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'It's life or death': failure to protect trans kids at ARMS a systemic problem

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By The Graphic Staff**



A "Trans Rights" sign made by students was torn down at ARMS.

Over the last two years, Amherst Regional Middle School students, parents, and staff members voiced concerns to district leadership about adjustment counselor Hector Santos and current eighth-grade guidance counselor Delinda Dykes, noting that the two routinely misgendered and deadnamed transgender students and staff, invoked anti-LGBTQ prayer at school, allowed religion to overflow into conversations with students and staff, and failed to provide support to students who were facing gender-based bullying or intimidation at school. Santos also posted religiously worded anti-LGBTQ material on a public Facebook page.

This year, when Santos's daughter Tania Cabrera was brought on to serve as the seventh-grade guidance counselor, staff and students told The Graphic she also misgendered trans kids, told staff that a trans student had reverted to using their legal name when they had not, did not report on an anti-LGBTQ harassment incident that was reported to her, and told a trans male student who went to her for support that she sympathized with his parents, who had "lost their daughter." The Graphic reached out to Dykes, Santos, and Cabrera with every allegation and allowed them the right to reply; in three almost identical statements sent by email, they refuted all claims made in this report.

According to multiple sources interviewed by The Graphic, the aforementioned complaints were made by students, parents, and educators on numerous occasions to ARMS Principal Diego Sharon, Director of Special Education Faye Brady, and Director of Student and Family Engagement Marta Guevara, who reported many of them to Superintendent Michael Morris.

But Guevara also confirmed by email that district policy requires staff to file complaints against other staff with Assistant Superintendent of Diversity, Equity, and Human Resources Doreen

Cunningham. “All student matters come to Faye [Brady] and me, and complaints about adults go to Doreen [Cunningham],” she wrote.

Cunningham has personal ties to the three counselors. In addition to Santos being slated to officiate at Cunningham’s wedding in July, Santos referred to Dykes and her husband as his “siblings in faith” in a previously public Facebook post, which included pictures of him, Dykes, and Cunningham at a party.

Fearing retaliation if they filed a complaint against the counselors with Cunningham, multiple staff members say they dropped their complaints and took to trying to create alternative forms of support to safeguard kids.

Meanwhile, Dykes was named interim principal by the superintendent in November 2022, when Diego Sharon took a leave to attend to family matters. And she and Santos were granted professional educator status in under two years, a tenure-like designation that is normally awarded only after three years of positive professional evaluations.

When parents and community members attended a school committee meeting on April 25 to read letters or submit public comments about shock and concern over

allegations of “conversion therapy” or anti-queer language or behavior happening at the middle school, they were met with a similar district response.

“We need an actual complaint as well as some evidence so we can investigate that,” Morris told the committee. “If there are people who have been harmed or have experienced harm, we want to follow up.” Amherst representative Peter Demling added that he was concerned that reports were “unverified” and could be “false.”

Graphic staff found numerous complaints about the counselors in writing or delivered by parents and staff via phone or email to the superintendent.

We also found a trail of well-documented written complaints that were sent to Morris and other district staff—including a Title IX complaint filed on April 14, 2023—about frequent bullying of LGBTQ students, specifically transgender students, that caused them significant distress and led to depression, suicidal thoughts, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and school withdrawal.

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a Federal civil rights law that prohibits sex discrimination at educational institutions that receive federal funding. Under Title IX, sexual

discrimination includes harassment on the basis of sex, which according to transequality.org, “includes discrimination against someone because they are transgender.” Schools are legally required to respond to and remedy hostile educational environments and failure to do so means a school could risk losing federal funding.

Morris and Brady did not wish to offer comment, citing the pending Title IX investigation, and Cunningham also said that she did not wish to comment.

Dykes, Santos, and Cabrera all emailed to say they believed that “any investigation” into the matters that involved them “will show that I have not engaged in any wrongdoing.”

