

# RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GREATER VICTORIA SCHOOL BOARD

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## INTRODUCTION

In June of 2002 the Greater Victoria Board of School Trustees passed the following motion:

**"That the Board directs administration to strike a committee to explore and make recommendations to deal with safety issues for sexual minorities".**

In accordance with this motion a committee which included a trustee, school administrators, teaching, counselling and CUPE staff, parents, and students, looked at all aspects of the safety of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, intersex, queer, or questioning (LGBTTIQQ) youth in schools. Information was gathered from policies and regulations in school districts throughout Canada and the United States, survey results such as those from the 1999 McCreary Centre Society "Being Out-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Youth in BC: an Adolescent Health Survey", various Human Rights documents, and discussions with same-sex parents as well as students in our school district.

## RATIONALE FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Board of School Trustees recognizes and values the diversity found within its school communities and believes that each individual contributes to the strength of the district's culture. The Board also recognizes that students and other school community members identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, intersex, queer, or questioning (LGBTTIQQ) face a unique set of challenges within our schools and communities. Individuals who are dealing with or are perceived to be dealing with issues of gender identity, gender expression, intersexuality or sexual orientation, as well as their families, are frequently the targets of homophobic, transphobic, or heterosexist behaviors. This often results in a struggle with a variety of profound social consequences including discrimination, harassment, physical and sexual violence, social and emotional isolation, substance abuse, homelessness, school truancy and drop-out, self-harm and suicide.

It is with this reality in mind and with an understanding that each member of the school and district community must share the responsibility for changing this reality, that in accordance with the Greater Victoria School District Policy and Regulations 4303, these recommendations are made.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## ADVISORY COMMITTEE

That the Board strike a Committee of School District stakeholders and representatives from the Victoria LGBTTIQQ Community to act in an advisory capacity in the implementation and further development of the following recommendations:

### 1. EDUCATION

- a) That the Board and District Administration promote opportunities for staff to increase their awareness of the scope and impact of discrimination against LGBTTIQQ people.
- b) That the Board and District Administration promote opportunities for staff to increase their knowledge and skills in developing respect for, as well as eliminating discrimination against, LGBTTIQQ people.
- c) That schools be encouraged to support age-appropriate activities which promote an understanding of the impact of discrimination on members of their LGBTTIQQ community.
- d) That schools be encouraged to support age-appropriate activities which promote respect for and reduce discrimination against members of their LGBTTIQQ community.
- e) That the Board and School Administration work to increase parental awareness of the needs of LGBTTIQQ students and families through school PAC's and VCPAC.

### 2. SAFETY

- a) That middle and secondary schools be encouraged to develop student Codes of Conduct which clearly state that discrimination on the basis of gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation is prohibited.
- b) That school staff take steps to eliminate language and conduct which discriminates against people in the LGBTTIQQ community.
- c) That schools document incidents of discrimination against students in the LGBTTIQQ community in their school.

### 3. SUPPORT

- a) That schools create support systems for the LGBTTIQQ youth in their school communities.

- b) That the Board issue a public statement promoting and supporting school clubs such as Social Justice or Gay/Straight Alliance Clubs for their LGBTTIQQ youth and their allies.
- c) That middle and secondary schools be encouraged to promote and support school clubs such as Social Justice or Gay/Straight Alliance Clubs, for their LGBTTIQQ youth and their allies.
- d) That community resource lists and displays in schools be inclusive of community supports for LGBTTIQQ youth and families.

#### **4. LEARNING AND CURRICULUM RESOURCES**

- a) That current and promising practices which promote safe and inclusive school environments for LGBTTIQQ youth be identified and shared with school staffs.
- b) That resources be identified which schools can access to assist their school communities in becoming safe and inclusive school environments for LGBTTIQQ youth.

#### **5. SYSTEMIC BARRIERS**

- a) That the Board ensures that the wording of all District documents reflects equal treatment and inclusion for LGBTTIQQ youth and families.

Respectfully submitted by:

Charley Beresford, Trustee  
Dick Brown, Elementary Counsellor  
Chelsea Clark, Student  
Gail Dunlop, Parent  
Lyle Fink, CUPE 382  
Bryan Hartshorn, Student  
Karen Leahy-Trill, CUPE 947  
Ruth MacIntosh, VCPAC  
Andre Serzisko, Parent  
Brenda Simmonds, Principal  
Joan Thain, Vice Principal  
Lynn Thomson, GVTA

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

School District 61 Board of School Trustees has undergone a process of connecting with members of the school community to discuss how needs relating to gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation are being met by the school system. Insight and direction was gained in a series of public meetings and focus groups with stakeholder individuals and organizations. These meetings generated a number of recommendations that lay the foundation of the discrimination policy and, in particular, the preceding rationale and recommendations.

