

A mother is urging Toronto's Catholic board to amend its code of conduct to protect her family

Canada's largest Catholic school board is deciding whether to add gender identity and gender expression to its code of conduct to align with a revised provincial code.

Board trustees say there's tension over whether to add terms to list of prohibited grounds for discrimination



Cristina Tartaglia (left) and her family on vacation in Mexico. (Submitted by Cristina Tartaglia)

At the start of school two years ago, Cristina Tartaglia's daughter's kindergarten class was told to bring a photo of their families to put on the wall of their classroom to make the transition from summer a little easier.

Tartaglia's daughter brought in a photo of her smiling family on vacation — Tartaglia, her wife and their daughter, lying on the beach with big smiles on their faces.

That photo stayed up on the wall for the better part of the year. But some time before the new school year started, the photo, affixed securely with four staples, disappeared.



Cristina Tartaglia (right) gave this photo for her daughter to take to school to put up on a wall. It was taken down. (Submitted by Cristina Tartaglia)

Living our Catholic values

A staff member later told Tartaglia he had witnessed another staff member of the school take the photo down because that person "felt my family didn't belong."

We no longer felt safe.- *Cristina Tartaglia, Catholic school parent*

Tartaglia and her wife eventually decided to register their daughter at a different school. "I was shocked. We no longer felt safe," she said.

Tartaglia recently shared her story with members of the Catholic Education and Living our Catholic Values subcommittee as Canada's largest Catholic school board grapples with whether to add four terms, including gender identity and gender expression, to its code of conduct to align with a revised provincial code.

Those four terms — gender identity, gender expression, marital status and family status — are at the centre of considerable tension between trustees. If added, students and families could not be discriminated against on those bases.

"There are some trustees at the board that believe denominational rights take precedence over human rights," said Tartaglia.

Human rights

The Ontario Human Rights Commission is keeping a close eye on the debate unfolding at Canada's largest Catholic school board and its chief commissioner, Renu Mandhane, has written a letter to its chair urging it to add the terms.



Renu Mandhane, chief commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, is urging the Toronto Catholic District School Board to consider adding gender identity and family status to its code of conduct. (Martin Trainor/CBC)

"Part of the role of a code of conduct is to signal to everyone in the community they will be included and kept safe," said Mandhane.

In her letter, Mandhane said "excluding particular protected grounds would send a harmful and troubling message."

Board chair and trustee Maria Rizzo said the issue has divided trustees.

Letters

Rizzo says she has received dozens of emails from parents and members of the Catholic faith urging her to reconsider "waging war against God," calling the adoption of the terms "diabolical evil" and a "massive betrayal of Jesus Christ and the natural law."

One email begins with:

"Man and woman; boys and girls; mama and papa; ladies and gentlemen; male and female. NO FURTHER GENDER THEORY."

Another reads: "Should we also permit 'Catholic' teachers to publicly promote the evil of abortion? How about euthanasia? How about pornography?"

The same complainant voices a concern about student behaviour:

"I am flabbergasted that Toronto's Catholic school trustees are considering adding cross-dressing, sex changes, and identification with multiple genders, to the types of behaviours it would permit its teachers and students to engage in during class and in the hallways."

'Alarming and appalling'

"It's alarming and appalling we have gotten to this point," said Rizzo. "People have been intimidated and brow-beat."

In fact, Tartaglia said she was challenged by a number of trustees after sharing the story of her family photo, who insisted Catholic values could not possibly allow the terms into the code of conduct.

"I'm not even asking them to tolerate me or my family," she said. "I'm just asking for the same rights as every other family within that board."

CBC News reached out to several trustees who are against changing the code of conduct. Only one responded, saying the issue will be debated at the next meeting, not through the media.

The board subcommittee meets again Oct. 30.