All three closed their emails by writing, “I will continue to serve this school community to the best of my ability. I cherish my relationship with students and staff” and “I am confident that proper procedures will be followed with regard to these complaints and that I will be vindicated.”

Religious Beliefs

Santos and Dykes allegedly frequently expressed their religious views at work. Last year, a secretary, John*

(pseudonym), who has worked in the district since 2017, said Dykes and Santos reached out to invite him to a private prayer circle with them in Santos's office before school at 8:15 a.m. At first, he didn't see the harm. He said he identifies as both a Christian and an LGBTQ supporter.

"I was exploring my spiritual side at that time," he said, noting that the circle did not involve students or teachers. "I thought we were just going to pray for strength to get us through the day. Who doesn't need that?" But things shifted quickly. He alleges that after some introductory prayers, Dykes changed lanes, saying, "In the name of Jesus, we bind that LGBTQ gay demon that wants to confuse our children."

John said he felt an immediate "tightness in my chest. I looked to the door, wanting to run." He left shortly afterward, told a trusted colleague he felt they "were crazy to be saying that," never joined their prayer circle again, and tried to avoid the two at work, making polite talk but keeping his distance.

However, the meeting gnawed at him. When he heard about the counselors misgendering kids or bringing up religious comments in counseling sessions, he

decided to tell Guevara about the prayer circle, and she reported it to Morris.

When Dykes became interim principal this year, she approached John to say she thought he had “started changing up” on her and avoiding her. He replied, “I don’t want to talk about it right now. And we never talked about it again. It was just work formalities.” Dykes did not respond to confirm or deny the prayer circle.

Later this year, screenshots of public Facebook reposts by Santos also emerged and were shared somewhat widely among ARMS staff (his page is now viewable only by friends). These were shared with The Graphic as well.

One, dated September 5, 2022, is a repost of a post by David Fierro. Accompanied by an image of the crucified hand of Christ shielding children from rainbow paint about to spill on them, it reads, “If my 4-year-old son tells me he wants to dress up as a princess, I will tell him no. I will try to get my daughter to play a sport of her liking or the violin, but I will not support male behaviors. I’m not going to endorse someone telling you that there is a third gender. There are only two chromosomes. ... God created man in the beginning, Adam and Eve.”

It ends with, “I will not run away from my responsibility as a [parent] and my duty to teach them things as they are. If you think the same, I invite you to express it and don’t be silent. If others scream their rights, I scream mine.”

Another Santos repost on May 25, 2019, linked to a story about gay conversion, originally posted by Darwin Rivera on May 24, 2019, called “Ex-gays take to the streets to testify of their freedom in Jesus.” The Graphic received a screenshot of this post as well.

We also received a report that at least one family terminated IEP-related counseling services with Santos because he brought up the Bible and Jesus in counseling sessions with their child, which the family reported to Sharon and Morris.

On top of that, staff members witnessed Santos “misgendering a student in crisis who had been on his caseload for months.”

On another occasion, staff members reported that when a student had a panic attack in a hallway and was lying on the floor, the area was shut down to divert student traffic. Santos allegedly arrived on the scene, standing over the child and shouting, “You need to get up off the floor. You’re making a spectacle of yourself.”

The Effects on Trans Kids

A parent who reached out to us, Joan* (pseudonym), said she gave the district over a year and a half to address her complaints about her child's counselor, school climate, disciplinary procedures, and harm to her child before filing a Title IX complaint in April. According to Joan, her nonbinary child, Echo* (pseudonym), endured frequent misgendering by adults and transphobic bullying by peers at ARMS in seventh and eighth grade.

Dykes, their counselor, routinely misgendered them, even when they were wearing a large pronoun pin on their hat. Dykes also allegedly confused Echo with another trans child and resisted prompts from the parent to correct incorrect pronouns during a phone call between the two.

When Joan corrected the counselor, she said, "She told me she was learning, and she hoped I would grant her mercy."

