

Presentation to the Committee of the Whole
Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board

By: Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, District 21, Teachers' Unit

Date: June 2, 2008

We wish to begin by thanking the Board for hearing our presentation today. My name is Chantal Mancini and I am the President of the Teachers Unit for OSSTF District 21. My co-presenter is Anthony Marco, Teachers Unit 1st Vice President. We are here with strong support from the Teachers' Unit Council.

Our presentation is in response to recent public discussion surrounding the Board's Equity Policy, with specific focus on the portion regarding Sexual Orientation.

OSSTF District 21 has had representation on the Equity Policy Steering Committee since its inception post-amalgamation. The Board has included consultation with a variety of stakeholders and community groups throughout the process. Our only criticism of the process is the frustrating length of time it has taken to put the Equity Policy in place.

The Sexual Orientation piece of this policy has indeed been the most controversial. However, current research supports that this section is perhaps the most urgent. This research and recent reports strongly support what secondary teachers already know: homophobia continues to be a serious problem in Canadian high schools, and it can have tragic consequences.

In October 2007, 13-year-old gay Ajax high school student Shaquille Wisdom took his own life. He was the victim of homophobic bullying at his high-school via websites students set up to target fellow students. This quickly turned into verbal and physical bullying at school. Just days before Shaquille hung himself, other students had stuffed him into a garbage can. Both the school and his mother had no idea this was occurring. Shaquille had been terrified to tell anyone.

In January 2008, the Toronto District School Board released the Falconer Report on School Safety. As we are all aware, it released some shocking findings on the state of safety in Toronto high schools. During the Panel's consultations, young women and men repeatedly raised a concern that students from marginalized groups felt isolated among their peers and excluded from the school system. Homophobia was cited as one of the main reasons for these sentiments. The report argues that anti-bullying initiatives are not working to alleviate these problems, because they have been presented in a way that does not take into account the complex relationship between bullying, gender, and sexuality. Anti-bullying policies must acknowledge that homophobia is itself a reason why students are bullied, or they will continue to fail to protect the student population.

In February 2008, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health released a research report on school violence, sexual harassment and bullying. The study found that the pattern of homophobic insults against boys—such as being called ‘gay’ or ‘fag’—continued mostly unchanged from Grade 9 to Grade 11—34 percent and 30 percent, respectively. 22 percent of Grade 9 girls also reported being the target of homophobic harassment, with this percentage falling to 12 percent in Grade 11. Dr. David Wolfe, who headed up the report, has pointed out that teen harassment used to be more racist and sexist, but is now more homophobic and misogynist. The CAMH website cites US Department of Health statistics that assert that queer teens make up less than 10 percent of the teen population—but that one-third of all teenage suicides are gays and lesbians.

EGALE Canada also released a report two weeks ago on school safety and LGBTQ youth. It found that over two-thirds of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school. Dr. Catherine Taylor of the University of Winnipeg stated that homophobia and transphobia is linked to poor performance in school, drop-out rates and teen suicide. Participants in the study felt unsafe in school buses, in gyms, changing rooms, the cafeteria, in stairwells and hallways. Over a quarter reported being physically harassed. Additionally, almost 40% of straight participants reported that they made homophobic remarks sometimes or frequently.

As educators who care about students, the results of the aforementioned reports are frightening and make a case for urgent action. Clearly, LGBTQ students are a long way away from being treated equitably. The Equity Policy of the HWDSB is a crucial step in ensuring that ALL students are valued, are treated with dignity, and are encouraged to reach their full potential. Schools should be a safe and welcoming space, one that reflects the diversity of individuals in a community.

Teachers have a legal, ethical and moral obligation to provide safe learning environments for all students. The College of Teachers’ professional standards state that teachers are ‘responsive pedagogical leaders who are respectful of equity and diversity within Ontario’s classrooms and schools’. This is also reflected in the policy of OSSTF, which states that one of the objects of OSSTF is ‘to foster and promote dignity of all persons regardless of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status, or disability’. OSSTF also believes that the public education system should strive to ‘understand and challenge human rights violations such as sexism, racism, homophobia, harassment and other forms of injustice including violence’, and that the Ministry and Boards of education should provide professional development opportunities to assist members in developing practices that uphold these ideals. OSSTF also believes that a safe school involves many caring, trained staff to support the learning of students.

The Board’s Equity Policy, in its current form, is an essential tool for educators to use to ensure equity for all students. It is a clear statement that the Board will strive to serve **all** students, in a non-discriminatory fashion. It is aligned with the Ontario Human Rights Code, which clearly states that all persons have the right to be free from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

As an employer, the HWDSB is legally obligated to provide a safe and healthy workplace, as well as a workplace free of harassment and discrimination. Therefore, the Equity policy also serves an extremely important purpose for staff. It contains clear statements on employment practices that make discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation unacceptable. Such statements are also clearly articulated in OSSTF policy, which asserts that “there should be no discrimination in salary, promotion, tenure, or fringe benefits on the basis of sexual orientation.” OSSTF has long recognized that Federation members from the LGTBQ community can face many challenges in their professional lives. These members are often forced into silence about their sexual orientation, because they fear for their safety. This limiting of their very humanity takes its toll on their health and personal relationships, and does not allow their students to experience a diversity of adult role models in their schools. As Federation representatives on the front line of member protection, we can tell you first-hand that homophobic harassment of our members continues to occur, and that it is extremely difficult for members to come forward in such cases if they do not feel supported at their worksites and in the parent community. While an Equity policy alone cannot change such unsafe climates in schools, it provides employees with a starting point to push back against homophobia and heterosexism. Additionally, it commits the Board to training so that all of our members can begin to build safe environments for LGBTQ colleagues and students.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: “Morality cannot be legislated but behavior can be regulated. Judicial decrees may not change the heart, but they can restrain the heartless.” It is time that the HWDSB move forward with a policy that is long overdue. For the reasons we have outlined above, OSSTF District 21 Teachers’ Unit supports this policy, and strongly encourages the trustees to endorse it tonight as an initial step towards protecting the rights of LGBTQ students and teachers. As educators who care about students, colleagues, and an education system that celebrates diversity, we believe that it can’t come soon enough.

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