

SUPPORTING TRANS STUDENTS IN OUR SCHOOLS

Strategies for the Successful Transition
of a Transgender Student in the DDSB

This document is to serve as an addendum to the 2012 Durham District School Board Supporting Our Transgender Students. These documents work in partnership to assist in the assurance of safe and welcoming schools for our students who identify as transgender.

“

As a transgender child, I was always looking around for someone like me, because I thought I was the only one. But having support from my family changed everything. They helped me love myself and embrace who I am. – Jazz Jennings

”

No two individuals transition in exactly the same way. The following strategies are designed to provide practical suggestions to help parents/guardians and schools support a child through the in-school transition process. Consider how each strategy may be useful in your unique situation. Always keep in mind your student's immediate health, safety, and educational needs and make adjustments accordingly.

1. A parent/guardian and transitioning child must be flexible. This may be difficult if the child is very young, such as in early elementary. “Most transgender children still live in the shadows, hiding from a world that sees them as freaks of nature. Rejected by their families, many grow up hating their bodies, and fall victim to high rates of depression, drug abuse, violence and suicide” (*Goldberg & Adriano, 2008, para 5*). A plan should be formulated in consultation with the parents/guardians, but preparation should be made to change the plan if circumstances warrant it. This plan may include conversations with the Equity and Inclusive Education Officer, principal, and perhaps select teachers such as the school counsellor and/or physical education teacher. Work with the student to identify a list of “safe people” on staff to ensure that the child always has a support person available (*Luecke, 2011*).
2. Remember, transitioning is a public process and one that cannot be hidden. Accordingly, it may be difficult to keep the transition a secret from others. Include this reality in planning for and with the child and their family.
3. As a School, you should be cautiously open with others regarding the student's transition. Schools should always choose allies carefully. Parents/Guardians may be highly involved in assisting their child in finding their best allies. The schools and parents level of assistance may depend greatly upon the student's age.

4. Be open, but respectful with questions regarding the student's transition. Do NOT ask questions about the student's body or whether they seek gender realignment. Remember, for many individuals, this will be their first exposure to issues of gender identity. Work with the student on how to answer questions that they may face. However, as Luecke (2011) suggests, "It shouldn't be the transgender child's or their parents' responsibility to educate others" (p. 137). The school will need to provide professional development for staff, workshops for parents, and lessons for students on gender identity, variance, and expression.
5. Enlist the support of the board personnel or community organizations such as PFLAG Durham. In some cases, you may find minimal support. Disclose information on a need-to-know basis with appropriate school personnel only.
6. Underplay rather than overplay the "ordinariness" of the transition. Remember, it may be difficult for the student to immediately act "accustomed to" in their authentic gender. Voice, intonations, gestures, and actions may be overdone or underdone as they reflect what they perceive to be within the "accepted" gender range. Assist the student with this matter. Encourage them to practice gender roles and expected behaviours within a safe environment such as at home or among close friends.
7. Be aware that some students and parents may object to the transition and their continued presence within the school. Have another plan to deal with this possible outcome. Assist the student in developing the self-esteem necessary to successfully move through this time of transition while maintaining their educational focus and personal well-being.



These suggestions are not hard and fast rules, but guidelines that should be adapted and modified by each particular situation. It is also recommended that you work with educational specialists who can help you develop a transition strategy to support the student at school.

School officials, once informed of a student's decision to transition, must respond in much the same way as they would accommodate any student with specialized needs. In collaboration with the student, parents, healthcare, and other specialized educational professionals, school

administrators should devise and implement strategies that maximize the likelihood of a successful in-school transition for the student – in other words, develop a Transition Plan. Because each transitioning student is unique, as are their parents, and each school has its own distinct community culture, the Transition Plan developed for a particular student in a particular school will also need to be unique. There is no "one size fits all" approach.

Everyone's medical history is considered highly confidential and others are informed only on a "need-to-know" basis. For a transitioning student choosing to remain in the same school, or transferring to another school within the same school district, the reality is that the "news" will likely disseminate quickly.

