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Committee III

Vancouver School Board

RE: Revised policy for Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities

I would like to express my appreciation to the Committee and the Board for their leadership in ensuring that transgender youth can feel safe and supported in school.

I am a Registered Psychologist and a Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Family Practice, Faculty of Medicine, at the University of British Columbia. I am an experienced gender specialist and a member of a group of professionals working with transgender individuals that meets regularly for discussion and consultation. I have conducted research on gender dysphoria and presented my research at international conferences. I have provided training in issues related to transgender care for a variety of healthcare professionals, including physicians, psychiatrists, nurses, and counsellors. I maintain memberships with the World Professional Association for Transgender Health and the Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health. I am also a member of the Canadian Psychological Association and the British Columbia Psychological Association.

I have been working with transgender youth and adults in my private practice since 2005. I have seen the social isolation that transgender youth too often experience, and have had concerns for their social development as a result. Further, I have known too many youth who have dropped out of school due to feeling unsafe. For two years I ran a support group for transgender youth so that they could have a place where they could develop their social skills and interact with their peers. I am encouraged to see the tremendous improvements in the way that transgender youth are treated over the past few years. I am relieved to know that the Vancouver School Board has taken the lead in establishing clear policies so that transgender students can have the same educational, social, and athletic opportunities that other students enjoy.

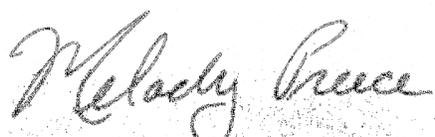
I am pleased to see that the policy emphasizes the importance of taking a pro-active approach. Vulnerable students should not have to advocate on their own behalf, and knowing that policies are already in place that allow them access to the accommodations they require will provide much-needed relief.

I appreciate the policy's statement that programs or services that attempt to change a student's orientation or gender identity should never be considered. Indeed, such treatments have never been shown to be effective, and are considered unethical. A number of organizations have provided consensus statements in that regard, including the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health. It is also agreed by the majority of health care professionals and researchers working in this area that gender variance in and of itself is not a mental illness. Rather it is the challenge of managing these feelings in a non-accepting culture that causes the depression and anxiety youth often experience. This is an important message to convey to parents and teachers alike.

The emphasis on individualizing the experience of transgender youth in schools based on their needs is entirely consistent with WPATH guidelines for the care of transgender youth. It is not possible to have a "one-size-fits-all" approach when working with gender variant students, and that is nicely presented in the policy document.

Generally, I feel that the policy is well-articulated and in line with the recommendations for transgender care made by various medical, legal, psychiatric, and psychological organizations as well as the conclusions from medical and psychological research. It provides parents, teachers, and school staff with guidelines based on principles of respect, inclusion, sensitivity to privacy, and student safety. I believe that this policy will help transgender students to feel safer and more accepted in their schools. I certainly hope that other school districts will quickly follow suit and adopt similar policies. I feel confident that this policy will go a long way towards preventing the fear, isolation, depression, and inaccessibility to a solid education that in the past has been the common experience of far too many transgender youth.

With sincere appreciation,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Melody Preece". The ink is dark and the signature is written on a light-colored background.

Melody Preece, Ph.D. R. Psych.