

March 29, 2011

An open letter to the Dufferin-Peel Community regarding GSAs (Gay/Straight Alliances) in our schools

A recent request to establish a Gay/Straight Alliance chapter (GSA) at St. Joseph Secondary School in Mississauga has received media coverage, which you may have read or heard about. We would like to help you understand, from our perspective as a Catholic school board, what the issue is about. As background, the school principal responded to the request by indicating the school takes an inclusive approach to the discussion of issues related to social justice matters such as homophobia, racism, bullying and the marginalization of students. The principal identified a number of structures in place at the school, where a student or students could meet to discuss their concerns. The principal also referenced a resource that supports adults with same sex orientation. The principal did not deny students the right to meet for discussion, but indicated that discussions would be reflective of our faith perspective.

A Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) is described as a student club with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and heterosexual student membership that provides students with same sex orientation, and their allies, opportunities to work together to make their schools more welcoming for all members of school communities, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity.

In a January 14, 2011 statement from the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, Archbishop Thomas Collins stated that *“the debate surrounding GSAs in Catholic high schools is being complicated by the fact that people are not distinguishing between an objective and a strategy. GSAs are a strategy that some people propose to achieve an objective with which the Bishops of Ontario are in agreement: that all students in schools feel safe and respected. Our objective is that each student be treated with dignity, for each is a child of God. It is not right or fair to suggest that one particular strategy is the only way to achieve a given goal. We seek to achieve the goal of a safe and loving environment for all students in a way that is in harmony with our faith.”*

These are objectives with which our Catholic schools agree and embrace. Supports already in place within our schools provide students with opportunities to achieve similar objectives. It is our practice, however, to frame discussions, such as those identified above, under the umbrella of a broader community focus on equity and diversity, and through a Catholic lens. It is from the perspective of inclusion, where a myriad of topics can be addressed, and a diverse spectrum of students can participate in the discussion, that we have found to be successful.

Many social justice or equity/diversity-oriented student groups that focus on raising awareness of, and/or battling issues such as racism, intolerance, bullying and homophobia currently exist in Dufferin-Peel secondary schools. To clarify to students, who may not be aware of an existing school-based forum for discussion, we will be requesting that one group in each secondary school be designated to include, as part of its focus on diversity and equity, a forum for discussion of issues related to same sex orientation, homophobia, stereotyping, related bullying

and inclusion. If such a group does not exist, then an existing social justice/equity-focused group must be expanded to include this component. The name of this group must be respectful of, and in alignment with, our Catholic perspective. This group, like all others in our schools, will be moderated by a faculty advisor and will include a Catholic perspective as part of its discussions. If individual students, or a small group of students, wish to discuss personal concerns, we would, as is our current practice, refer them to the school chaplain, guidance counsellor or other trained staff member.

It is important to know that we are in complete compliance with the province's legislation. This was affirmed by the Premier of Ontario, who in a statement in the Legislature on March 21, 2011 said, "*We are making it perfectly clear to all our school boards, all our schools, all our principals, all our teachers and all our students that it is unacceptable in Ontario to discriminate based on race, gender, religion or sexual orientation. We have also said that boards can find different ways to ensure that they adhere to those policies.*"

We are very proud of the proactive work we have done in terms of equity, diversity and inclusive education and continue to strive to make every student and staff member feel safe, cared for and welcomed as part of our Catholic school communities. We continue to support Ministry policy, using a Catholic worldview that integrates a faith perspective, offering a multi-faceted, layered approach to support and assist students with questions, concerns or issues related to sexual orientation. It is important that our students have opportunities, within our Catholic culture, to be able to engage in conversation in an environment that enables them to connect with staff and/or other students whom they trust. Support for students of same sex orientation can include services provided by Chaplaincy Teams, Guidance Counsellors, Social Workers, Child and Youth Workers, and any caring adult in the school assigned through our Student Success initiative. In situations where students wish to discuss personal concerns, again, we encourage them to work through the school Chaplaincy Office or, alternately, through the Guidance Office. The recent debate has also given us pause to consider our resources for students with same sex orientation.

We are proud of our ongoing commitment to equity and inclusive education and have been extremely proactive in creating awareness and understanding of issues related to same sex orientation among administrators, staff and students with the objective of creating and maintaining safe, caring, inclusive and healthy environments for students. Examples of some of our work include:

- ▶ For close to 20 years, we have maintained a centralized, full-time staff person devoted to equity, diversity and inclusive education;
- ▶ Our schools offer a significant number and range of programs and supports for all students, including those with same sex orientation. Programs and supports include student forums and resources on self esteem, bullying awareness, Link Crews for Grade 9 students, which promote a safe environment for all, anonymous bullying tip lines, retreats, Religious Education classes and Physical Education units that explore healthy sexuality and relationships, guest speakers, and a tremendous number of other programs, initiatives and supports;
- ▶ Through our *Diversity Workshop* series, we have offered workshops on same sex orientation, where speakers have examined topics from a human rights perspective;

- ▶ Conversations related to sexual orientation, and how we respond to these conversations continue to be shared with staff, trustees and Catholic School Councils;
- ▶ Our upcoming Annual *(In)Equity Conference* in May features two keynote speakers, who will address same sex orientation from a lived and personal perspective;
- ▶ Our Catholic Community Culture and Care School Climate Survey addresses sexual orientation/bullying, among other topics;
- ▶ We teach about sexual orientation in our Family Life Programs in elementary/secondary curriculum and resource supports;
- ▶ Proactive practices and related staff development in support of safe, caring, inclusive and healthy school communities, as part of our System Directions supporting *Community Engagement* and the Catholic Board Learning Plan's *Catholic Community Culture and Caring* pillar;
- ▶ NTIP (New Teacher Induction Program) - we provide professional development in areas including equity and inclusive education, human rights, safe schools, etc.
- ▶ Virtues Education Program - highlights and promotes the dignity of all human beings and is rooted in our Gospel values.
- ▶ Director's Diversity Committee, which discusses a wide range of issues related to equity and diversity;
- ▶ Family of Schools Diversity Conferences - which focus on inclusiveness and acceptance;
- ▶ Race relations training and certification program for administrators and faculty in conjunction with the Canadian Race Relations Foundation;
- ▶ On-going implementation of Dufferin-Peel's Equity and Inclusive Education Policy and Religious Accommodations;
- ▶ Training of school staff using the *Pastoral Guidelines to Assist Students with Same Sex Orientation*;
- ▶ Family of Schools parent information sessions on *Pastoral Guidelines to Assist Students With Same Sex Orientation*.

Dufferin-Peel employees will continue to create and encourage communities of respect, dignity, care and inclusion that are grounded in our faith. Our approach to the Equity and Inclusive Education Policy, as well as our efforts to promote awareness and understanding of matters related to sexual orientation have been proactive and undertaken with a desire to support our students. Our Catholic faith places a moral responsibility on us as employees to provide a caring and inclusive environment for all, within the context of our Catholic system.

We hope this backgrounder gives you a better perspective of the topic and assures you that **our schools are indeed safe, caring, and inclusive places for all students.**

Sincerely,



John B. Kostoff
Director of Education



Anna Abbruscato
Chair of the Board of Trustees