Minnesota school districts are at a crossroads.

By wrongly interpreting Title IX to mandate discrimination, the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services have ordered the state's school districts and Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL) to ban transgender students from competing in sports or other competitive activities that align with a student's gender identity. Failure to do so will result in the loss of federal education funding.

In contrast, Minnesota law—which state school districts and the MSHSL must follow—is quite clear: It is illegal to discriminate against someone, including children and youth, based on their gender identity. Indeed, several Minnesota school districts have paid out sizable judgments to transgender students and their families for violating that law.

The question of whether the state's school districts and MSHSL must follow federal or state law no doubt will be decided by the courts. In the meantime, notably absent from the debate is something incredibly important: the perspective of an actual transgender person who is a school board member.

I transitioned genders in 2009 at age fifty-two. In the time since then, living as who I truly am—a woman—I have thrived, accomplishing many things that I could never have imagined when I presented as a man.

Among those accomplishments was getting elected to my local school board in 2022. That role has helped me to better understand transgender students as they compete in sports and other activities governed by the MSHSL, such as debate, dance, and band.

Animating the federal government's push against transgender students is the Trump administration's dictate that there are only two genders—male and female—determined at birth and which supposedly are immutable. In other words, with the stroke of a pen, the president sought to erase an entire category of humans who number in the millions in America.

However, like it or not, transgender people—including trans children and youth—*are real*. We exist because of neurobiology and how our brains are wired. That same kind of wiring makes some people left-handed or introverted or attracted to someone of the same gender. We certainly didn't "choose" to be transgender, and instead, it is all about the natural variation that comes with being human.

Yet, inherent in the debate around transgender athletes is the idea that being transgender is somehow a "choice." As the argument seems to go, non-transgender ("cisgender") athletes and their parents shouldn't have to go along with that "choice," especially when the transgender athlete has some kind of supposed advantage in height or strength.

But what if a cisgender student athlete is has a distinct advantage because they are abnormally tall or strong for their age? They didn't choose that, and no one would argue that the student athlete should be penalized as a result.

How about a cisgender student athlete who is older by virtue of being one day too young to start kindergarten—meaning that they would be nearly a year older and more mature (and stronger or faster) than the youngest student athlete in their cohort. Again, the older student didn't choose that advantage.

The list of advantages enjoyed by some student athletes—created by biology or brain wiring or circumstances they don't control—could be endless. No one is talking about holding those student athletes to different standards. The same should be true for transgender student athletes.

The reality is that every transgender student athlete simply wants to be left alone to engage in the many things that come from being on a team. While that certainly may mean competing against a rival team, it also involves forming friendships that may last a lifetime. It also means learning key life lessons about respecting authority, self-reliance, perseverance, and the importance of offering dignity to another.

Forcing trans students to deny their true gender identity is both morally wrong and illegal. Minnesota school districts and the MSHSL need to ensure for the dignity and rights of transgender students. Those students matter. They are worthy and have value. They should be accorded compassion and kindness, not outrage or intolerance.

And they deserve the right to live and compete as who they truly are. Just like everyone else.