A 1999 survey entitled "*Being Out – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Youth in BC: An Adolescent Health Survey*", published by The McCreary Centre Society, highlights the issues many lesbian, gay and bisexual young people in British Columbia's schools are presently facing:

- 37% of gay and lesbian youth feel like outsiders at school.
- Two-thirds often hear homophobic remarks made by other students.
- Nearly 1 in 5 lesbian and gay youth have been physically assaulted and the majority of youth have been verbally harassed at school in the past year.
- 46% of the lesbian and gay youth surveyed attempted suicide at least once before in their lifetime and in the past year, almost 25% attempted suicide.
- The average age of first suicide attempt was 13 years.
- Almost 40% of lesbian and gay youth have dramatically low self-esteem.
- 61% of surveyed youth have been physically abused in their lifetime.
- None of the surveyed youth gave high ratings to the quality of their family relationships.

One of the primary findings of the survey was that schools are not safe or supportive places for most gay and lesbian youth. When asked by surveyors if they liked school, 37% gay and lesbian youth responded that they don't like or hate school compared to 21% of all youth in schools.

An issue highlighted in the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Education in 1999 states that 20% of gay, lesbian and bisexual students skipped school in the past month because they felt unsafe en route to or at school.

Studies of transgender youth have documented elevated high school dropout rates, parental abuse and increased likelihood of becoming street involved, with high rates of sexual exploitation of homeless transgender youth. While some transgendered people are well supported, many struggle with daily discrimination, physical and sexual violence, poverty and extreme social isolation with resulting depression, alcohol and drug use and high rates of self-harm and suicide attempts. HIV rates are disproportionately high among transgendered people.

According to the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), “a person with an intersex condition is born with sex chromosomes, external genitalia or an internal reproductive system that is not considered ‘standard’ for either male or female.” It is estimated that 1% of the population is intersex. The medical profession is currently split between those who believe that intersexuality should not be treated unless it poses health risks and those who believe that evidence of intersexuality should be concealed through surgery, hormones and non-disclosure to intersex children. The trauma from repeated invasive surgeries can have profound long-term consequences on the physical, mental and sexual health of intersex people. Additionally, intersex youth speak of becoming depressed and suicidal as a result of the shame and stigma they feel about their bodies as a result of constant medical scrutiny.

In discussion with focus groups of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning youth in the Victoria area, a number of recommendations for schools and the school environment were put forward as follows:

- Include discussions of same sex relationships and sexual activity when covering curriculum areas of sexuality and sexual health.
- All staff and students need education on the issues of homophobia transphobia, intersexuality and heterosexism.
- All staff need to treat issues of discrimination based on gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation (specifically verbal harassment such as name calling – “fag” “queer”) as seriously as other forms of discrimination, such as racism.
- Gay/Straight Alliances need to be set up in all middle and secondary schools. These organizations need to be set up and supported by staff, not only sexual minority youth.
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning youth need to know who they can safely approach about these issues in the school environment and where the safe spaces in the school are in the event that they need to access support immediately.

Information was also gathered from same-sex parents with children and youth in School District 61. Much of the concern expressed by parents was also expressed by the youth groups, e.g. unacceptability of homophobic remarks and schools

being unsafe for lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex and transgender youth. There are some important distinctions, however, which are described below:

- The School District needs to encourage the integration of same-sex family messages into curriculum during elementary grades and into school district policies.
- School forms need to be updated to provide for the possibility that students do not live in a heterosexual family, e.g. changing “mother/father” to “parent1/parent2” or leaving a space where parents can identify themselves.
- Sexual minority issues need to be visible to students via information in libraries, images in the school and guest speakers from the community.
- The School District must be proactive in supporting its staff by identifying anti-harassment policies and by ensuring that the District will support staff if they choose to acknowledge their sexual orientation in the workplace.
- Parent Advisory Councils should be encouraged to educate themselves on the issues of sexual orientation in schools and every effort should be made to encourage diversity on parent councils.

The extensive consultation with impacted school community members did not highlight specific issues that the working committee feels necessary to address with this policy. In particular, intersex, transgender, gender identity and gender expression issues were not strongly stated due to the lack of representation of this group of individuals. The committee believes that failure to acknowledge this population in the writing of this policy would contribute to the continued silencing of the voice of these groups thereby not reflecting the needs of this population.

## DEFINITIONS

**Bisexual** - an individual (male or female) who is attracted to, and may form sexual and affectionate relationships with both males and females. A bisexual may not be equally attracted to both genders and the degree of attraction may vary over time.

**Gay** - a person who forms sexual and affectionate relationships with those of the same gender; often used to refer to men only.

**Gender Expression** - the appearance, mannerisms and/or behaviour used to signify to others the gender that the individual wishes to be perceived as.

