

LET'S MAKE SURE DESIGN OF NEW SCHOOLS MEETS ALL STUDENTS' NEEDS

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For decades, laws have required public restrooms to be ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) accessible. This includes establishing larger stalls and lower sinks for handicapped individuals who could otherwise not utilize the facilities. Many restrooms today even feature changing stations for parents with young children.

Along these same lines, K-12 schools have made similar accommodations for children, with changes to schools' structures as well as the nature of instruction.

Special education techniques, online education, homeschooling and trade courses have been specifically designed to be offered, providing ways to meet the diverse needs of today's students. These compliances have clearly made learning spaces more accepting and amenable, but there are still several more steps we can take.

Our school district could take an obvious step forward by installing universal, private, gender-neutral restrooms available for students and faculty in every building. Psychological conditions such as paruresis (often known as "shy bladder" syndrome) and parcopresis (a psychogenic condition in which a person is physically unable to defecate while in the presence of others) affect some students. These conditions, matched with unaccommodating spaces, can cause students mental agony and a definite lack of usage. This, in turn, causes students discomfort, dehydration, and a lack of attention to school work.

The traditional, sex-segregated typical bathroom setting also poses difficulty to non-gender conforming and transgender students. These students are more likely to have experienced sexual assault or harassment if they attend a school that does not grant them access to the bathroom of their chosen identity, according to a study from the journal Pediatrics. Of 3,673 trans and nonbinary students surveyed across the United States, 26 percent reported being sexually assaulted in the previous 12 months. Among those who attended public schools that restrict students' access to restrooms, the percentage jumps to 35 percent. This issue will not be solved by talking through issues with a school phycologist; it will be solved by strategic, long-term problem solving and finding a way to stop the problem at its core.

Sexual and physical assault survivors would also benefit from a secluded, singular bathroom space. Of the 700,000 children abused each year annually, the youngest children (ages 0-12) were the most vulnerable to maltreatment at a staggering rate of 24.2 per 1,000 children. Students who face these brutal acts of violence may feel their safest for the eight hours a day they are in the school system. The least we can do is offer them a private restroom.

While the solution to these problems isn't new, building private restrooms in our schools would be a forward-thinking concept that could put the USD 257 school district ahead of the curve. There are clear shifts in 21st-century education, and equitable access to school restroom facilities is one of them. By creating a private, gender-neutral bathroom that any student or faculty member could use, school officials would undoubtedly be putting the needs of students first while proving their commitment to the future.

As we draw up the blueprint for our next elementary school building, we should be aiming for the highest of ideals and principles. Iola is at the dawn of a new era in its public education, and now is the perfect time to implement needed changes. These are the types of discussions that should be occurring to ensure we seize a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to design our school facilities with the future and well-being of all students in mind.

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