FAQ: Vancouver School Board’s Proposed Revised Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities Policy

Is this policy new?

No. This is a revision to a policy that has been in existence since 2004. School boards across British Columbia and Canada adopt policies to prevent discrimination of staff and students on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identities. We regularly update policies to reflect current needs and best practices.

What are the proposed revisions?

The revisions add clarity, update language, and provide regulations in order to provide guidance to school staff on how to help Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer (LGBTQ+) students feel safe and comfortable in their schools. The changes reflect current best practice and are based on government documents, research, advice from experts and legislation.

Ultimately, these proposed revisions provide operational guidelines for school staff working to support a small, but also very often isolated and vulnerable group of kids – students who need these supports to be able to focus on their learning at school.

What is the purpose of the revisions?

To protect students. Studies show that LGBTQ+ students experience greater amounts of verbal and physical harassment at school, are four times more likely to attempt suicide and are more likely to suffer from significant mental health issues like depression as compared with their non-LGTBQ+ peers. We want these students to be safe and included at school and we want to help them focus on being successful in their schoolwork.

There are similar changes to policy and practices at other municipal, provincial and federal levels. The Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation has just adopted a new policy to give guidance to parks’ facilities staff on making gender-neutral washrooms available to the public. The BC government has recently amended the Vital Statistics Act to make it much easier for trans* British Columbians (including minors) to change their name and gender on official documents and registries. According to the provincial Teacher Regulation Branch (TRB), certificate holders have the professional obligation to maintain safe, inclusive, and respectful environments for LGBTQ+ students – including trans* students. In fact, several years ago, the Public Health Agency of Canada issued guidelines on how people can support LGBTQ+ children and youth. We need to ensure our policies and practices remain current.

Who has been involved in the development of this revised policy?

This policy has been developed, over the last two years, through the PRIDE Advisory Committee, which has representation from employee groups (teachers, support staff, district staff, Principals/Vice-
principals), community representatives as well as representatives from the DPAC (the District Parent Advisory Council).

Do other school boards have policies like this?

At least 32 school districts in BC have policies related to non-discrimination of LGBTQ+ students.

How will this policy affect my child?

The vast majority of students will not notice any difference in their school life. The policy revisions will support the VBE’s ongoing work to make school safe and inclusive and for a very small group of at-risk trans* students. We hope this policy will help them feel significantly less isolated and better able to focus on their learning.

I've heard something about change-rooms and washroom. What's that all about?

Over the last several years, many schools have been working with trans* students and their parents/guardians to accommodate students’ needs for washroom and change room options that are safe and that correspond to their gender identity. In most cases, schools have been able to provide an accessible all gender single stall washroom for use by any student who desire increased privacy. All students require a safe washroom facility and change room that corresponds to their gender identity.

Where possible, schools will provide an easily accessible all gender single stall washroom for use by any student who desires increased privacy, regardless of the underlying reason. A similar policy has been adopted by the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation to make gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms available to the public.

How would a student develop a new gender identity plan for their school?

Typically, school staff will consult with district staff to learn about best practices for supporting transitioning students. Then there is a process of collaboration between the school, the student and their parents/guardians to develop a plan. The proposed policy revisions now describe the operational actions taken to accommodate these students, so they can focus on their learning and not be distracted by worrying about what washroom to use, where they will change for PE and sports activities and whether they will be harassed by others.

What's the process for revising the policy and what concerns are we hearing?

This policy revision process is still in a consultation stage - it is a draft policy. We are still interested hearing from the public on how we can support LGBTQ+ students in our school.

Isn't this more of a medical issue?

Our role is not a medical one, and we do not provide medical advice. Questions around medical concerns should be directed to Vancouver Coastal Health who employ specialists who work in this area.

Our role is to educate – and to ensure that ALL of our students have the best chance of being successful and most able to focus on their learning in our schools.