

Corbella: Couple warns their daughter could have died under new GSA law



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The parents of a southern Alberta autistic girl are warning other parents that had Bill 24 been the law over the past two years, their 14-year-old daughter very likely could have committed suicide.

The parents, who have asked that their names be changed and their identities hidden to protect their daughter's privacy, are pleading with Rachel Notley's NDP government to "not shut parents out of their children's lives" and "to bring some nuance" into Bill 24, which became law in Alberta on Nov. 15.

Bill 24 makes it illegal for educators to tell parents if their child has joined a GSA, or gay-straight alliance, at their school. But this couple — who are going by the names Sarah and Stephen for the purposes of this article — say their Grade 9 daughter fell into a "dark place" after joining her school's GSA.

"I believe this law is going to endanger kids, which is the opposite of what Premier Notley is trying to achieve," said Stephen, a scientist who works in the energy industry and who says he is very much in favour of GSAs, as is the entire family.

The couple's daughter started Grade 7 at her middle school in the fall of 2015 at the age of 12. It was around that time that she reached puberty — something that upset her. The girl, who will be called Jane in this article, has body dysmorphia, a condition the Mayo Clinic describes as "a mental disorder in which you can't stop thinking about one or more perceived defects or flaws in your appearance."

During elementary school, Jane suffered from anorexia, something she overcame through the help of her parents, counselling and attending eating disorder clinics.

Early into the 2015 school year, the parents noticed that Jane was more anxious than usual. The worried parents were eventually told by a teacher that Jane had joined the school's GSA and they were "completely fine with it. We thought it would be a safe place for her to meet new friends, stand up against bullying and learn about how everyone is different," said Stephen.

Eventually, however, the school wrote the couple a letter recommending that they take Jane — who was still 12 years old — to a gender clinic.

By very gently talking with Jane away from the stress of peer pressure, they learned that Jane was being called a boy's name at school and addressed with male pronouns. At home, she'd be called by her real name and female pronouns.

"To live a double life, where she's keeping this huge secret from her family, including her siblings, is exceedingly stressful, especially for someone with autism and body dysmorphia," explained Sarah.

"(Jane) was adamant that she did not want to be a boy, and prior to puberty, she was fine with being a girl," said Sarah. "A psychiatrist asked her if she wanted a penis and she recoiled at the thought and reiterated that she doesn't want to be a boy."

As Stephen said: "Thirty or 40 years ago, she'd have been described as a Tomboy."

It was decided, with the help of mental health professionals, that the safest way to proceed for Jane was to stop living a double life and be referred to only as a girl. The school agreed but, apparently, many of her school peers continued to call her by her male name.

As Christmas 2016 approached, Sarah received a panicked call from the school to pick Jane up, as she was threatening to commit suicide.

"She was super anxious, she had suicidal ideations. She was in a very dangerous place," recalled Sarah. Within a week of being kept at home and seeing her counsellor every chance they could, Jane improved immensely. Still, she was never left alone for a moment.

"I'm a very accepting person," said Stephen. "I love people for who they are. I have many LGBTQ friends. I love all people, I seriously do, but they're promoting the idea on kids who normally would not have gone there.

"They were facilitating and going out of their way to transition her into becoming a boy without our knowledge. But what training do they have about children with autism?" asked Stephen.

"The school undermined us and that led (Jane) to that point of suicide. We could have helped our daughter, but they didn't give us that opportunity."

For two months, Jane was kept at home while the family searched in vain for a new school for their daughter, even considering moving out of the province. Eventually, the school's principal became more involved and Jane returned to her school.

"He apologized to us for what the school did to Jane and promised that they would work with us and not violate what's in the best interest of our daughter," said Stephen, who reached out for help from the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms.

They also approached Jason Kenney, now the United Conservative Party leader, who has mentioned their story on several occasions as a reason why more discretion is needed in the GSA legislation, to empower teachers to not necessarily keep information from loving, safe parents.

Education Minister David Eggen was given three days to respond to repeated requests for an interview to discuss this family's experience, however, he refused and issued the following statement:

“This legislation will make sure that students are the ones who decide when and how to have these deeply personal and important conversations with their parents and loved ones. If a student's safety is at risk, parents will be notified. One of our government's top priorities is ensuring students' safety and that is why GSAs are so important. For some students, GSAs are the only place they have where they feel safe and accepted. GSAs literally save lives.”

Sarah and Stephen worry that the new law will cause teachers to hesitate to inform parents, for fear of breaking the law, and that hesitation could spell lead to the death of children.

Ashleigh Yule, a registered Calgary psychologist specializing in autism and gender diversity, says the research is clear that “we see a convergence between Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and gender diversity that makes the issue more complex.”

However, Yule is adamant that no exemptions in Bill 24 should be made.

“Students with ASD, just as students without ASD, may have unsupportive or abusive parents. Notifying parents that a student has attended a GSA may be unsafe for that student, regardless of the student's ASD status,” said Yule.

“Nuance in the law is not about ‘outing’ children,” said Sarah, who has family members who were murdered in the Holocaust for being Jewish. “It's about recognizing the uniqueness of each person and each family.”

“I'm very suspicious of the state wanting control over our children. We've seen where that has led in the past,” added Sarah.

“Most families are the safest places for their children,” said Stephen. “We love our children, more than Rachel Notley or David Eggen do.”

Both parents hope by telling their story, pressure will force the province to make some provision for safe, open-minded parents, especially of children with special needs, to be told very early on if behavioural changes begin after joining a GSA.

“We saved our daughter's life, only because we knew what was going on with her,” said Stephen. “We shudder to think what might have happened to her if Bill 24 had been the law two years ago.”