This fact should be considered as the Transition Plan is developed. The student's right to confidentiality should be strictly maintained at all times. Before developing a Transition Plan, the transitioning student, their parents, and school administrators may wish to consider who will become involved in developing the plan. For example, should the student's school counsellor, physical education teacher, and classroom teachers also participate in planning?

Should outside agencies or individuals be called upon once parental permission is received? During the planning process, it is natural for everyone's attention to focus on the transitioning student in an effort to determine how to best support them. No less important, and easily overlooked, is the effect of the student's transition on any other school-aged siblings. Do they attend the same school or a different one in DDSB? How might they react to the imminent transition of their sibling? Are they at risk of bullying or harassment by other students? What should the parents and school do to support the siblings? Can siblings and student allies help support the transitioning student? Is there or should there be a supportive role for the peers of the transitioning student? Do these peers need specific training in how to best support a transitioning student? Are family members (including parents) experiencing a sense of grief because of the apparent "loss" of the child whom they love? How can the school support family members when a child transitions? All of these questions are important to consider when helping to develop an effective and thoughtful transition plan.

“

An individual's gender identity is not a choice or caused by a lack of male or female role models or poor parenting, rather it is another variation of human diversity

– Cohen-Kettenis, et al, 2008

”

As part of developing a school-based transition plan, consider the following guiding questions:

PRIOR TO TRANSITIONING

1. Which of the following actions is in the best interest of the transitioning student: As near total confidentiality as possible, or complete disclosure to the entire school community (including all parents), or something in-between? Should all, some, or none of the following groups be informed: teaching staff, support staff, students, and parents? If so, how and when will this occur? What are the potential risks of disclosure? What are the potential risks of secrecy?
2. When does the student wish to transition? Is the desired date realistic? Will the student, their parents, and the board be prepared by this date? Work to develop a transition timeline of “what is happening when” so that everyone involved knows what their expectations are and how they should be prepared.
3. Will suggestions on preparing for a successful transition be sought from:
 - Trans health programs or qualified health professionals?
 - Local LGBTQ youth or parental support groups or programs such as PFLAG Durham Region?
 - ETFO or OSSTF?
 - Educational and mental health professionals who may specialize in gender identity issues?
 - Other schools that have had experience with a transitioning student?
 - Other students who have transitioned or parents who have a child who has transitioned?
 - Knowledgeable trans individuals?
 - An “out” teacher working for the school board who is willing to help?
4. Is it necessary for the school to develop or expand school policies around homophobia, transphobia, gender identity, gender expression, and anti-bullying (including cyberbullying) to assist and protect a transitioning student?
5. What can school administrators, counsellors, classroom teachers, support staff, other students, and parents do to create a supportive environment for the transitioning student?
6. Will counsellors or supportive staff allies be available for students and staff who may experience difficulty adjusting to their own personal issues raised by a transitioning student?
7. Should all students be given trans-inclusive information by school counsellors and/or knowledgeable members of the medical and/or trans communities? If so, when? Will it occur during class time? Ensure strands of Health and Physical Education pertaining to this area are covered in the secondary panel.
8. If some parents or the media raise questions or issues, who in the school or district will be responsible for addressing them? How will they be addressed?
9. Should professional development time be made available for in-service staff training?

Gender identity is set as early as by age 3.

American Academy of Pediatrics (Copyright © 2018)

- 10.** Which bathroom(s) will the transitioning student use? If these are separate bathrooms, how will access be granted? What are the safety and health implications?
- 11.** Which facilities will the student use to change for athletic activities or to attend excursions?
- 12.** When will the school incorporate the student's new name in its informal and formal records? For example, when will class lists, seating plans, and report cards display a student's newly chosen name? When will existing records be changed?
- 13.** What actions will be taken if there is inadvertent incorrect pronoun usage, deliberate incorrect pronoun usage, blatant transphobia, and/or bullying (including cyberbullying)? Has the safety of the transitioning student (and his or her siblings and peers) been adequately addressed? Does everyone know the board policies and human rights legislation? Is everyone aware that ongoing bullying could result in police intervention and/or human rights complaints?
- 14.** Is everyone aware that gender diversity is a normal variation of human development and that transitioning is the recommended course of action by healthcare professionals in strong and persistent cases?
- 15.** Is everyone aware of the Transition Plan, corresponding timelines, and does everyone understand their role in implementing it? Is the plan flexible and adaptable?