**Gender Identity** - one's internal and psychological sense of oneself as male or female, or both or neither (regardless of sexual orientation); people who question their gender identity may feel unsure of their gender or believe they are not of the same gender as their physical body. **Third gender** is the term sometimes used to describe people who feel other than male or female and **bi-gender** refers to people who feel they are both male and female. Often bi-gender people will spend some time presenting in one gender and some time in the other. Some people choose to present **androgynously** in a conscious attempt to question and expand traditional gender roles, even though they do not question their gender identity.

**Heterosexism** - the institutionalized assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual and that heterosexuality is inherently superior to and preferable to homosexuality or bisexuality; also refers to the institutional and organizational discrimination against non-heterosexuals or behaviours not stereotypically heterosexual (this discrimination is also sometimes referred to as cultural, institutional or societal homophobia).

**Homophobia** - the irrational fear or hatred of, aversion to, and discrimination against homosexuals or homosexual behaviour. There are many levels and forms of homophobia, including cultural/institutional homophobia, personal homophobia, interpersonal homophobia and internalized homophobia. Many of the problems faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people stem from homophobia and heterosexism. **Transphobia** is the fear, hatred and intolerance of the transsexuals or transgender people, including anyone judged to not fully fit into their assigned gender.

**Intersex** - People who were born with a combination of male and female anatomy. Used to be called "hermaphrodite"; some still use this term, though intersex is the word now preferred.

**Lesbian** - A woman who forms sexual and affectionate relationships with other women; the term originates from the Greek island of Lesbos which was home to Sappho, a poet, a teacher and a woman who loved other women.

**Queer** - broad term used both as an individual label and also signifying a larger socio-political movement created from a general dissatisfaction with a gay and lesbian politic that is thought to be too assimilationist in nature; "queer" defines a strategy, an attitude, a reference to other identities and a new self-understanding. It is a term also used as shorthand for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people.

**Questioning** - an apt term or self-label sometimes used by those exploring personal and political issues of sexual orientation, sexual and gender identity, and choosing not to identify with any other label; "questioning" may create greater potential to create new options as well.

**Sexual orientation** - refers to a person's deep-seated feelings of sexual attraction. It includes whom we desire sexually, with whom we want to become intimate, and with whom we want to form some of our strongest emotional relationships. The inclination or capacity to develop these intimate sexual and emotional bonds may be with people of the same gender (lesbian, gay), the other gender (heterosexual) or either gender (bisexual). Many people become aware of these feelings during adolescence or even earlier. Some do not realize or acknowledge their attractions (especially same-sex attractions) until much later in life. Orientation is not the same as behaviour since not everyone acts on his or her attractions. It is also important to note that one's gender identity is totally independent of one's sexual orientation; neither facet should be considered predictive of the other.

**Transgender** - refers to people who do not identify with the gender roles assigned to them by society based on their biological sex.

**Transsexual (TS)** - an individual who presents himself/herself and lives in the gender "opposite" to his/her genetic/physical gender at birth. A transsexual is someone who feels psychologically like the other sex and has somehow been trapped in the wrong body. Transsexuals may be heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual in their sexual orientation. Some transsexuals may undergo operations and hormone therapy in order to make their body fit what they feel is their true gender. TS's are also known as **female-to-male, FTM, transmen** or **male-to-female, MTF, transwomen**.

**Two-Spirit**- Two-Spirit is a term used by some indigenous (First Nations) people to describe themselves in a way that is closer to their cultural construct of

sex/gender/sexuality than the dominant Western view. Many of the languages of indigenous nations of North America include specific terms for gender and sexual diversity; some indigenous people may use both the general term Two-Spirit and the culturally specific term from their own language to describe themselves.



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## TERMS OF REFERENCE

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- Advise the Board on the implementation, review and renewal of the recommendations approved by the Board on June 23, 2003 in conjunction with Policy and Regulations 4303.
- Advise the Board on other strategies to address LGBTTIQQ issues of youth, their families and GVSDB staff.
- Suggest appropriate ways to integrate anti-homophobia education within curriculum for all grade levels.
- Work with members of other District groups to raise awareness of LGBTTIQQ issues and develop strategies to effectively support our students and families.
- Encourage youth representation on and input to the committee.

### **Membership:**

Representative from Elementary, Middle and Secondary Principals (1 from each)

Representative from Greater Victoria Teachers Association (GVTA)

Representative from CUPE 947

Representative from CUPE 382

Representative from Allied Specialists Association (ASA)

Representative from District Councillors Association

Parent from Victoria Confederation of Parent Advisory Council (VCPAC)

Representative from Gay/Straight Alliances and Student Councils

School Board Trustee (1)

Community Organizations representing LGBTTIQQ issues

SEXY

Transcend

Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG)  
LGBTTIQQ Parents  
Police Liaison Officer

Approved: February 2004