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CREATING POSITIVE SPACES FOR TRANS* STUDENTS

A Guidebook for Administrators, Teachers, & Support Staff

Simcoe County District School Board

"To achieve an equitable and inclusive school climate, school boards and schools will strive to ensure that all members of the school community feel safe, comfortable, and accepted" (SCDSB, 2010)

CREATING POSITIVE SPACES

RATIONALE

The Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB) is committed to providing a safe, welcoming and nurturing school environment for all youth which promotes learning and student success. The Board has sponsored conferences to build students' competencies as leaders in Gay-Straight Alliances and to create more welcoming climates for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and/or Queer (LGBTQ) students. SCDSB is also committed to raising awareness about issues related to gender violence and discrimination.

Many SCDSB schools support Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) that provide safe spaces where LGBTQ youth and allies can meet and participate in events meant to build positive and healthy relationships between students and staff. At schools where they exist, the GSAs play an important role in educating other students and staff.

This document examines some of the barriers that trans students may face in SCDSB schools and outlines best practices to ensure safe and inclusive learning environments for trans students.

> "It is the ethical, and professional duty of education workers to provide safe, equitable, and inclusive school environments for all students regardless of their actual or perceived differences." (Wells, 2012)

Evidence-based research, including valuable information gathered from the 2014 SCDSB Trans Student Focus Group Session, informs this guidebook in identifying effective practices which can support trans students in SCDSB schools. Several of the quotations contained in this document come directly from the students who participated in this focus group.

Local community members from social service agencies and LGBTQ support groups acted as consultants by reviewing this document. Their feedback was invaluable.

TERMINOLOGY TO HELP GUIDE YOU THROUGH THIS GUIDEBOOK:

Keeping in mind that all labels have limits, the definitions provided below are intended as helpful functional descriptors.

BINARY is a social system in which people are divided between being either male or female based on their biological sex at birth.

CISGENDER is someone whose self-identity conforms with the gender of their biological sex (often seen as the opposite of transgender)

CROSS-DRESSER refers to people who dress in clothing traditionally or stereotypically worn by the other sex, but who generally have no intent to live full-time as the other gender.

GENDER EXPRESSION refers to the way an individual expresses their gender identity (e.g. in the way they dress, choice of name and pronoun, grooming habits, mannerisms, activities, etc.)

GENDER IDENTITY refers to an individual's internal sense of being male, female, or something else, regardless of their biological sex. Since gender identity is internal, one's gender identity is not necessarily visible to others.

GENDER NON-CONFORMING refers to individuals who do not conform to stereotypical expectations about how they look or act based on the female or male sex they were assigned at birth (also called Gender Variance and/or Gender Independence).

"When people say I'm confused about my gender, what they really mean is that they are confused about my gender."- SCDSB student

HETERONORMATIVE denoting or relating to a world view that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation.

HOMOPHOBIC having a disparaging or hostile attitude or a negative bias, which may be overt or unspoken and which may exist as an individual and/or a systemic level, towards people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT).

INTERSEX refers to a person who has male and female genetic and/or physical sex characteristics.

QUEER is a term used to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual and, transgender people. Some use queer as an alternative to gay in an effort to be more inclusive, since the term does not convey a sense of gender. Depending on the user, the term has either a derogatory or an affirming connotation, as many have sought to reclaim the term that was once widely used in a negative way.

TRANS* OR TRANSGENDER are umbrella terms for people whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from their biological sex at birth, and/or whose gender expression is different from the way males or females are stereotypically expected to look or behave.
Trans individuals include, but are not limited to, transsexuals, cross-dressers, androgynous people, genderqueers, and gender non-conforming people. Trans and transgender are broad terms and are acceptable for non-transgender people to use.

TRANSITION is the process (which for some people may also be referred to as the "gender reassignment process") whereby people change their appearance and bodies to match their internal gender identity, while living their lives full-time in their preferred gender role.

TRANSPHOBIC having a disparaging or hostile attitude or a negative bias, which may be overt or unspoken and which may exist as an individual and/or a systemic level, towards people who are transgendered or transsexual.

TRANSSEXUAL refers to a person who undergoes a medical gender reassignment process (through hormones and/or surgery) to change their birth-assigned sex.