TRANSITIONING DAY

- 1.** Will this day be considered by everyone to be a "school-as-usual" day or will it be different in some way? If it will be different, in what ways will the day change? What will be the roles of the transitioning student, their parents, the administration, the student's counsellor, and other school staff?
- 2.** Has everyone prepared for the possibility that the media or concerned parents may be present on the day of transition?

POST TRANSITION DAY

1. How often and when will meetings occur to review the effectiveness of the Transition Plan and possibly revise it?

When a student (or an adult within the school system) transitions there is natural curiosity about the individual's transition. Usually, this curiosity quickly subsides and within a few days or weeks, the “novelty” of the situation wears off, and the school environment returns to “normal”. However, transgender and transsexual youth are at greater risk of bullying and violence when compared with their heterosexual and peers of diverse orientation. Ideally, all school community members will be sensitive to this, and will monitor the safety of the transitioning student and become supportive allies. Any negative issues should be promptly acted upon by the school administration. All students must clearly see that there are swift consequences for any transphobic bullying or prejudicial behaviour.

A CHECKLIST FOR CREATING A SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT FOR TRANS STUDENTS

- Deploy the Equity and Inclusive Education Policy 4107, which expressly prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.
- Provide professional development opportunities to further knowledge on sexual orientation and gender identity issues and concerns. For assistance, contact the Equity Department.
- Infuse diverse sexual orientation and gender identity perspectives into classroom practices, as well as school and classroom discussions.
- Develop inclusive library collections and open access to age-appropriate online information and community supports and services.
- Support and sustain gay-straight alliance (GSA) clubs in schools, which are inclusive of Trans students.
- Require all teachers and adults to intervene, prevent, and report harassment, bullying, and violence in schools.
- Designate and make gender-neutral bathrooms and change room facilities publicly available.
- Identify in-school allies, advocates, and mentors for trans students.
- Require all school staff, parents, and students to respect and use a student's preferred name and chosen pronouns.
- Ensure that a student's preferred or chosen name and photo is used in all school records.
- Respect the confidentiality of all trans students and their families.
- Educate parent councils about sexual orientation and gender identity issues

“...all publically funded schools must provide non-discriminatory educational environments. This legal responsibility includes offering non-discriminatory educational programs and services to all trans and gender non-conforming students.”

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

COMMONLY USED TERMS

ALLY

A person, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, who supports and stands up for the human and civil rights of sexual and gender minority people.

CISGENDER

A non-transsexual person whose gender identity, gender expression, and sex assigned at birth align with conventional expectations of male or female.

CLOSET

Hiding one's gender identity or sexual orientation from others in the workplace, at school, home, and/or with friends.

COMING OUT

A process through which trans individuals disclose to others their gender variance and/or sexual orientation.

FTM OR F2M

A person who is transitioning or has transitioned from female to male.

GENDER DYSPHORIA

The emotional discomfort an individual experiences due to internalized conflicts arising from the incongruity between one's natal (birth) sex and one's sense of gender identity (a personal sense or feeling of maleness or femaleness or neither).

GENDER EXPRESSION

Gender expression is the manner in which individuals express their gender identity to others. A person's gender expression is often based on the binary model of gender, which is either stereotypically male or female. However, some individuals choose to express themselves in terms of a multiple model of gender, mixing both male and female expressions since they do not see themselves as being either stereotypically male or female, but possibly some combination of both or neither genders. Some individuals may receive aggressive reactions or violent responses from members of society who feel a woman is acting too masculine or a man is acting too feminine. The majority of homophobic and transphobic bullying is often based upon the enforcement of rigid sex-role stereotypes, rather than a person's actual sexual orientation or gender identity.

