

May 7, 2014

Vancouver Board of Education
School District #39
1580 West Broadway
Vancouver, B.C. V6J 5K8

An open letter to the Vancouver School Board from the BC Trans* Clinical Care Group:

The BC Trans* Clinical Care Group is a group of professionals providing care to transgender and gender-diverse children, adolescents, and adults in British Columbia. Our group includes, but is not limited to, psychologists, clinical counsellors, social workers, nurses, family physicians, psychiatrists, endocrinologists, surgeons, educators, and lawyers. Our members include trans* and non-trans* people. We have a national and international reputation for excellence in coordinated care for trans* and gender-diverse people. The group has been meeting for ten years and is chaired by Dr. Gail Knudson, psychiatrist and Clinical Associate Professor at the UBC Department of Psychiatry.

We are writing in support of the Vancouver School Board's proposed draft policy revision on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities. Our members have had the opportunity to review the *Draft Proposed Policy and Regulations: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities*, and it is our opinion that this policy will be instrumental in providing safer-spaces in VSB schools for all youth.

Having carefully reviewed the draft policy, we are writing to confirm that the policy is in keeping with current medical evidence around the health needs of gender-diverse young people in schools. It is our collective expert opinion that failure to adopt the policy will inevitably put transgender and gender-variant youth at greater risk for harm at school.

Medical research and opinion with respect to trans* children has evolved. The current best practices are to accommodate a child's gender identity and to defer any irreversible medical steps until a child is a late adolescent.

Transgender youth and those with diverse gender presentation are a highly marginalized group. These youth face higher rates of rejection by family, depression, suicidality, and verbal and physical harassment in schools.^{1,2} There are now numerous high-quality studies that clearly indicate the need for better protection and support for trans* children and youth.

Unfortunately, current policy is not doing enough to protect the clients we serve. A 2011 study by Egale Canada showed that 78% of transgender youth felt unsafe in their own schools.² Of these youth, only half received support from adults when bullying was reported. Transgender youth face nearly unparalleled risk for suicidality, with a recent study from BC Children's Hospital mirroring previous studies showing a 10–20% risk of attempted suicide in these vulnerable students.³

Research in BC and across North America shows that inclusive policies and Gay-Straight-Alliances (GSA's) in schools are correlated with better health outcomes for students of all sexual orientations and gender identities, such as reduced engagement in at-risk drinking.⁴ Support

from adults can literally be life-saving: One Ontario Study found that trans* youth whose parents supported them were 93% less likely to attempt suicide.⁵

It is the professional opinion of the psychiatrists, physicians, and other health-care professionals in our organization that policies such as this are necessary to support children and youth who are under our care. Living in one's preferred gender is an important element of gender transition, which for children and youth typically precedes medical transition. It is imperative that students who are living in their preferred gender feel safe and supported in school. This includes providing gender-appropriate and gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms, respecting the privacy of trans* students by implementing appropriate data management policies, organizing education and awareness for adult staff, and creating accountability when students do report challenges, as outlined in guidelines published by the Public Health Agency of Canada.⁶

In summary, we support the Vancouver School Board's proposed policy changes and congratulate VSB on taking steps to ensure the safety of our city's schools.

Sincerely,

The BC Trans Clinical Care Group*

References:

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2. Taylor C, Peter T. *Every Class in Every School: Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools*. Egale Canada Human Rights Trust. 2011. <http://egale.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/EgaleFinalReport-web.pdf>
3. Khatchadourian K, Amed S, Metzger DL. Clinical Management of Youth with Gender Dysphoria in Vancouver. *Journal of Pediatrics* 2014;164(4):906–911.
4. Konishi C, Saewyc E, Homma Y, Poon C. Population-level evaluation of school-based interventions to prevent problem substance use among gay, lesbian and bisexual adolescents in Canada. *Preventive Medicine*. 2013;57(6):929–933. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2013.06.031>
5. Travers R, Bauer G, et al. *Impacts of Strong Parental Support for Trans Youth*. Trans Pulse, for the Children's Aid Society of Toronto and Delisle Youth Services. October 2012. <http://transpulseproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Impacts-of-Strong-Parental-Support-for-Trans-Youth-vFINAL.pdf>
6. Public Health Agency of Canada. *Questions & Answers: Gender Identity in Schools*. 2011. <http://librarypdf.catie.ca/pdf/ATI-20000s/26289E.pdf>

7. Canadian Teachers' Federation *Supporting Transgender and Transsexual Students in K-12 Schools: A Guide for Educators* c 2012