TWO-SPIRIT is an English term coined to reflect specific cultural words used by First Nation and other indigenous peoples for those in their cultures who are gay or lesbian, are transgendered or transsexual, or have multiple gender identities.

This is not an exhaustive list. Please note that not everyone uses every term in the same way, and these are the terminologies that are used most often. Some terms may overlap, or even shift over time to accommodate for a changing culture. We affirm that individuals should choose the words that work best for themselves.

WHAT IS GENDER?

GENDER IS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT.

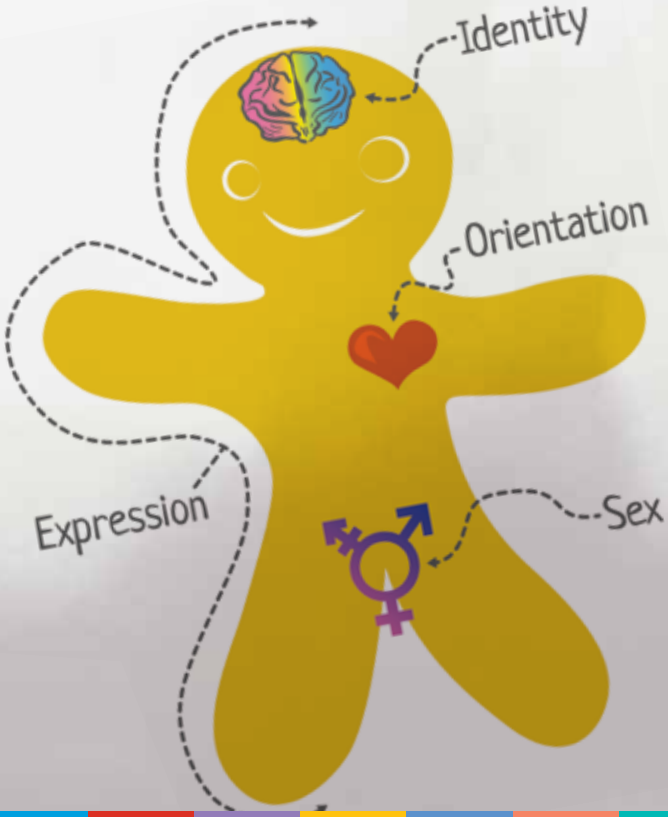
Although the understanding of gender has progressed over time to become more inclusive of members living outside of the male or female (cisgender) binary, oppressive views regarding gender identities of human beings continue to be prevalent today. Common beliefs include the understanding that one's gender is determined at birth, and that everyone is born either male or female. There is also a more troubling view that all people born male should operate in a "masculine" way, and that all females must behave in a "feminine" way.

We, as education workers and community members, must work to ensure these heteronormative assumptions and views do not affect our students' sense of safety and belonging. It is crucial for us to acknowledge and respect the identities of trans students to make our schools safe and inclusive for all.

The information introduced in this booklet is an important consideration in diversifying our views of gender and sexuality. Most terms discussed in this document were created by the LGBTQ community. At this point in time the most important part of understanding these terms is to respect them.

"People need to understand that sexual orientation is not the same thing as gender identity. As a trans person, I find it tough because a lot of other students assume that being trans affects my sexuality, so they assume that I will be attracted to them." - SCDSB student

The "Genderbread Person" (found on the following page) serves as a strong visual representation of the separate spectrums on which we exist, including gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation.



