



May 22, 2014

To: Vancouver School Board  
1580 West Broadway  
Vancouver, B.C. V6J 5K8

Attn: Committee members, Committee III

**Re: Proposed revisions to the Board's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities policy**

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Dear Committee,

My name is Hélène Frohard-Dourlent and I am a doctoral student in Sociology at UBC. I am writing this letter in favour of the revisions to the Board's sexual orientation and gender identities policy. These revisions have been carefully developed over the past four years, and they represent an essential step forward in order for the Vancouver Board of Education (VBE) to properly support the trans and gender-nonconforming students who attend Vancouver schools as well as their families.

In the spring of last year, I conducted my doctoral research on school staff who have worked with trans and gender-nonconforming students and I interviewed administrators, counsellors and teachers in the Vancouver school district as well as three other B.C. school districts. My goal was to better understand the experiences of educators and current school practices, as well to identify potential areas for improvement.

Across grade level and school districts, the school staff who talked to me amazed me by their commitment to their students and to inclusive learning environments. Most of them had little in the way of formal training when it comes to working with trans and gender-nonconforming students yet they were dedicated to supporting these students. However, as a consequence of their lack of training, many staff and administrators felt unsure how to best support these students, and the majority of them simply didn't have ready access to accurate and up-to-date information on best practices, leaving them to make crucial decisions without the benefit of data or experience.

Within the VBE, educators indicated that having an LGBTQ policy – and an Anti-homophobia and Diversity mentor who could provide guidance for trans and gender-nonconforming students– made a significant difference in how confident they felt in their capacity to support these students and their families. While this is positive, I want to stress that it was also obvious from talking to staff and administrators that although the current policy provides a general framework for creating safety and inclusion for LGBTQ students, it does not provide specific strategies and guidelines to consistently support trans and gender-nonconforming students based on current best practices. The 2004 policy leaves too much room for unhelpful and unpredictable responses on the part of staff, especially if the

social responsibility and diversity team is not closely involved – and district staff simply do not have the capacity to be closely involved with every situation that involves a trans or gender-nonconforming student. This can lead to harassment, discrimination and a lack of safety for these students.

The policy revisions are therefore essential because they take the important and necessary step to set in writing clear guidelines for staff to follow, guidelines that meet expectations for best practice in this area. A clearer policy can only help staff and administrators feel more confident in supporting trans and gender-nonconforming students and increase their capacity to create welcoming and inclusive schools. The fact that some schools have already successfully supported some students cannot be a reason for inaction. It leaves other trans and gender-nonconforming students and their families vulnerable to situations where staff do not have access to information, which can create difficult circumstances regardless of how well-intentioned educators may be. Families of trans and gender-nonconforming children often have to advocate tirelessly in their lives, with little certainty about how seriously their requests will be taken; revising the existing policy sends a very strong signal to Vancouver families that their school district is indeed committed to providing inclusive school environments for everyone, and that the district has a clear and informed sense of what that means for trans and gender-nonconforming students.

In conclusion, it is clear that the revisions to this policy will have a positive impact not only on student well-being, student learning, and school communities by reducing the likelihood of misconceptions and harassment. But what educators shared with me in the course of my research makes it clear that these revisions will also create a more positive working and teaching environment for school staff by setting clear expectations to follow. This sets up educators and schools for success, gives people the tools to be the supportive adults that they want to be, and contributes to the work of creating welcoming and inclusive schools for every student in our district.

Ten years ago, the VBE became a leader in creating welcoming and inclusive environments for all students by passing the original LGBTQ policy. Much has changed in that 10-year span, and the visible presence of trans and gender-nonconforming students is one of these things – the revisions proposed here bring the policy up-to-date and the district back to the forefront of the fight for inclusive schools. As someone who has been working and doing research in this area for over a decade, I know the incredibly positive impact that the update to this policy will have on Vancouver schools and families. I am thrilled that the Board has an opportunity to re-affirm its commitment to welcoming and inclusive schools, and I look forward to Vancouver becoming a clear leader for other school districts once again. Thank you.