

Brendan:

I'm one of the youth that this equity policy will be affecting. But I'm here to represent the youth without a voice.

The kindness and support I've been shown as I was coming out was amazing. I was lucky to have had friends, people in the community, and teachers that were understanding and accepting of me. I'm mostly free to be who I want to be.

But it was not always like this. During the time when I was still in the closet, I felt depressed and constantly had suicidal thoughts. I was part of a religious group and prayed for these feelings to go away. But they didn't. It has taken titanic efforts to get me to a place where I don't hate myself all the time. Even now, I have the odd day where I just want to die. But this is because of internalized homophobia. I grew up with the thought that my existence was wrong and I wondered why I existed. I felt dirty, and begged for salvation.

Most people have been brought up and raised to think heterosexuality is the only thing that exists. Step out of that boundary and you are ridiculed and shunned. This is why I fight. People aren't allowed to be who they are. Not only does this affect the queer community, but the straight community too. Masculine girls are called dykes. Feminine boys are called fags. These youth may identify as LGBT, but they could also be straight. Assuming a person is LGBT by their dress or by association is also a part homophobia and heterosexism. This can be seen by the attack on December 9 when two men were beaten when leaving Embassy, a night club frequented by the LGBT community. One of them was straight.

I just finished a project for the Well on the needs of LGBT youth. I've spent the past month learning about ethical research, using the recent Needs Assessment of the LGBT Community as a secondary source to help determine what questions to ask, then sending out surveys and doing a focus group with LGBT youth in this community. From what I gathered in regards to schools, Westmount Secondary School is considered a safe place. Students that came from other schools in the city all identified schools as places they don't feel safe. I also asked if they experienced homophobia/heterosexism and if so, how often. Then what ways they experienced it. The responses from non Westmount students were "daily" "weekly" "a lot". Some Westmount students said "daily" but to a lesser extent. Some of things that have been done to them include rocks, name calling, violence, hitting, spitting, anger, silent treatment, ignorance, ostrization, rude comments, and being told in Sex. ed. that there was no other way. One of my friends was knocked down a flight of stairs two years ago for holding hands with his boyfriend. No administrative person dealt with it. This isn't an isolated incident. I remember incident upon incident being discussed at Health Initiatives For Youth where we would talk about what's happened to us. Very few schools ever actually dealt with the abuse these kids have been taking.

Clearly, there is an issue at hand. These youth have been harassed for their identity. If this had been an issue of race or religion, we could have named it directly. We can't ignore one group and support the rest. We are all connected. The human identity is made up of many pieces. We aren't just "gay" "Muslim" "Asian" or just "Canadian" but both along with many other things.

Fear creates differences which can be seen as diversity. We need to have this equity policy in place not only to protect everyone, but to educate each other about our unique identities. As a youth in this community, I support this policy knowing that it will improve the lives of many youth and children within and outside our schools.

Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilized by education; they grow there, firm as weeds among rocks.

- Charlotte Bronte

Erin:

I have just a little to add to what Brendan has said. I'm also a student from Westmount secondary, and when I looked over the Equity Policy draft for myself I was very impressed at everything it covered, but mostly that it recognized and proposed to change the current heterosexist curriculum. Sexuality, heterosexual or otherwise, is only addressed in the health portion of gym class, and this is understandable. We learn about history and why things happened, not historical gossip, because it isn't relevant to course material. In the case of sex education, this is different. There's a systematic homophobia that exists in this two week health class. Alternate sexualities are not addressed, not even mentioned, or merely hinted at. The closest you get is a fleeting mention of anal sex, and this is in relation to straight relationships. The health nurses that come in are not even allowed to teach alternate sexualities, if they took the initiative! Why is this? Brendan investigated this, and the answer he got was that parents might be angry at the material, and withdraw their kids from the program, upon which they get no sex education whatsoever. In other words, the school board is letting themselves be intimidated by unreasonable threats. There is no real reason for leaving this part of normal human sexuality out, other than systematic homophobia, and heterosexism. Sex ed. is taught during grade nine for a reason, and that's because of the intense emotional, mental and physical changes happening in a person. Leaving alternate sexualities out makes those not fitting into the heterosexual mold feel like a biological freak without clear answers that can be obtained without feeling like humiliating yourself by actively rooting up information from the teacher in-class or from a guidance councilor, which by the way, is not the expectation for learning about straight sex. I was one of those kids who felt like a freak because of all this. If the purpose of sex ed is to give kids clear, accurate information for healthy lifestyles, it sure isn't being done. We're left with the old channels of TV, friends and the internet, all just brimming with the reliable information we crave at that stage.

This is just one example of that systematic homophobia that the policy would be able to change. The difference would be *real* to us. We wouldn't need to spend literally

years trying to 'straighten' ourselves out to fit the information we were given, and told to trust. This policy is the first step towards that end goal.