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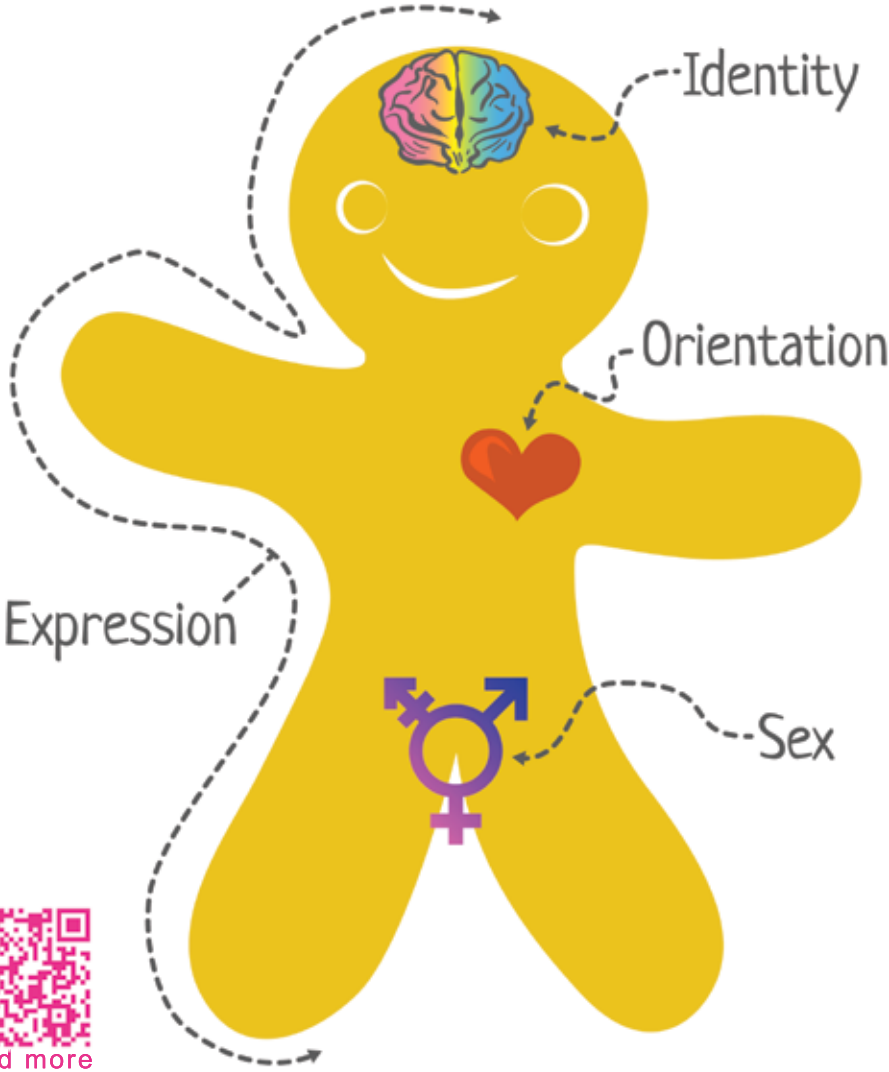

read more

read Person

by www.ItsPronouncedMetrosexual.com

Gender Identity

Woman — Genderqueer — Man

Gender identity is how you, in your head, think about yourself. It's the chemistry that composes you (e.g., hormonal levels) and how you interpret what that means.

Gender Expression

Feminine — Androgynous — Masculine

Gender expression is how you demonstrate your gender (based on traditional gender roles) through the ways you act, dress, behave, and interact.

Biological Sex

Female — Intersex — Male

Biological sex refers to the objectively measurable organs, hormones, and chromosomes. Female = vagina, ovaries, XX chromosomes; male = penis, testes, XY chromosomes; intersex = a combination of the two.

Sexual Orientation

Heterosexual — Bisexual — Homosexual

Sexual orientation is who you are physically, spiritually, and emotionally attracted to, based on their sex/gender in relation to your own.

"In schools that have made efforts to introduce LGBT-inclusive policies, GSAs, and even some LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, the climate is significantly more positive for sexual and gender minority students" (Taylor, 2011).

WHY IS THIS AN IMPORTANT ISSUE TO ADDRESS IN OUR SCHOOLS?

Students who begin questioning gender and gender identity will most likely begin this process as young adults although many youth are presenting at younger ages (Wells, 2012). Not all youth who identify as trans will openly disclose their true identity because of possible feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety and fear of rejection or violence (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010).

