

Court settlement finalized with Pine-Richland regarding transgender bathrooms

When Elissa Ridenour reflects on her senior year of high school, she'll look back with satisfaction.

Engaging in a discrimination lawsuit with the school district wasn't something she wanted to do, but now that it's over, she's happy she did it.

"While it was happening it was horrible and I didn't want to spend my senior year doing that, but now that I look back at it I kind of feel relieved I was able to be a part of something that is going to be so groundbreaking within my community and really spread the voice of the trans community," she said.

Ms. Ridenour, 19, was one of three transgender students who sued the Pine-Richland School District after the school board adopted a policy last fall that restricted students to using either unisex bathrooms or bathrooms that match their biological gender.

Lambda Legal, the advocacy group representing Ms. Ridenour, Juliet Evancho and a third student, who wasn't identified because he was a minor, announced a finalized settlement deal with the school district Tuesday.

The Pine-Richland school board voted July 17 to overturn to rescind the policy. Also as part of the settlement, the students received an undisclosed monetary sum and the school district agreed to update its nondiscrimination policy to include gender identity.

"This is a victory for transgender students everywhere and sends a clear warning to school districts with anti-transgender bathroom policies," said Omar Gonzalez-Pagan a staff attorney with Lambda Legal.

The lawsuit was filed last fall in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania after the school board adopted the restrictive restroom policy, which reversed a longstanding district policy that allowed students to use restrooms matching their gender identities.

Legal experts said the case was closely watched all across the country when U.S. District Court Judge Mark Hornak issued a 48-page ruling outlining why the Pine-Richland policy was discriminatory and violated the Equal Protections Clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

It was seen as a major victory for the three students, and a ruling Mr. Gonzalez-Pagan said set legal precedent that could be argued in similar cases across the country.

"I think what that really shows school districts across the country is that regardless of the argument of Title

IX (which prohibits discrimination in schools)... really it's the Constitution that mandates equal treatment of transgender students."

Cheryl Kleiman, Pittsburgh-based staff attorney with the Education Law Center, said the Pine-Richland case joins several others that "reaffirm the rights of transgender students."

"Today's settlement announcement represents important precedent for school districts across the Commonwealth and nationally -- and sends a clear message that discriminatory policies and practices will not stand," she wrote in an email. "We urge school districts to see this as an opportunity to proactively review their policies and practices to ensure that they are inclusive, fair and welcoming of all students."

Ms. Ridenour and her co-plaintiffs have all graduated from the school. She is headed to Chatham University this fall to study biology and will spend her last few weeks of summer working and shopping for items for her dorm room with her new roommate.

She legally changed her name this week, she said.

"I'm very happy with how it ended up and I'm really glad that future trans students, whether there's some this year or next year, I'm glad that they have a mostly comfortable environment to go to at school," Ms. Ridenour said. "I'm really happy that we were able to be a part of that, despite all the trials and tribulations."