But despite her patience, the misgendering did not improve with her child or anyone else's. Parent Laura Hunter confirmed the misgendering of not just Echo but others, saying that at an end-of-year party she hosted for all ARMS families and staff, Dykes told her a story about a child (who had used he/him

pronouns since the start of seventh grade) repeatedly referring to him as “she” and as someone’s “girlfriend” even though “he is referred to as male by everyone.”

“At some point, I sort of gave up on the conversation,” she said.

Another parent, Lila* (pseudonym), said that on top of the misgendering, when Dykes took on the interim principal role, she began suspending large numbers of kids for “all kinds of strange reasons, like hugging in the cafeteria,” and parents were upset, many of them reaching out directly to Morris to complain.

She also allegedly did not hide her religious or personal beliefs from students and staff, handing out chocolate crosses to children at school. Others said she asked children if they had “prayed on” conflicts they were experiencing.

A study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* showed that the cumulative effects of misgendering are serious, and the benefits of using a youth’s name and pronouns are substantive. In each context (i.e., at home, school, work, or with friends) in which a transgender youth’s chosen name is used, “their risk of suicidal behavior is reduced by more than half,” the study notes.

In September 2022, the American Academy of Pediatrics stated that “parents should not misgender their transgender child.” Additionally, according to [childtrends.org](https://www.childtrends.org/), a group that conducts “independent, actionable research that describes and analyzes how children, youth and families are faring,” studies since 2011 have shown that while “transgender youth have higher rates of depression, suicidality and self-harm, and eating disorders when compared with their peers,” when they have access to gender-affirming medical therapy and social support, especially at school, “their mental health outcomes are similar to their cisgender peers.”

Devastating Consequences

For Joan, the negative effects of her child being misgendered were bad enough, but she said the impact of Echo having a guidance counselor who was not skilled at affirming their gender or creating safe spaces also sent the message that “when they had problems, guidance was not the safest place to go.”

By January 2022 in Echo’s seventh-grade year, Joan had written to raise concerns about Echo’s safety to Sharon, Dykes, and then-Assistant Principal Doreen Reid, and she cc’d staff who had supported Echo, including Erin Neil Kolasinski, an

adjustment counselor who is also the LGBTQ Club adviser; and paraeducator Julie Woynar, who staffed a drop-in student support room Echo frequented.

When a peer called out, “Trans people are weird” during Echo’s presentation in front of a class, and students hurled homophobic slurs at them in the hallways and on school grounds, Echo began carrying around a digital camera to log events themselves, since they did not yet have a phone.

“I remember walking out of the school building and having 15 people catcalling me and barking at me, calling me a [fag], and making sexually suggestive gestures,” they said.

According to Echo, this group contained upward of 30 students who surrounded other trans students as well, doing the same to them, especially at times when students were less supervised, including before being let into the school in the morning or when they were let out in the afternoon.

Joan said she never let up on reporting these things to Sharon, Dykes, and others, and began to make multiple complaints about bullying of her child via the school’s online link to report bullying. When Joan did that, Sharon took action, relying on

hallway video cameras to find and suspend at least one student who was involved in the bullying, and, for a while, to assign that student to an adult who walked around the building with him in the hallways. “It was like an in-school restraining order,” Echo said.

But the cumulative stress on Echo had already taken its toll. To cope, they took to entering the school through a side door after knocking on their English teacher’s window and spending time in nurse Celia Maysles’s office when they were feeling overwhelmed. One day, as they walked home after school, Echo reported seeing the same perpetrator holding a rock in the air and miming a throwing motion as if to say he wanted to hurt them with it.

“I had nightmares,” Echo said. “I still do. I don’t know if they will ever stop.”

Eventually, they needed to be hospitalized and treated for PTSD, depression, and anxiety. “My school put me in the hospital,” Echo said. “That’s not good.”

