



DURHAM DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

Supporting Our Transgender Students

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Durham District School Board Supporting Our Transgender Students
2012 Durham District School Board

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Definitions

Transgender: A person whose gender identity, outward appearance, expression and/or anatomy do not fit into conventional expectations of male or female. Some describe it as being born in the wrong body. Some opt to change/reassign their sex through hormones and/or surgery and some change their outward appearance, or gender expression, through clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms, etc.

Transphobia: Hatred, suspicion or fear of anyone whose gender identity and gender expression does not conform to society's expectations for their biological sex.

Supporting Transgender Students in Durham District School Board

We all have the right to a safe and healthy school environment. This document contains recommendations for school administration to help create welcoming and supportive schools for trans students.

Barriers Faced by Transgender Students

The world can be an unsafe place for trans students. Schools are no exception—but we can change that. Trans students experience verbal and physical harassment, assault, teasing, social exclusion, and have their property stolen or damaged at rates higher than any other student group. In addition, the more frequent harassment that trans students experience, the lower their grades and educational aspirations (1). These students also drop out of school at higher rates than other students because of feeling unsafe (2). Some use drugs to cope with this stress (3), some contemplate suicide (4).

Trans students of visible minorities, racialized groups and diverse faith groups experience additional challenges because of the systemic racism and oppression to which they are often subjected. These challenges can compound the stress of transition and further marginalize them.

EGALE Canada's (2011) school climate survey revealed:

- **50% reported that staff never intervened when homophobic or transphobic comments were made.**
- **78% of trans students felt unsafe at school.**
- **90% of trans students hear transphobic comments daily or weekly from other students.**
- **23% of trans students report hearing teachers using transphobic language daily or weekly.**
- **74% of trans students reported being verbally harassed because of their gender expression.**

Most trans students report being victims of transphobic behaviour in the form of chronic, severe bullying in school. Some trans students report objects thrown at them, being beaten by other students and receiving death threats. Many are verbally abused and ridiculed. Some describe themselves as friendless and “outcasts.” Some of the harassment occurs in the classroom, but can be “subtle” and “one-on-one” escaping teacher notice. The majority of harassment happens outside of teacher and staff view—in hallways, washrooms, and outside on school grounds.

The alienation of these students is compounded by the lack of relevant curricula and resources and/or misinformation that is circulated regarding their identities. Gender specific school spaces and policies, such as single sex washrooms and change rooms compound the social stress of school. Trans students feel discouraged when their own initiatives and efforts to improve the school environment are met with indifference or resistance.

Studies show that compounding this reported peer harassment is the fact that trans students experience a lack of mentorship and teacher indifference (5). Trans students have difficulty talking to school staff about harassment. If students experience verbal harassment and intimidation rather than physical attacks, they may doubt there is much staff can do to effectively address it. Some students fear that staff will not take their complaints seriously or have peer violence escalate when they make a report. Some trans students feel some teachers and principals tacitly approve of the violence and harassment when they don't step in, ignore what is happening, or give bullies a “slap on the wrist” as a consequence (6).

Common Beliefs about Gender

Without a doubt, gender has an enormous impact on who we are as people. Over the past few decades, society's ideas about the roles and gender identities of women and men have progressed significantly. However, outdated and oppressive views of gender continue to circulate in our everyday understandings of what it means to be human. To resist reinforcing these harmful beliefs, we must be conscious of the overt and covert assumptions and values we have about gender and how they affect our students' sense of safety and inclusion.

Common Beliefs

- Gender exists in a binary: everyone is either male or female
- Gender identity is realized by age two and does not change
- Gender is determined by one's anatomy
- Males should have a masculine style of expression and females should have a feminine style of expression
- Feminine males and masculine females are abnormal or disordered

GENDER NON-CONFORMING

A child's style of expression is considered gender non-conforming when it consistently falls outside of what is considered 'normal' for their assigned biological sex. This may be indicated by choices in games, clothing, and playmates. For example, a boy who wants to take ballet, wear pink, and play primarily with girls is gender non-conforming. Gender non-conforming children may become gender normative over time or their style of expression may continue to defy gender expectations as adults. Some of these children grow up to be gay, lesbian or bisexual and some grow up to be heterosexual. Some of these children are or will become transgender.

