

Wednesday, May 5th, 2021
Student Trustees 2010-2021

Dear TCDSB Community,

A decade ago, I sat on the Toronto Catholic District School Board as a Student Trustee and implored that the TCDSB adopt board-wide policies to protect and support 2SLGBTQ students, ensuring that every student has the right to a safe learning environment. Further to this, the members of CSLIT, and the 1000+ student participants of the 'Voices That Challenge' Conference, advocated that the Board educate staff members in supporting students targeted by harassment and victimization based on their gender expression and sexual identity, and implement Gay-Straight Alliances to recognize, honour and cherish 2SLGBTQ students and their allies.

A decade later, I am deeply saddened that supports for and celebrations of 2SLGBTQ students remain hardly existent in TCDSB schools. 2SLGBTQ students are a very welcome and proud part of my faith community. As Catholics and people of faith, we are called to affirm the inherent dignity of every human being.

I strongly support the recommendation to proclaim Pride Month at the TCDSB, and believe this is an important step in enacting the Catholic graduate expectation to "promote equality, democracy, solidarity, for a just, peaceful, and compassionate society."

In solidarity,
Natalie Rizzo (Student Trustee 2010-2011)

However incompatible you may believe Pride Month to be with the Catholic faith, you cannot deny the simple truth that there are hundreds of students in our schools who identify with the 2SLGBTQ+ community. They exist. They have families.

And it would misunderstand many of them to say that they disrespect our faith. They respect it, and in fact respect it so deeply that they seek to find fulfillment in their faith with who they are and how they love.

Their hope is to be seen, valued, and nurtured by our educational system. I ask that you grant our students this hope, and vote in favour of the motion.

Signed,
Enrique Olivo (Student Trustee 2013-2014)

How can we support our students to succeed? How can we ensure that our students access education in a safe, just and equitable manner? These questions are fundamental to the work of this school board and call upon our responsibility as members of the Catholic community to advocate for those most marginalized, silenced, and oppressed.

Today, this includes addressing the systemic oppression of students who identify as part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. During my term as a student trustee, safe spaces for these students were sparse and were not institutionally supported across the Board – it was dependent on, for example, if a student’s school had a Gay-Straight Alliance or if a student could travel to the CEC once a month for CSLIT’s Equity Subcommittee meetings.

As a former student trustee, I strongly support this motion put forward by the 2SLGBTQ+ Advisory Committee as a symbol to TCDSB students who identify as part of this community – we are here for you, we see you, we support you, and we want you to succeed. I urge all members of our Board to see this motion with compassion, empathy, and kindness.

Signed,
Allison Gacad (Student Trustee 2015-2016)

Inclusion and belonging are both integral parts to the continued wellbeing of TCDSB students. In order for students to feel safe in their schools, they must also feel loved and accepted. To this extent, it was imperative for us to make equity and inclusion a key pillar of our platform and term.

During our term, an inclusion and belonging retreat was held for all students in the TCDSB. We invited members of school GSA clubs to participate and any student that was committed to addressing the barriers many 2SLGBTQ+ students face within their schools. The aim of these GSA clubs is to raise awareness and build safe school environments for *all* students. However, many of these initiatives were student-led and require the support of the administration to remain safe spaces for all students. As *Discerning Believers* rooted in the Catholic faith, we strongly believed that it was our duty to use our term as Student Trustees and CSLIT co-chairs with the aim of creating a more inclusive environment for 2SLGBTQ+ students.

We support every 2SLGBTQ+ student and it is our hope the Board implements the appropriate measures to ensure they feel safe, loved, proud, and accepted.

Signed,
Karina Dubrovskaya (Student Trustee 2015-2017)
Rhea Carlisle (Student Trustee 2016-2018)

During my time as a Student Trustee, I often noticed the hesitancy regarding affirming empathy and inclusion towards students of the 2SLGBTQ community. The first year after my term, I was absolutely disheartened to hear a trustee compare homosexuality to bestiality and pedophilia. These words sent a wrong message and affected various students and staff at the TCDSB.

The motion before you stands at a defining moment. This time, the TCDSB can choose to move forward and embrace the diversity of its student population.

Students spend an enormous amount of time at school. Because of this, school almost becomes an extension of their home. It's imperative for trustees to support this motion as it will indicate greater support, empathy, and love for 2SLBTQ+ students.

Signed,
Joel Ndongmi (Student Trustee 2017-2019)

Although my term has not come to an end yet, I have seen enough. Only a few months into my term, the one meeting I was alone, a trustee compares being a 2SLGBTQ+ member to pedophilia, cannibalism, auto-erotic asphyxiation and other criminal acts. I cried.

The Catholic Social Teaching of Solidarity teaches us that we are one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they may be. Loving our neighbour has global dimensions in a shrinking world. At the core of the virtue of solidarity is the pursuit of justice and peace. Blessed Pope Paul VI taught that "if you want peace, work for justice."¹ The Gospel calls us to be peacemakers. Our love for all our sisters and brothers demands that we promote peace in a world surrounded by violence and conflict. As *reflective, creative and holistic thinkers*, we are called on by God to solve problems and make responsible decisions with an informed moral conscience for the common good.

In my Student Trustee candidacy speech, I said: "I can never create change if I don't dare to try. I want to be able to get *our* voices heard at the board level because we don't help run the TCDSB, we **ARE** the TCDSB. We are what makes all of this happen, and that's why our voice is so important, so please, allow me to be the amplifier that makes your voice louder and louder until it can't be ignored.", and that is what I'm doing now.

Our students matter. They're the reason we do what we do as a school board so let them know they are supported, valued and accepted here by supporting this motion.

Signed,
Kathy Nguyen (Student Trustee 2019-2021)

The 2SLGBTQ+ Community deserves our support, our respect and our love.

It has been almost one year since I was first elected to be the Student Trustee for the Toronto Catholic District School Board. One year since I made my promise to fight for the inclusion and the acceptance of all our students. This promise was difficult to uphold because we kept heading in the wrong direction, and often contradicted our mission statement: “The Toronto Catholic District School Board is an inclusive learning community uniting home, parish and school and rooted in the love of Christ.”

The 2SLGBTQ+ Community has been a long-standing marginalized group within our school board, and their voices have never been close to acknowledged until the present day. We state that our mission is to build an all-inclusive environment, but seem to leave the 2SLGBTQ+ Community out of the conversation every time. How do you think students feel, when the people who were supposed to fight for them, end up being the oppressors? How do you think students react when they feel like their learning space is unsafe and is constantly on the lookout for hate? These are the same thoughts I constantly have day-to-day.

We have an opportunity to move past our mistakes and lead our school board in the right direction, where 2SLGBTQ+ students don't have to question their safety and the right to be themselves. Recognizing Pride Month and flying the Pride flag is the bare minimum our board can currently accomplish for all the hate we have bestowed. What you decide at the meeting will inevitably impact all students and it is your choice if you want this effect to be positive or negative. I have one year left as Student Trustee, and I hope this is a conversation we don't need to debate on for the coming year.

We are for the students, not just one specific group, but all.

Please support the recommendations.

Signed,
Keith Baybayon (Student Trustee 2020-2022)

Yours in Leadership,
Past and Present Student Trustees