When Echo tried to return to school after their hospitalization, it felt so overwhelming that they withdrew from school altogether. “We are currently homeschooling,” Joan said.

At the start of this school year, as Echo was entering eighth grade, Joan sent a letter to Guevara detailing specific policy changes she wanted to see put in place. “Marta said that she was doing a larger investigation into gender discrimination and sexual harassment at the school, and asked if my child wanted to be part of that and if we wanted to file a Title IX complaint,” she said. Joan was hesitant at the time because she did not want to single out Dykes in a complaint.

But in March, when Joan withdrew her child from school, she added to the letter she had initially sent to Guevara and sent it to her again, this time cc’ing Morris. A month later, she realized she was too uncomfortable with how things had played out and decided to file a formal Title IX complaint after all.

Guevara said she is “a fierce advocate for equity” and “an advocate for students and their families,” and she places a strong value on making sure all students have “access, can participate in, and can benefit from our educational programming.” She also said that she supports families in the process of filing these complaints. “I make sure people understand their rights and their options,” she said. In her role, she has received “about a dozen” Title IX complaints in the last five years.

As for Echo, they were not sure what to do about high school. “It’s hard for me to think about going through the entrance of a school and seeing the faces of the people that bullied me again,” they said.

Protocols and Policies

While Massachusetts [bullying laws](#) typically describe bullying as a repeated offense, schools are encouraged to take serious steps to safeguard students who are considered “vulnerable” to bullying, including trans students. The principal is ultimately tasked with implementing and overseeing the plan at any school.

At Amherst Regional High School, Dean of Students Mary Custard said that harassment on the basis of race, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation, among other protected categories, triggers an immediate response and investigation. “I meet with the student who is the alleged aggressor, issue a strong warning about their behavior, and also notify their parents,” she said. “In some cases, they are suspended on the first offense. If not, and if they do it again, they would almost always face suspension.”

At the same time, restorative justice at ARHS is used to remedy harm to the victims. Typically, after assigning consequences, Custard would fold in RJ

coordinator Aaron Buford to check in with the victim and follow up to make sure they feel safe enough to be back at school. The perpetrator might also be contacted after that to discuss what happened and help them understand the hurt they caused.

The two parties would not meet in a restorative circle together unless their parents were both notified, the victim had agreed to it, and the person who caused harm was ready to repair it.

“It’s highly unusual for us to see repeat behavior like this at ARHS,” said Custard, who believes that policies limiting hateful speech also norm students to refuse to tolerate it. “Our students will respond as courageous upstanders to this type of harassment of their peers and rarely stand quietly by, which helps to set an LGBTQ-supportive tone in our school community,” she said.

Like ARHS, ARMS has a Dean—Sonia Molina—and a Restorative Justice Coordinator—Letha Gayle-Brissett; the pair is referred to as a “Dean Team.” While Molina and Gayle-Brissett could not comment about specific cases due to privacy concerns, Sharon said that “the discipline system is set up with the intent of responding equitably and appropriately at all times.”

But according to parents and students we spoke with, acts of transphobic intimidation or harassment were responded to with differing levels of severity at ARMS, with some responses stopping harm in its tracks and others causing it to escalate.

The school-wide process was, by many accounts, muddied by the fact that LGBTQ students who stopped going to their guidance counselors in crisis later fanned out to people all over the building.

Losing Faith

James* (pseudonym), a trans male eighth grader, said only a few weeks into the start of seventh grade, he reported an incident that happened in town—to his counselor, Dykes—telling her a group of middle schoolers had followed him through town, stolen his friend's bike, and then called James a “fag.”

But Dykes's alleged response was clear: “If you stop messing with those boys, they'll stop messing with you.”

After that, James never went directly to Dykes himself when he was targeted at school, but, instead, in seventh grade told a staff member who is no longer at the school, or he stopped by Gayle-Brissett's room.

