

# Everyone Welcome, a Winnipeg School Division Reality

By Julie Millar, Radean Carter, and Ashley Pearson, Winnipeg School Division

“Just wanted to voice my support for the Safe and Caring policy. I’m very proud of our school division for advancing acceptance and inclusion. I saw the rainbow ‘Everyone Welcome’ posters and pointed them out to my children because I felt so proud to see this message in our school. Thanks very much.”



## EVERYONE WELCOME



“**E**veryone Welcome.” That’s the first thing you will see when entering a school or building in the Winnipeg School Division (WSD). It’s a large, colourful poster adapted from two of the most recognized international LGBTTTQ symbols—the pink triangle and the rainbow flag.

Originally, the pink triangle was employed by the Nazis in World War II to identify lesbian and gay people in concentration camps. The LGBTTTQ community reclaimed the icon as a symbol of empowerment and remembrance for those who suffered. The rainbow flag was inspired by the Flag of the Races, which had five stripes, each representing the colours of human kind. The six colours of the rainbow flag stand as a symbol of pride, diversity and unity of the LGBTTTQ community: red for life, orange for healing, yellow for sun, green for nurture, blue for harmony and purple for spirit.

### Drafting the policy

Beyond symbols to action, WSD identified the need for a Safe and Caring policy for LGBTTTQ students and staff. The policy would give weight and authority for support of learning environments that respect diversity, create welcoming and safe spaces, raise awareness, and support and protect everyone. Respect and safety are for everyone, in every school. However, LGBTTTQ people typically experience higher rates of harassment, discrimination, suicide rates, as well as poor mental and physical health outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

Policy development requires a committed team to research, examine educational literature, explore other policies and dialog with noted experts and agencies in the field. In addition, the WSD Board of Trustees recommended an extensive consultation and feedback process which began with a panel discussion in the fall of 2015.

The wisdom and advice from professionals from the Rainbow Resource Centre, and Gender Dysphoria Assessment and Action for Youth Clinic, as well as the passion and bravery of a parent of a “gender creative” child and a 20 year old transgender man, drew laughter, tears, enlightenment and admiration from the audience. Teachers, trustees, clinicians, principals, vice-principals and senior administration attended. It was a turning point in WSD’s full recognition of the challenges faced by the LGBTTTQ community.

To support consistent messaging and information about the new draft Safe and Caring policy, an online video was created. It highlighted sections of the draft policy, and included student and staff testimonials about the need for the policy. Parent groups, community members, students and staff viewed the video, which culminated with three specific feedback questions:

1. Is there anything missing from the draft policy?
2. Do you have any concerns about implementing the policy?
3. What solutions do you suggest to address your concerns?

## The feedback

Winnipeg School Division supports a progressive and diverse set of communities where a policy such as Safe and Caring enjoy broad support, but we recognized that putting it into practice would be complex. The feedback from the consultations and online survey was extremely helpful in revising the policy and determining our next steps. After analyzing the feedback, the top five recurring comments, concerns and questions focused on:

1. Bathrooms and change rooms;
2. Professional development and training;
3. Communication with parents;
4. Safety; and
5. Field trips.

Some of the positive feedback was moving.

*"I am THRILLED at this policy, and at WSDs teaching about gender fluidity and non-conformity, and support of the kids and staff who this policy supports. I am so very pleased that my child is learning so much in such a positive way, and in such a matter-of-fact, supportive environment."*

*"I am the mother of a trans person. I asked my son to assist me in reviewing the policy and have worked in collaboration with him on this. I realize that his and our reality and experience is not emblematic of all trans people, but he is an activist for and very involved in the trans community and his perspective is worth considering. Thank you for the time and effort that has gone into this document and for the stand you are taking by declaring this a division priority!"*

While WSD recognizes that there are some members of our community who may be uncomfortable with this policy, we can't let some people's discomfort violate other people's human rights. We will be focusing on some key factors for administering the policy equitably across the division. Some of these include maintaining accurate student records, referring to students and employees by their preferred name and pronoun, minimizing gender segregated sorting, providing access to gender inclusive washrooms and appropriate change rooms, along with the review of dress codes.

WSD is forging ahead with required Inclusion Across the Rainbow workshops, which incorporates Human Rights, anti-homophobia, and Safe and Caring policy training for new staff. An online tutorial is being developed for staff who have not taken this training prior to 2012.



## It starts with awareness

Educators may be unsure of how to support their LGBTTTQ students in a meaningful way. We want to provide opportunities for staff members to voice their questions and concerns, talk through scenarios and share ideas for creating school climates in which their most vulnerable students feel safe and valued. From students to senior administration, everyone has a role to play in creating an inclusive school climate. Proper training gives all school community members a thorough understanding of the part they play in making their school an environment that welcomes all students.

In addition, a communication strategy is evolving and will include updated definitions, Frequently Asked Questions, a poster campaign, along with continual renewal of our comprehensive resource and support materials in our schools and libraries. Using inclusive and respectful curricular content allows students to see themselves reflected in the material they are reading and learning.

We want to enable our LGBTTTQ students to safely and comfortably live their lives, normalizing transgender issues across the division. This will be done in coordination with WSD inclusive practices such as safe and healthy school strategies, bully prevention initiatives and our Healthy Minds mental health strategic plan.

For youth to thrive in our schools and communities, they need to feel socially, emotionally and physically secure and supported. Creating learning environments that respond to all students' needs includes providing explicit support systems for LGBTTTQ students, such as our gay-straight alliances (GSAs). A full day GSA student forum will take place this year to provide an opportunity for students and teachers from various GSAs to meet, share ideas and collaborate. Students will also participate in the OUTShine International LGBTQI2S Youth and Ally Summit in Windsor, Ont. in the spring of 2017.

As a final point, we know when staff and other adults serve as allies and role models for students, and take a stand against homophobic comments, it has a significant impact on academic success and feeling safe in school. Symbols, icons, banners and logos are important in our messaging because they represent what we stand for and what we believe in with respect to inclusion, caring and safety for all. It is in our actions that we can ensure our beliefs become reality.

Winnipeg School Division is proud of its diversity and embraces change that improves quality of life for everyone. The Safe and Caring policy, along with nurturing practices, learning innovation and engagement has the power to build an environment that is truly welcoming for all students.

*"I have a good friend who is transitioning to a female and when she looked over the policy, she cried. She didn't live in a world or a time when her rights and freedoms to be who she is were valued or protected. Well done Winnipeg School Division! This stuff makes me proud!"* ■

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## Reference

1. The Manitoba Teacher's Society. (2016). The Every Teacher Project: On LGBTQ – Inclusive Education in Canada's K-12 Schools Final Report. Written by Catherine Taylor, Tracy Peter, Christopher Campbell, Elizabeth Meyer, Janice Ristock & Donn Short. Manitoba Teacher's Society: Winnipeg.