GENDER IDENTITY

Gender identity is a person's internal sense or feeling of maleness or femaleness. Gender identity relates to how a person views oneself and gender expression relates to how they may present their sense of gender, usually along stereotypical binary lines, to the larger society. Gender identity and gender expression are often closely linked with the terms transgender/trans-identified. While sexual orientation and gender identity are separate and distinct categories, "many transgender people seek support and acceptance from the gay and lesbian community, where gender norms are often more inclusive" (*Ryan & Fetterman, 1998, p. 48*).

GENDER QUEER

An umbrella word referring to gender identities other than male and female. Many youth prefer the fluidity of the term gender queer and reject the labels of transgender or transsexual as too limiting. For example, gender queer individuals may think of themselves as having both male and female gender identities, or as having neither male nor female gender identities, or many other possible gender identities not restricted to the traditional gender binary model.

GENDER REALIGNMENT SURGERY (GRS)

Sometimes referred to as "sex or gender confirming surgery".

GENDER ROLES

The set of behaviours a person chooses or is expected to express as a man or a woman. These are the behaviours that Western society most often calls "masculine" or "feminine". Gender roles can change with time and may be different from one culture to another. For example, many Indigenous communities have rich histories of multiple gender traditions.

GENDER VARIANT/GENDER NONCONFORMING

Gender-linked behaviours, which are different from those stereotypically expected of an individual's sex.

LGBTQ/GLBTQ

Commonly used acronyms that are shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, twospirit, queer, and questioning identities.

MTF OR M2F

Male to female. A person who is transitioning or has transitioned from male to female.

PAN GENDER

Individuals who consider themselves to be other than male or female, a combination of the two, or a third gender. Gender queer is a similar term.

QUEER

Historically, a negative term for homosexuality. More recently, LGBTQ communities have reclaimed the word and use it in a positive way to refer to themselves. Queer can also include anyone whose sexuality or gender identity is outside of heteronormative and cisnormative bounds.

QUESTIONING

A person who is unsure of his or her gender identity or sexual orientation.

TRANSGENDER (TG), TRANS-IDENTIFIED, OR TRANS

These terms refer to a person whose gender identity, outward appearance, or gender expression does not fit into conventional expectations of male or female. Also commonly used as an umbrella term referring to anyone who is gender variant. Transgender individuals normally identify with a gender that is different from the one they were assigned at birth. In this guidebook, we use the term transgender as an expansive and inclusive term to represent a wide range of gender identities and expressions.

TRANSITION

The process of socially and/or physically changing from one's sex assigned at birth. Medically, this process may begin with hormone therapy, and may be followed by one or more gender confirming surgeries (GCS).

TRANSSEXUAL (TS)

An individual whose gender identity is not congruent with their natal sex. Many transsexual individuals frequently experience discomfort with the disparity between their physical body and sense of self (gender dysphoria) and, as a result, often begin transitioning with hormone therapy and may follow with surgery to make the body more closely align with their gender identity. All transsexual people are transgender, but not all transgender people are transsexual.

TRANSMAN OR TRANSBOY

A person who is transitioning or has transitioned from female to male (FTM).

TRANSWOMAN OR TRANSGIRL

A person who is transitioning or has transitioned from male to female (MTF).

TRANNNY

Sometimes used by non-transsexual people as a derogatory expression when referring to a transsexual individual. Also sometimes used as a “reclaimed” word by transsexual individuals when talking amongst themselves. When used this way, it is often understood as a positive expression.

TWO-SPIRIT

Some Indigenous people identify themselves as two-spirit rather than as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Historically, in many Indigenous cultures, two-spirit persons were respected leaders and medicine people and were often accorded special status based on their unique abilities to understand both male and female perspectives.

Portions of this document have been adapted from the works of Dr. Kristopher Wells, University of Alberta.

“

There's power in naming yourself, in proclaiming to the world that this is who you are. Weilding this power is often a difficult step for many transgender people because it's also a very visible one. – Janet Mock

”