That year, James was kicked out of a class when he insisted a teacher stop misgendering him; he said the teacher “said I was too sensitive and was being disrespectful.”

He was also on the receiving end of transphobic and homophobic slurs from a number of students, which he sometimes endured without reporting.

But trouble persisted at school. During the fall of eighth grade, a different student sought James out more frequently, saying, “People hate you” and ultimately telling James to “kill himself because no one wants you around.”

This time, James’s parents filed a report on the school’s online tip line, and Dykes was tasked with dealing with it. According to James’s mom, Kate* (pseudonym), Dykes initially reacted with surprise, insisting over the phone that the aggressor was a “nice kid,” but she did call the perpetrator’s home afterward, issuing a stern warning.

Because in that one instance Dykes “involved the parents, and the student was warned with a suspension, that was the only time James was bullied that the bully stopped,” Kate said.

But James was targeted more times across his eighth-grade year by yet another student, and while the boy was mostly transphobic toward James, he also mocked James's race and culture.

In the moments when he was harassed in the middle of the day, he tended to go to Gayle-Brissett to report it rather than to Dykes. In this case, he discussed the act of racial discrimination one-on-one with Gayle-Brissett and subsequently agreed to be in a restorative circle with the student.

But the next time the same student singled James out for abuse, it was more extreme, and he and his family were not satisfied with the school's response—more restorative justice.

When James entered the boys' bathroom one day, that student "told me to get out," he said, "and when I resorted to using the girls' bathroom, he yelled in a hallway full of students, 'I thought you were a boy; what are you, trans?'" This ended up not just stigmatizing James but outing him to seventh-grade students who had not previously known he was trans and later harassed him about his gender identity, calling him a "tranny."

Denying a trans student access to the bathroom of their gender identity is a violation of a [Massachusetts law](#) that went

into effect in October 2016. It also pushes up against guidelines established in 2012 for [Creating a Safe and Supportive School](#).

James reported the incident to Gayle-Brissett, who was upset on James's behalf. But when James was brought into restorative justice session to face the perpetrator again and discuss it, he said, "I told Dr. G-B I didn't feel comfortable being in a circle with this person anymore."

A short time later, following that event, James said that the student's friends "sat at my table and called me transphobic slurs."

In March, James's parents called a meeting at school and also asked for the administration and dean team to fold them in on all future incidents and to up the stakes on dealing with identity-based harassment, moving past restorative justice or "coached lunches" (similar to lunch detention) as punishments or resolutions for the perpetrator. Irene LaRoche, one of James's teachers, attended the meeting to urge the same.

Teachers shared with The Graphic that other reports of transphobic language or behavior they had witnessed and logged in the Educator Handbook—the online staff site for reporting disciplinary infractions—

had, on occasion, been referred to restorative justice to be resolved or marked “no action needed at this time” by the dean. Kate and her husband said they got the message that the school “would prefer to resolve things” this way.

But in email exchanges with school staff, Kate and her husband expressed growing impatience with these approaches. By March 2023, Kate wrote, “[My husband and I] have spent the time since [James] came to ARMS trusting the school would enlist the necessary actions to address the numerous issues that [James] has brought forward to staff since he began in 7th grade. However, as more than a year and a half has passed, we find that little has changed at school for him.”

As a result, Kate said, there were times this year when she worried her son would not make it. He became suicidal, and, at one point, Kate “took to sleeping in his room because he was not sure he could get through the night without harming himself.”

“We offered to pull James from school several times and to homeschool him, but he did not want to miss out on seeing his friends and playing sports,” she said.

James’s dad said in all other areas of life, James had been “a happy kid. He had the

support of his friends and his family, and never questioned his gender identity,” having known he was trans since fourth grade.

The parents’ demands—emailed to Sharon and Gayle-Brissett—were almost exactly the same as the ones Joan had outlined in her letter to Guevara and Morris, also in March. They asked that staff not only receive continued training around pronoun use but also be held to a higher standard in using pronouns, that their son have access to the bathroom without being targeted, and that the school better protect children from bullying and offer “clear communication with parents.”