LGBTQ youth are more vulnerable to incidents of verbal, physical and sexual violence (Taylor, 2011). An important finding from *The Simcoe County LGBT Youth Needs Assessment Report: Making It Better Today* states that:

46.9% of participants experienced homophobic comments on a daily basis

31.7% experienced transphobic and negative gender related comments daily (Ham, 2012)

3,700 LGBTQ students across Canada were surveyed over a period of time from 2007 to 2009 as part of the Egale Canada Human Rights Trust (EGALE) national climate survey. The survey reports that:

74% of trans students experience verbal harassment

37% experience physical assault because of gender expression

64% of the students surveyed reported that they felt unsafe at school (Taylor, 2011)

Research indicates that in some North American districts, as many as three-quarters of trans youth drop out of school as a result of feeling unsafe (Sausa, 2005). Trans students also suffer from higher rates of mental health issues including depression, anxiety, and suicide (CMHA, 2008). Again, not all trans students will self-disclose especially in a climate where they feel unsafe. A key finding from *The Simcoe County LGBT Youth Needs Assessment Report: Making It Better Today* was that Gay-Straight Alliances and the Lesbian Gay Bi Trans Youth Line have [historically] been the only resources accessible to LGBTQQ youth in Simcoe County (Ham, 2012).

Research shows that trans youth will often seek out a person who they can trust in disclosing their identity. Education workers may be the first point of contact for questioning youth. For students who begin to identify as trans, accommodations will need to occur in our schools in the most appropriate and respectful ways in order to create safe, respectful and welcoming learning environments.

WHAT TRANS STUDENTS WANT US TO KNOW:

When preparing a document meant to support the safety and belonging of students, it is critical to gather and use student voice. For this reason, trans youth in SCDSB schools were consulted, and have identified the following issues as influencing safe learning environments for trans students:

ISSUES SURROUNDING SAFETY:

"I feel safe in the classroom BUT I don't feel safe using the bathrooms in the school. A lot of the guys in our school are biased. It's awkward. When I can, I leave the building and go to the public library" (The bathroom the student referred to is across the street in an adjacent building).

"In my Grade 9 gym class, I got my bra stolen and was told I was in the wrong area. I don't identify as either male or female."

"Health class needs to be expanded. I wish they would take the health class out of the gym class and expand it so it actually met my needs."

ISSUES SURROUNDING INCLUSION AND BELONGING:

"It would be great if the class and school information forms included a question asking students to identify as male, female, gender-neutral or other."

"In some classes, teachers ignore homophobic or transphobic comments. This should NOT be ignored. This kind of thing doesn't have an impact on me, but especially for people who are just coming out, it could make them feel ashamed."

STUDENT VOICE

"People changed lots of other personal things all the time. They dyed their hair and dieted themselves to near death. They took steroids to build muscles and got breast implants and nose jobs so they'd resemble their favorite movie stars. They changed names and majors and jobs and husbands and wives. They changed religions and political parties. They moved across the country or the world -- even changed nationalities. Why was gender the one sacred thing we weren't supposed to change? Who made that rule?" *Ellen Wittlinger, an excerpt from Parrotfish*

It's funny how hard life can be as a trans person while in high school; fearing or being rejected by parents and friends while battling inner demons. It can be one of the most depressing parts of your life, though when you find that one person who you tell and they smile and say "I know" and they're there for you, it's like you have a new sword to fight your demons with and a new shield to deflect their words. Submitted by *Anon*

WHAT CAN ADMINISTRATORS DO?

"In a truly equitable system, factors such as race, gender, and socio-economic status do not prevent students from achieving ambitious outcomes. Our experience shows that barriers can be removed when all education partners create the conditions needed for success" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p.8).

SCDSB's Policy 3130, Equity and Inclusive Education (EIE), and its related procedures are designed to ensure equitable and inclusive learning and working environments. Below are some of the effective practices for schools and administrators.

POLICIES & SCHOOL PROCEDURES

- Review and implement proactive school anti-harassment policies which deal with transphobic comments and/or violent actions. Practices which benefit trans youth will also benefit all students.
- Create inclusive school policies and procedures (e.g. do the images and text in your school's dress code include consideration for the continuum of gender and sexual identity?)
- Include inclusive language on school-created forms (e.g. replace gender-specific pronouns with gender-neutral plural options, namely "they" and "them").
- Ensure that trans students feel represented in school resources, including literature, décor and Gay-Straight Alliances (e.g. when you do an equity walkthrough of your school, are trans students represented?)
- Schools can acknowledge, raise the transgender flag, or plan an event to occur around November 20th, Transgender Day of Remembrance.
- Designate at least one all-gender washroom in the school, preferably close to the gymnasium to act as an all-gender change room.
- Ensure guidance counselors are aware of options for students to substitute up to three (3) compulsory credits (e.g. Grade 9 Physical Education).