TRANSGENDER

A transgender person is someone whose inner gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth based on their biological anatomy. For example, a transgender child self-identifies as a girl but was born with the anatomy of a boy (or vice versa). Some children and adults self identify as both male and female or neither male nor female. These people fit under the term 'transgender' as well. Transgender people have existed throughout history in cultures all over the globe. Research shows that between 2% and 10% of the population is transgender.

There are two groups of people who are especially marginalized by common beliefs about gender: those whose style of expression is gender non-conforming and those that are transgender. There are many students from both of these groups in our schools. It is crucial for teachers to acknowledge and respect the identities of these students to make our school a safe and inclusive place for them.

Consider this list of commonly held beliefs about gender:

Which of these beliefs do you hold to be true?

How are people pressured to conform to these beliefs?

Whose identities are marginalized by these beliefs?

What are the impacts of these beliefs on people who do not conform to them?

What DDSB Schools Can Do to Support Trans Students and Parents

Don't wait until you "get" a trans student to enforce supportive policies and a welcoming environment. You already have trans students but do not know it yet. Because they may perceive the environment to be unsafe and unwelcoming, they may not be out. DDSB Equity and Inclusive Education Policy (4107) explicitly states that "Equity and Inclusive education supports all students equitably through the identification and removal of discrimination, and discriminatory or systemic barriers that limit their ability to achieve to their full potential."

Trans students often start to take their first steps towards expressing and embodying their true gender identity during their high school years or earlier (7). When students begin experimenting with gender, they may face social and familial rejection and even homelessness. Because of the discrimination they face elsewhere in their lives, schools have the potential to be the most stable cornerstone in their lives.

Individual staff can play an important role in students feeling supported at school. This can involve supportive comments and actions in class, as well as staff making themselves more approachable to discuss gender and students' issues. Teachers should be on the look out for indications of distress in students including social isolation, being the target of peer-teasing or bullying, skipping classes, or a sudden drop in school performance.

Trans students frequently perceive principals as the most important person in setting the tone for the school culture. Studies show that if teachers do not report incidents they see (which may be a fraction of what actually occurs), even a well-intentioned principal will not be fully aware of the extent of harassment that trans students experience (8).

Many trans students move to urban centres to connect with an established trans community and to access resources. This move from home can also mean a "fresh start" for trans students in their chosen gender identity to be in a place to transition in a more supportive environment, with fewer social pressures and expectations than the communities where they grew up. However, the autonomy and anonymity of urban centres in combination with the social stress of transitioning can leave these students vulnerable.

There are many things school staff can do to be supportive and to provide a more welcoming and safer environment for trans students. Most changes are easy to implement, simple, and require no new resources. It begins with creating awareness among staff and students and working from a vision of providing quality, inclusive learning environments for all students. Please encourage communication from family/parents in developing an inclusive plan for your school.

Creating Safer Spaces Through Inclusive Language

Trans people should always be addressed and accommodated in the gender in which they present, unless they specifically request otherwise. If you are unsure, please ask the person how they prefer to be addressed. Most transsexual people will use pronouns based on their identified gender.

Suggestions to enhance the school learning environment for trans youth follow. This list is illustrative and not exhaustive. We encourage you to develop and share with your staff and the Durham District School Board other gender inclusive ideas and protocols you may develop.

