

May 8th, 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 Dr. Marria Townsend:

I am a family physician who has been providing primary care and gender affirming care to transgender youth and adults in my practices at Three Bridges Community Health Centre and the Catherine White Holman Wellness Centre since 2007 and 2009 respectively. I am the Physician Lead for Transgender Primary Care at Vancouver Coastal Health. I am a member of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, as well as the Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health. I am a Clinical Instructor with the Faculty of Medicine at UBC. In addition to my clinical work with trans* people, I teach extensively on the topic of trans* health and have been an invited speaker on matters related to trans* clinical care at many peer-reviewed conferences.

I am writing to express my strong support for the Vancouver School Board's proposed draft policy revision on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities. I have reviewed the *Draft Proposed Policy and Regulations: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities*, and it is my opinion that implementing this policy is a very important step towards creating and maintaining safe and inclusive school communities for all children and youth within the Vancouver School Board.

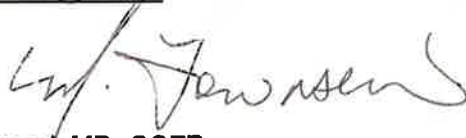
The evidence is clear that trans* people of all ages face disproportionate levels of stigma, harassment and violence resulting in negative health consequences including poor mental health, increased rates of substance use and suicide. Furthermore these experiences significantly impair trans* people's function in school and work which greatly limits their opportunities for a satisfying life. It is widely accepted that policies are needed to protect and support this population. Schools have an important role to play in supporting transgender and gender diverse students and ensuring a safe and respectful learning environment. The Public Health Agency of Canada recommends that schools ensure safe environments for gender diverse youth by developing relevant policies, providing professional development that builds trans-competence of staff, raising awareness in the school community of gender diversity and challenging outdated and harmful ideas about gender. The VSB policy, like policies developed and implemented in other major Canadian cities, is a step in the right direction.

I would like to stress that expert opinion is overwhelmingly in support of allowing and supporting trans* people of all ages to self determine gender identity and expression, and supporting them through the stages of social and medical transition as desired. The VSB policy touches on critical aspects of supporting trans* children and youth, which are consistent with best practices and medical evidence including sections on confidentiality and privacy, use of names and pronouns, expectations regarding dress, reducing sex-segregated activities, ensuring washroom and changeroom accessibility and access to physical education and sport. These measures will greatly improve the safety and well-being of all trans* and gender diverse youth and will no doubt benefit the entire school community since everyone is adversely affected by gender discrimination, sexism, gender stereotypes and assumptions related to gender and sexual orientation. I fully support all aspects of this policy and strongly recommend that medical or psychiatric assessment, diagnosis or treatment of any kind should not be a prerequisite to schools supporting self-identified trans* students.

In light of the significant harms that are incurred by our failure to protect trans* and gender diverse youth, I urge the VSB to swiftly adopt and implement this policy. I also encourage the VSB to ensure that all educators and administrative and support staff receive the training needed to ensure a clear understanding of why the policy is needed and competency for working with trans* and gender diverse students. PRISM is a Vancouver program that is well known for providing workshops and trainings on trans competency. Many excellent resources exist to support teachers to create safe and inclusive classrooms such as "The Gender Spectrum: What Educators Need to Know" which was developed by the Pride Education Network with the support of the BC Teacher's Federation.

I would be very happy to answer any questions related to this topic and will be speaking at the VSB meeting on Wednesday May 14th. I can be contacted by email at Marria.Townsend@vch.ca

Sincerely,



Marria Townsend, MD, CCFP
Physician Lead for Transgender Primary Care, Vancouver Coastal Health