- Ensure that there are LGBTQ and trans specific resources and information available for students (print and web based) in Guidance or other appropriate areas of the school

EDUCATION & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF STAFF

- Become informed. Some trans students may be willing to serve as resource people for staff education. In some cases, with student permission, students' family members may be willing to serve as advocates who can provide information to staff members (e.g. include a trans student on your school's Equity Team)
- Use correct terminology and language in referring to trans youth. Be sure to stay current on the use of terminology and language, as these are evolving with the culture of the times. If you don't know, ask the trans students themselves.
- Invite LGBTQ-identified guest speakers to assemblies.
- Provide staff training and/or identify staff who can work with trans students who are experiencing challenges.
- Provide opportunities for school council members to increase awareness about trans and/or LGBTQ youth experiences and health concerns.
- Don't be afraid to ask trans students questions privately, but be discreet.
- Treat trans youth with the same respect everyone should receive.
- Seek guidance and/or assistance from the Equity and Inclusive Education (EIE) support staff at the Board

ADMINISTRATIVE AND MANAGEMENT ISSUES

- React immediately to harassment and identify the specific behaviour as being homophobic or transphobic.
- Identify allies and caring adults in your school. Students especially value knowing when there are self-identified LGBTQ adults working in their school.
- Provide trans youth with strategies for facing violence and/or rejection

WHAT CAN EDUCATION WORKERS DO?

SCDSB's Policy 3130, Equity and Inclusive Education (EIE), and its related procedures are designed to ensure equitable and inclusive learning and working environments.

All students in our schools and classrooms should be able to say, "I feel safe. I feel I belong."

Below are the effective practices for teachers and support staff.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Become informed (e.g. know and understand both the Ministry and SCDSB EIE policies; use local and web resources; seek the support of allies among your colleagues; seek the support of the Equity & Inclusive Education support staff at the Board)
- Physical Education teachers face particular challenges in supporting trans youth, given issues in change room spaces; focused professional development for Physical Education Teachers would be valuable.
- Use correct terminology and language in referring to trans youth.

CURRICULUM & LEARNING

- Challenge gender stereotypes and integrate transpositive content into the teaching of all subject areas
- Use LGBTQ books, media, pictures as part of your everyday curriculum
- Include the terms gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender when describing various people and families
- Use teachable moments to address transphobia or homophobia
- Invite LGBTQ-identified guest speakers into your classroom or school.
- Do an equity walkthrough of your classroom space, resources and teaching materials, as well as your language and delivery models
- Incorporate learning materials (e.g. films and literature) that highlight trans individuals.

- Provide inclusive sexual health education that reflects the range of student identities and experiences.
- Create a bulletin board with a list of community resources for all students with specific resources for LGBTQ-identified students.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

- Create inclusive practices and class rules. Practices which benefit trans youth will also benefit all students.
- Create a safe space in your classroom that prohibits homophobic and transphobic comments or behaviours.
- Survey your students to ask their preferred gender pronouns.
- React immediately to harassment and identify the specific behaviour as being homophobic or transphobic.
- Do not divide the class according to gender for activities, games, or the classroom seating plan.
- Ask open-ended questions when talking about families (e.g. use the terms partner, families, or guardians to include LGBTQ families)

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

SIMCOE COUNTY LGBT YOUTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Ham, M., & Byrch, L. (2012, May). *The Simcoe County LGBT Youth Needs Assessment Report: Making it Better Today.* Barrie, ON: Byrch Consulting & Associates.

Retrieved from: http://www.acsc.ca/Making-It-Better-Today-Report.pdf

POLICY AND PRACTICE REFERENCE BOOKS

Canadian Labour Congress. (2007). *To Our Allies: Everything you ever wanted to know about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans issues. Accessible online at:* http://www.canadianlabour.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/AlliesBooklet2007-EN1.pdf

Canadian Teachers' Federation. (2006). *Gay-Straight Student Alliance Handbook: A Comprehensive Resource for Canadian K-12 Teachers, Administrators and School Counsellors.* Canadian Teachers' Federation.