PREFERRED WAYS OF ADDRESSING TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Transsexual females—identified as male at birth	To be addressed as ‘she’
Transsexual males—identified female at birth	To be addressed as ‘he’
When you are in doubt of an individual’s gender	Address an individual as ‘they’

TO CREATE A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT FOR TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Post signs using open inclusive language	‘all welcome’
Provide options on forms requiring gender	‘gender: _____’, ‘other: _____’
Be aware of accessibility in your schools	‘unisex washrooms’—where possible

1. Become familiar with the Durham District School Board’s equity statements and bully-awareness policies. “Gender identity” is an articulated ground for protection.
2. Develop a school protocol for consistent use of trans students’ preferred name and pronouns that are easy for students to access. For example, a student’s “preferred or chosen name” can be used on class lists, timetables, etc. Students should never have access to PowerSchool or other information containing private information including identifying a student’s legal name(s).
3. Develop a school policy that ensures the right to use a washroom that best corresponds to the student’s gender identity. If trans students do not feel safe using this washroom, ensure that they have access to a private washroom (e.g., staff washroom) that does not require asking for an entry key.
4. Ensure that a student has the right to participate in gender-segregated sports and gym class activities in accordance with the student’s gender identity.
5. Integrate trans-sensitivity and advocacy training into staff professional development curricula.
6. Train staff to identify and confront transphobia in the school.
7. Designate a school staff person within the school, who can act as a staff advocate for trans students. If appropriate, the school’s equity contact could assume that role.
8. Accommodate locker room accessibility, which may include use of a private area (washroom, or Physical Education instructor’s office), or a separate changing schedule (just before or after the other students have changed).
9. Have transgender-related fiction and non-fiction books in the school library.

10. Integrate transgender content into the school curriculum and into student sexual health education.
11. Support the implementation of a transgender-inclusive GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) in the school.
12. Encourage and support scholarships and awards that recognize the unique strength and resilience that trans students possess.

The Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy of the Ministry of Education came into effect February 2010. This strategy requires all school staff to report serious student incidents, such as bullying, to the principal, and staff to address inappropriate and disrespectful behaviour among students. “Our schools must be places free of discrimination and bullying where all students feel welcome, safe and respected. We remain committed to the goals of increasing student achievement, of closing gaps between students who are achieving and those who are not, and of increasing confidence in our publicly funded education system.” (Kathleen Wynne)

Gender Roles and Play in the Classroom

Students sometimes have rigid ideas about gender roles and what it means to be a boy or girl. As elementary teachers, experience has taught us that we need to have conversations that encourage acceptance of everyone. This includes the way in which students express themselves, particularly during play-based activities. During these times, students may impose rigid gender roles on one another. It is important not to make assumptions about gender or how a particular student should act. As long as they are being imaginative, enjoying themselves and being respectful of one another... let them play! Here are some quick creative tips on how to nurture and model an environment of acceptance:

1. Let all children play in any centre. Don't limit the number of boys or girls in a centre, rather limit the number of children in the space based on safety issues.
2. Encourage students to play in all centres over time. They will initially have their favourites, but make sure they get opportunities to dig, build, bake, explore, etc.
3. Encourage students to mix up their play groups and get to know one another. Allow them to pretend to be male, female or an animal or inanimate object when they play. Don't allow other students to “box students in” based upon their gender.
4. Avoid lining boys and girls up in separate lines or asking girls to stand up or boys to stand up at different times during activities in circle time. This may put students who do not conform to rigid gender roles in an awkward situation. Gender variant children may not see themselves the way you see them.
5. Allow students whose gender identity is different than their physical appearance to refer to themselves as they choose. If a girl is referring to herself as a boy, let it go. Avoid saying “No, you are a girl!”
6. Nurture and model respect and acceptance for every child. Be willing to have professional, albeit challenging conversations with students and parents about our inclusive policies and practices.

7. Allow there to be more than one mom or dad in the House Centre. There can be more than one sister or brother. Sometimes, students argue over this and want to impose rigid rules on others: this is a perfect opportunity to intervene and nurture creative equality.
8. Let students in the Dress Up Centre pretend to be whomever they want to, irrespective of gender. Talk with your students about the importance of being imaginative, having fun, and trying new activities.

