents of transgender children who say simply: “my child just wants to live and be happy. “

What all these people have in common is a desire that their children, like other children, feel safe to be themselves, whoever they are, and not afraid that their identity will cause other people to do them harm. That is a core right of all our Vermont students. No Vermonter should fear that his or her identity-- whether sexual, racial, linguistic or cultural—should lead others to do him or her harm.

I spoke with an educator recently, who has been a longtime proponent of equity. Ethically and intellectually, she says, she knows the ruling is right and is the only way to support and protect the rights of this vulnerable group. She also acknowledged that she is struggling with it personally, and that the fact she is struggling makes her uncomfortable.

I share that as a way of acknowledging that even as we work to ensure every student feels safe, supported and valued, we have to acknowledge that making this change is calling on a lot of us, including our educators, to move out of our comfort zones and ask some difficult questions about how our assumptions about gender shape – not always for the better—the lives of some of our students.

Change is hard, and our schools are at the forefront of this change. Our public schools, more than any other institution, are tasked with forcing us to have the hard conversations about what it means and what it looks like to live in a pluralist democracy that is working toward shared goals. We love them and we hate them, because they are vehicles for our aspirations, as well as reflections of our challenges.

Issues like this put our schools and our educators on the front lines, working to figure out how to navigate this world. They are challenged to do the brave thing and stand up for this vulnerable group in the face of occasional fear and vitriol from people who don't agree or don't understand. Our children are actually ahead of us on this issue, as the recent demonstration at Green Mountain Union High School suggests. Students there walked out in support of a

transgender peer. Many adults may need to take their cue from the students on this, and grow and change, even though change is not easy.