



Photo illustration by Ella Waldman

Community grapples with gender education

Lena Nadaner
Editor-in-Chief



Should the Lower School provide accommodations for families that choose to opt-out of the lessons?

Vote on the Lion's Tale website!

Background

As part of its DEIJ (Diversity Equity Inclusion Justice) curriculum, the Lower School began teaching gender inclusion lessons in 2020, which have garnered a wide range of parent reactions, from support to concern. Just as the rest of the country is grappling with these issues, the CESJDS community has differing opinions on how these topics should be approached with students of different ages.

At the Lower School, these lessons occur once a year for 30-45 minutes, aiming to combat gender stereotypes and give students the necessary tools and language for acceptance and inclusion, according to Dr. Kimberly Sherk, the Lower School Language Arts, Social Studies and DEIJ Coordinator.

Each grade has its own materials and learning objectives.

"It's all about making sure wherever a child is in their identity, that they feel welcome, and giving anybody's classmates the opportunity to know how to approach each other when there are questions when anything is brought up," Sherk said. "If somebody says 'you can't play with us because you're a girl,' how do you respond to that?"

The Washington Post found that lesson plans for gender identity are becoming more common and that seven states require curriculums to include LGBTQ topics. However, they also reported that five states limit how teachers can discuss gender identity. Closer to home, Moco360 reported that hundreds of parents protested in June in light of Montgomery Coun-

ty Public School's (MCPS) no-opt-out policy of LGBTQ+ inclusive storybooks in schools.

Lower School Principal Rabbi Matthew Bellas said that the decision to cover gender inclusion in the curriculum was not driven by any local or national trend.

"It's good to know that we're a school that is part of a national conversation, that we're doing something that is educationally relevant," Bellas said. "The conversation in and of itself is not impacting what or how we do things."

Bellas said that in the early spring of 2020, the Upper School began rolling out new initiatives to acknowledge gender identity, and Lower School families began sharing that their children were on gender journeys, so he wanted those students to feel comfortable and safe by developing lessons

and reviewing the curriculums.

Sherk explained that the lessons were developed using research from educational research journals, the Anti-Defamation League and Learning for Justice, and they are refined every year.

Pushback

Some parents have expressed concern about JDS teaching about these topics. Some believe that the lessons are not age appropriate and that the school uses them to push an ideology, a claim the school denies.

On Feb. 27, Bellas and Head of School Rabbi Mitchell Malkus received a letter from a group of parents that explained they understand the school's goal to create an inclusive atmosphere, yet question the particular approach. For that reason, the group of parents wrote, "we are uncomfortable with the Lower School's planned lessons about gender identity and, for varying reasons, do not consent to our young children attending those lessons."

Twenty-six Lower School families, three Upper School families and 10 individuals from the wider community signed the letter, according to Bellas. An anonymous parent who was part of this cohort said, "it's unfortunately a bit of a challenge to confirm or deny Rabbi Bellas's breakdown," but thinks it is an undercount. For fear of ostracization and social consequences for themselves and their children, many parents have remained anonymous with these concerns, so the letter could not be circulated around to grade-wide WhatsApp chats, for example, and many people were likely unaware that this letter existed.

"In the letter, everyone's on board with creating an inclusive community," the anonymous parent said. "No one should be made to feel like an outsider. It's a question of approach [and] age appropriateness of some of this stuff. Whether there's a way to do it that doesn't adopt a particular ideology; like can't we teach kids to be nice to one another without teaching them that."

The anonymous parent also explained that the lessons take place in April, which is Acts of Loving Kindness Month at the

Lower School, so children could be taught other lessons instead, such as zero tolerance for bullying.

Bellas and Malkus responded in an email to the parents, explaining that gender inclusion lessons are necessary for creating a safe and inclusive community and preventing bullying.

"Gender diverse children/youth who are not affirmed have significantly higher rates of suicide and depression than gender typical kids," Bellas and Malkus wrote in their response to the group of parents.

Just like parents, students also have diverse opinions on teaching elementary-aged children these subjects. Junior Sam Verschleisser is transgender and said that the lessons would have been helpful to him when he was in elementary school.

"This education...is definitely going to help kids feel safer and feel more okay expressing themselves genuinely," Verschleisser said.

On the other hand, another high school student explained that they appreciated the school being accepting, but did not think it was the school's place to teach these lessons. That student was also unwilling to share their name for fear of being ostracized.

"I'm really surprised that JDS, an institution that caters to families across the political spectrum, would take such definitive strides in one direction as opposed to the other," the student said. "I'm equally surprised that they would subject young impressionable children to lessons that are practically engineered to confuse them, and which I believe are simply not age appropriate."

Materials

Another concern of the signatories of the letter was the materials used in the lessons. The materials vary each year as new research comes out, Sherk explained, so when the school alerted parents in the middle of February that they were introducing the video "A Boy Like Me" to first grade, an assortment of parents expressed concerns over the video's one-sided generalizations of gender, and some claim it inappropriately introduces the idea that gender is a

Gender Inclusion Lessons Learning Objectives



Gurim:



Laying foundation for gender roles, gender stereotyping, and identity



"Boys" vs. "Girls; boy colors, girl colors, what can boys do, what can girls do?"



Kindergarten and 1st Grade:



Examine gender roles and recognize gender stereotyping



Expand students' perception of activities and possibilities for all genders.



Being an ally/good friend



2nd and 3rd Grade:



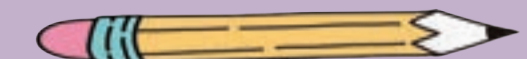
Expansion on K and 1st concepts



Define "Gender Expression"



Respecting differences in expression and role



4th and 5th Grade:



Expansion on 2nd and 3rd concepts



Define Gender Role, expression and identity



Familiarity with key terms related to gender identity

Information from CESJDS