

Improving Inclusiveness for the TCDSB's LGBT Students

Summary of My Delegation at the May 28, 2019 Regular Meeting of the TCDSB's Student Achievement and Well Being, Catholic Education and Human Resources Committee

Inclusiveness is directly linked to student achievement and well being, and inclusiveness is directly linked to Catholicity. These links to student achievement, student well being, and Catholicity are consistent with the selection of We Belong as the Catholic education focus of the Toronto Catholic District School Board ("TCDSB") for the 2018-2019 school year.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender ("LGBT") students are recognized as a protected group in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Ontario's Human Rights Act. The Education Act directs school boards to promote a positive school climate that is inclusive and accepting of all pupils, including specifically LGBT students. I understand that there is a general belief by some in the Catholic community that there is a Catholic exception to LGBT-related language in the Charter, Human Rights Act, and Education Act with respect to students. Despite much effort in searching for what is publicly and readily available for me as a Catholic educator, I have not found a Catholic exception to the obligation to be inclusive and accepting of LGBT students in Catholic schools. In contrast, there are many publicly and readily available documents and examples which support the Catholicity of deliberate inclusion of LGBT students in Catholic schools, not limited to the example of Jesus in the Gospels and of the intention of Catholic social justice. Good Catholic education policy can be written. Absent any clearly written Catholic education policy to the contrary, Catholic educators are obligated professionally and religiously to be inclusive and accepting of LGBT students in Catholic schools.

The TCDSB's communication about our LGBT students is not as inclusive as it could be. There are examples available on social media such as Twitter that the TCDSB's Senior

Management Team (“SMT”), in comparison to school and system superintendents at the Toronto District School Board (“TDSB”), is not using language or terms that are deliberately inclusive of LGBT students. For example, combining all Twitter-active SMT members in a search using LGBT-related search terms (specifically: homophobia, homophobic, biphobia, biphobic, transphobia, and transphobic), from September 4, 2018 to May 26, 2019, during this We Belong school year, the result was zero; in contrast, in a similar search involving the TDSB’s supervisory officers, there were several examples of social media being used to share messages that were deliberately inclusive of LGBT students. On April 10, 2019, the International Day of Pink (a day recognized internationally to raise awareness to stop homophobia), the main TDSB Twitter account in a related tweet referred specifically to homophobia and that “all students belong;” in contrast, the main TCDSB Twitter account avoided LGBT-inclusive terms in a related tweet. TCDSB SMT members on April 10, 2019 had “anti-bullying” messages on the International Day of Pink, but avoided terms such as homophobia. Further, my own search of board-wide emails from SMT members shows zero emails that are deliberately inclusive of LGBT students. Also, my attendance at a TCDSB-sponsored equity conference on student success in November 2018 included two main presentations which included no deliberate references about LGBT students.

In contrast to the zero examples of messages that were deliberately inclusive of LGBT students, there are many examples of deliberately inclusive messages from the SMT through social media and board-wide emails in other areas of equity such as race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, gender, and disability.

This inclusiveness gap, comparing the lack of SMT messages about LGBT students with the many SMT messages about students identifying with other equity areas, leaves the possibility for our LGBT students, who are statistically at risk in the areas of student well being and student achievement, that they may interpret the message of We Belong as not fully inclusive of them. Such an interpretation is harmful to everyone. We must be more deliberately inclusive of our LGBT students. Communication inclusive of our LGBT students is most effective from the SMT level. These are some suggestions for the SMT to adopt more inclusive language and actions to improve inclusiveness for our LGBT students:

- Include inclusive terms about LGBT students in social media, emails, speeches at board/school events, and in principal meetings.

- Associate inclusion of LGBT students, including addressing homophobia, with Catholicity, such as in adopting board-wide Catholicity goals and when assisting schools in adopting school-wide Catholicity goals.
- Focus on specific days (such as the International Day of Pink) for deliberate system-wide inclusive messages about LGBT students.
- Invite speakers for training purposes for SMT members and principals on improving inclusiveness (particularly as it relates to obligations under the Education Act regarding bullying and school climate).
- Attend GSA meetings at schools and release related messages on social media.