Discussions About Gender Identity Issues in Different Subject Areas

Students should be invited to question various aspects of gender identity, such as how it evolves biologically, genetically, and socially. This can be done in the context of many different academic subject areas. Some examples are:

English: Provide students with materials depicting characters in non gender stereotyped ways. When studying classical literature that may contain gender stereotypes, discuss this with students, including the connection to social norms and evolution of societal issues.

Social Sciences: Discuss how gender roles differ through time and by region. Provide students with a context for how changes come about through shifts in attitude, understanding, laws, scientific discovery, etc.

Science: Have students consider the biological and genetic differences between sexes and the scientific definition of male and female. Introduce the notion of intersexuality. Discuss varieties in gender roles through the animal kingdom in terms of reproduction, mating rituals, caregiving, and nurturing roles.

Math: Have a class discussion on famous mathematicians of the past and present. Discuss the dominance of men in the field and possible reasons for that. Have students challenge the long-held notion that girls aren't good at math and challenge this belief (e.g. Is it true? Can we find evidence to the contrary? If it's not true, where did the belief come from?)

Languages: How does gender connect to language? For example, how we are limited by the lack of a singular, gender-neutral pronoun in English? Do other languages have such a pronoun? What is happening to gender-laden words in every language such as policeman? In a language like French, objects have gender. Does that make sense? How was each gender decided? Do they follow stereotypical lines or are there unusual examples?

Physical Education: Ask students what they think of the fact that their school either does or does not separate PE classes by gender. Is there a good reason for separation? Is there a good reason not to separate? How might a transgender student cope with the current system?

Arts: Deconstruct gender stereotyping in arts classes (e.g., music—flute players are female; trumpet players are male; girls sing in the choir; dance—only girls dance; media arts—only guys are computer savvy; drama—no females on stage in Shakespeare's time) and discuss famous exceptions to these stereotypes. Discussion on why these stereotypes exist to broaden student experience.

Technological Studies: Challenge gender stereotyping in tech classes (e.g., only males are auto mechanics; only females take cooking; only males do woodworking; only females do hairdressing; only males do welding; only females do fashion design) and discuss famous exceptions to these stereotypes.

In all subject areas, discussions about gender identity and gender roles and stereotypes can help students think more openly and critically about the world around them and their place within it. It is always crucial to maintain a trusting and respectful classroom environment where such discussions can happen without the risk of rude remarks or put-downs. Adolescence is an important time for gender identity development and thinking about gender identity, and teachers can help students think critically about many gender identity-related issues while staying true to the subject curriculum and social responsibility goals.

Additional Definitions

Female-to-male transsexual (FTM): Someone who was born female and transitions to a male gender identity.

Gender: Refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.

Gender expression: How a person behaves, appears or presents oneself with regard to societal expectations of gender.

Gender identity: The gender that a person claims for oneself—which may or may not align with his or her gender assigned at birth.

Male-to-female transsexual (MTF): Someone who was born male and transitions to a female gender identity.

Sex: Refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women.

Sexual orientation: A person's enduring emotional, romantic, sexual and relational attraction to someone else, which is different from an innate sense of gender.

Transition: A process through which some transgender people go when they decide to live as the gender with which they identify, not the one assigned at birth. This may or may not include hormone therapy, sex-reassignment surgery and other medical components.

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What students have told us in the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools is that speaking up works and that they want the adults in their lives to do their part.

Resources

Questions and Answers: Gender Identity in Schools. Public Health Agency of Canada.

The Gender Spectrum: What Every Educator Needs to Know. Pride Education Network.

Under the *Program Services* tab on the Durham District School Board portal, please select the *Equity, Diversity and Race Relations* button, followed by the *Resources* tab on the left hand side.

See *Community Support* below.

Community Support

Trans Community Service

Trans Community Services Coordinator

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Trans Youth

Program Supervisor

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“We need to create a generation of people
who don’t have to recover from their childhood.”

–Safe Schools Action Team

Speaking up works.
When we don't let
fear stop us, we win.



DURHAM DISTRICT
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