“I understand that people have good intentions,” Kate said, “but frankly, I’ve had it up to my eyeballs with good intentions. Adults need to solve these problems. This is a life-or-death matter.”

The Future at ARMS

Sharon acknowledged wanting to do right by LGBTQ kids at ARMS. “There have been challenges coordinating all support systems in the school, and, clearly, there is room for growth,” he said. “I can state that we do not tolerate hateful or xenophobic communication or behavior in the middle school. I am always open to improving our systems of support.”

Morris also wrote to say that “the district (and myself) are fully committed to addressing any potential harms against trans students in our district. Once [the Title IX] investigation is completed, we will be able to get a sense of what that may entail.”

Genny Beemyn, who heads The Stonewall Center, an LGBTQIA organization at UMass Amherst, said the goal moving forward should be to “do everything possible” to “ensure the safety and comfort of trans youth.”

“The policies are there, on the state level and the federal level,” Beemyn said.

“There is a long series of guidelines for how schools in Massachusetts need to be treating their trans students. The institution needs to follow those laws and do right by its students.”

Multiple sources acknowledged that ARMS already has a vested interest in queer kids. English Department Head Heather Sullivan-Flynn and her ELA team have brought in LGBTQ literature across the curriculum, and the social studies department has included LGBTQ topics in lessons. Students have found community—and engaged in activism—via both the LGBTQ Club and POSH (People Opposed to Sexual Harassment, advised by Maysles and led by a student). Students and staff

have produced social justice content for advisories that aims to educate the ARMS community. A Transgender Day of Visibility video was shown at an all-school Women's History Month assembly in March. Maysles also held an all-staff training on pronoun use this year.

But they acknowledged that affirming trans kids, in the current moment, will require all hands on deck.

Sullivan-Flynn said she has heard people say that “middle school just sucks, and they have to get through it,” but that she believes “it's tough enough to be a 13-year-old, and no one should have to deal with discrimination on top of it.”

“We need adults in every role who love and respect queer kids. Ones who are strong, visible allies,” Sullivan-Flynn said, “ones who will be able to talk to them about sexuality and gender in the most supportive and affirming way.”

Maysles agreed, noting she had recently met with Morris directly to voice her concerns because her first priority is “the safety and mental health of my patients.”

Woynar said she and ELL teacher Alicia Lopez had readied 250 rainbow pride pins to hand out to staff and students this week. “Being an ally right now and

fighting for kids is my number one job,” she said.

“Think how brave they are to be out and be who they are in middle school,” Woynar said. “What they need is love, safety, comfort, empathy, and sympathy.”

**The following students contributed to sourcing, researching, or writing this investigative report: Talvin Dhingra (lead reporter), Ian Buchanan, Amara Cheng, Aixa Cruz, Lia Cullen, Victor Cruz-Castro, Walker Goeckel, Charles May, Lucia Lopez, Krish Poudel, Jane Scanlan-Emigh, Jacob Laney, Sea Kay Leung, Jenna Schilling, Tae Weiss, Deborah Wells.

*All sources who are referred to by a first-name-only pseudonym wished to remain anonymous. Parents and children sought anonymity on the basis of privacy and an ongoing legal investigation. Some staff members sought anonymity due to fear of retaliation. Some staff members who are named did not speak to The Graphic but were copied on email correspondences that were shared with us by parents or hold district titles related to this report. Nothing in this article was reported secondhand; all stories and facts were provided by firsthand sources in person or

via Zoom, phone, or email interviews. We reached out to everyone who was described as engaging in behaviors by others—rather than by their own account—and offered them the right of reply to each allegation. The children interviewed consented to the publication of their stories, as did their parents. The students and their journalism adviser consulted with a lawyer from the Student Press Law Center before publishing this report.



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