Residents push for transgender policy at Egg Harbor Township school board meeting

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EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP — After months of no action from school officials, advocates for transgender rights are again pushing the Egg Harbor Township Board of Education to move forward with developing a transgender policy in response to a new state law requiring such policies to be developed.

“My community is very concerned, continues to be concerned about the safety of our transgender students. We’re not asking for any money. We’re asking for simple policies that are state regulations,” Rev. Blake Spencer of Ocean Heights Presbyterian Church to the school board at its Tuesday meeting inside the Alder Avenue school.

The board struggled last school year with passing a transgender policy, which was ultimately voted down after much public debate from both those against and in favor.

The state law, signed by Gov. Chris Christie in July, requires school board to provide instruction on and make accommodations for transgender students. Currently, the district is being sued by a transgender student who alleges discrimination and harassment at the high school.

Under the law, state Commissioner of Education Kimberley Harrington is developing guidelines for school districts. Superintendent Kim Gruccio said the district is awaiting that guidance before proceeding.

“Transgender students in our schools are still waiting for you to reach out your hands to them,” said Emily McGrath of Egg Harbor Township, who has been a vocal supporter of transgender rights. McGrath was referencing the school’s new logo, “Every Hand Together.”

“Stop waiting,” she said.

Board member Ray Ellis said that he agreed with those in favor of a policy and asked the board to begin a discussion on the issue.

“It was voted down and I don’t think we mentioned one word about it since,” Ellis said. “We’ve got to face the fact it’s going to happen, we can’t just push it under the rug.”

In other business, the board of education also heard about a new afterschool program being developed for the Dr. Joyanne D. Miller Elementary School thanks to a $2.5 million 21st Century Community Learning grant from the state. The program, called After School Program for Instruction Recreation and Enrichment or ASPIRE, will serve 200 fourth and fifth grade students from the Miller School, Principal Latifah Potter said.

Potter said the grant is distributed in $500,000 increments over the course of five years. The district hired Kristen Boyd earlier this month to coordinate the program. Boyd previously worked at the Mullica Township School District where she coordinated the 21st Century Learning grant program there.

The program, which will run five days a week from 3 to 6 p.m. throughout the school year and include a four-week summer program, is expected to begin Monday, Oct. 2. Boyd said that there have been 400 applicants. Potter said the students who will be narrowed down via a lottery and there will be a waiting list.