Ontario Ministry of Education (2009, April). *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy.* Retrieved from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.pdf

Simcoe County District School Board. *SCDSB Equity and Inclusive Education Multi-Year Plan, 2011-2014.* Midhurst: SCDSB, 2010. http://www.scdsb.on.ca/About%20Us/Multi%20Year%20Plan%20Documents/ Equity-and-Inclusive-Education-Multi-Year-Plan.pdf

Wells, K., Roberts, G., and Allan, C. (2012). *Supporting Transgender and Transsexual Students in K-12 Schools: A Guide for Educators.* Ottawa, ON: Canadian Teachers' Federation.

RESEARCH

Baboudjian, N., Corrigan, S., Grant, N. Lavender, J. and Sullivan, N. (2011, April). Creating Positive Space. The new anti-homophobia network in Ontario schools. Education Forum.24-27

Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario. *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Trans People and Mental Health* http://ontario.cmha.ca/mental-health/lesbian-gay-bisexual-trans-people-and-mental-health/

Lushington, K. (2010, June). Building Inclusive Schools: Policy into Practice – Addressing Homophobia. *Professionally Speaking.* 28-34.

Sausa, Lydia A. (2005). *Translating Research into Practice: Trans Youth Recommendations for Improving School Systems.* Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education, 3(1), 15-28.

Taylor, Catherine & Peter, Tracey. Every class in every school: The first national climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools: Final report. Toronto: Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, 2011.

NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

EGALE Canada: A Canadian organization fighting for "*Equality For Gays and Lesbians Everywhere*". www.egale.ca; www.mygsa.ca

Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) www.glsen.org

Gay and Lesbian Educators from B.C. (GALE) www.galebc.org

Kids Help Phone, www.kidshelpphone.ca

Lesbian Gay Bi Trans Youthline, www.youthline.ca 1-800-268-YOUTH

Need Help Now, you[th] are not alone, www.needhelpnow.ca

PFLAG Canada www.pflagcanada.ca

Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth, www.provincialadvocate.on.ca, #beourally

Public Health Agency of Canada. Questions & Answers: Gender Identity in Schools. Ottawa: Minister of Health, 2010. *http://www.sieccan.org/pdf/phac_genderidentity_qa-eng.pdf*

Rainbow Health Ontario www.RainbowHealthOntario.ca

Trans Health Connection - a project of Rainbow Health Ontario and Sherbourne Health Centre. http://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/transhealthconnection/home.cfm

Ontario Human Rights Commission. Gender identity and gender expression.

http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/gender-identity-and-gender-expression-brochure

This introductory brochure can be downloaded. The OHRC website also contains detailed information about laws on harassment and discrimination.

FOR FURTHER READING - EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) and Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO). (2002). *Seeing the Rainbow. Teachers Talk About Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and Two-Spirited Realities.* Ottawa, ON: Canadian Teachers' Federation and Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario.

Canadian Teachers' Federation. (2005). Lessons Learned: *A Collection of Stories and Articles about Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Issues.* Ottawa, ON: Canadian Teachers' Federation.

ETFO: *LGBT Resources (Welcoming & Supporting LBGT Families; Positive Space, Positive Place; Take Action Kit; Imagine a world that is Free from Fear; Social Justice Begins with Me)*, Toronto, ON: Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario resources; www.etfo.ca

OSSTF Educational Services Department. (2010). *Creating Spaces: Embedding Equity in Education.* Toronto, ON: Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, with the support of the Ontario Ministry of Education.

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"To those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender – let me say – you are not alone. Your struggle, for the end to violence and discrimination, is a shared struggle. Today, I stand with you. And I call upon all countries and people to stand with you too.

A historic shift is underway. We must tackle the violence, decriminalize consensual same sex relationships and end discrimination. We must educate the public. I call on this council and people of conscience to make it happen.

The time has come."

Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary-General, United Nations

Simcoe County District School Board