

Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam's Presentation to the TCDSB on May 6, 2021

(CHECK FOR DELIVERY)

Thank you Chair, Trustees and esteem TCDSB community at large.

I am honoured for this opportunity to speak with you today about the important issue and the pending decision you have to proclaim June as Pride Month and to raise the rainbow flag at all TCDSB schools.

My name is Kristyn Wong-Tam and I'm the City Councillor for Toronto Centre. In addition to my councillor responsibilities, I am also City Council's appointed Chair for Toronto's LGBTQ2S Advisory Committee.

I applaud the leadership of the TCDSB for recently creating your own 2SLGBTQ Advisory Committee, thereby giving your own students and staff an official place to safely raise concerns and seek constructive solutions.

I trust you will agree when I say, we are all blessed to live and work in the most diverse and dynamic city in the world. As elected officials, we have the distinct honour and serious responsibility of caring for all constituents, regardless of their diverse background including sexual orientation and gender identity.

Recently, our elected duties have been made more difficult in this global health pandemic. I am aware of your personal sacrifices and hard work to ensure that the health and mental wellbeing of your students and staff are centred in your governance and decision-making. This includes making schools safer environments for all students to thrive including LGBTQ2S youth.

LGBTQ2S youth face approximately 14 times the risk of suicide and substance abuse than heterosexual peers. We know that 77 percent of trans respondents in an Ontario-based survey had seriously considered suicide and 45 percent had attempted suicide. Furthermore, 20 percent of trans people have experienced physical or sexual assault due to their identity and that 34 percent were subjected to verbal threats or harassment.

In 2015, a Canada-wide study, the "Every Teacher Project" surveyed educators about the state of LGBTQ2S inclusion, information and acceptance in schools. Over 50% of survey respondents from Catholic schools knew of LGBTQ2S students switching schools for safety reasons. Catholic school teachers reported greater fear of being fired for discussing LGBTQ2S issues with students compared with public school teachers. Only 57% of Catholic school educators said they would be comfortable discussing LGBTQ2S topics with students, while nearly 75% of secular school educators said the same

Although many schools remain unsafe for LGBTQ2S students, there are significant differences between what's happening in Catholic schools compared to non-Catholic schools. To remain relevant and even deserving of public funding, the Catholic school boards have much work ahead to address the critical issue of safety in our schools for all students, families and teachers.

All children are children of God including LGBTQ2S children and children with LGBTQ2S parents in our schools. We have a responsibility to make it safer for everyone to be part of the community. Part of this work is creating schools that are welcoming. By raising the rainbow flag and proclaiming Pride Month, the TCDSB can take one step further in demonstrating its commitment to diversity and inclusion. The proclamation and flags are significant gestures that represent an undeniable celebration of identity, acceptance and love. It will open a much-needed dialogue between LGBTQ2S students and their Catholic community.

The rainbow flag was created in 1978 by artist, designer, Vietnam War veteran Gilbert Baker. He was commissioned to create a flag by city politician Harvey Milk, for San Francisco's annual pride parade. Harvey Milk was assassinated that same year, and quickly the demand for the rainbow flag increased, as the globally accepted and recognized symbol for LGBTQ2S equality and acceptance. Each colour of the flag represents a different value: red is for life, orange is for healing, yellow is for sunlight, green is for nature, blue for serenity and purple for the human spirit. Despite any hearsay, the rainbow flag does not represent abominable behaviours but instead encompasses values that are deeply cherished in the Catholic and school communities.

You can lead the TCDSB in joining the City of Toronto, the Province of Ontario and the Government of Canada and your counterpart, the Toronto District School Board in proclaiming June, Pride Month. By joining your government partners in raising the rainbow flag, a symbol of equality at all publicly funded TCDSB schools. You can show all students, families and teachers that you truly see them and value them for their beautiful and God-given uniqueness.

During your time as Trustees, and especially over the past year, you have learned from students, staff and community conversations, research reports and health data that LGBTQ2S students disproportionately experience higher rates of suicidal ideation, homelessness, face poorer socio-economic prospects. For many students in your care, violence and discrimination are regular occurrences in their day-to-day lives. Some of this hatred and violence is taking place in TCDSB schools.

This is unacceptable and preventable.

Please ask yourselves, have you done enough to protect LGBTQ2S students, families and teachers?

By raising the rainbow flags and proclaiming Pride Month, you can take action to protect LGBTQ2S students by working to create a strong, caring and affirming community. One that cherishes a diverse school community - one that is fair-minded - one that is prepared to demonstrate love in bold, colourful action.

For some in the Catholic community, the issue of LGBTQ2S equality, the full acceptance of gay people in religious spaces remain highly divisive. For some conservative and fundamentalist Christians, there's a perception that the more vigorously they reject

LGBTQ2S equality, the more they demonstrate their steadfast belief in Jesus Christ. This is a false and failed proposition and any such litmus test must be resoundingly denounced - as Jesus never once refers to homosexuality at all.

Instead, I offer you this as consideration, biblical interpretation is constantly evolving, as scholars re-interpret and re-evaluate what original passages on topics meant in their historical context. I invite you to wrestle with the contexts of the biblical writers and weigh them against our own lived experiences. I invite you to cast your vote today - in the here and now - by listening and learning from your students and professional staff about their lived experiences.

I say this not only as an elected official like yourselves but as a mother, wife, aunt and daughter. I say this as someone who daily sees the devastating impacts of when all children are not supported. I want my son and all children of God to know they are loved and cherished. Raising the rainbow flag is now part of our duty to show love to all children and families in our communities.

One week ago, the Halton Catholic District School Board voted against flying the rainbow flag at its publicly-funded schools. Their shortsightedness left their school community angry and disappointed. Immediately, afterward that disheartening vote, all nine high schools in the Halton Catholic School Board District tweeted messages of acceptance, tolerance and diversity and some of the schools changed their logos to include rainbow colours to show support for LGBTQ2S students and teachers.

Now reflect on the fact that faithful Catholics, in the millions around the world, have come to recognize the love and work of God in LGBTQ2S people. Many Catholic spaces have already become affirming. Others like the Halton Catholic District School Board are choosing to stay in the dark but as history and the bible teach us, the light will always come through.

Your choice today is clear.

Will you follow the Halton Catholic District School Board into darkness?

Or will you join your student Trustees, your own 2SLGBTQ Advisory Committee, your professional staff in leading the Toronto Catholic District School Board into the light?

I pray that you will vote yes to joining them in the light.

Thank you.

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