

Dear VSB Board:

As the parent of three sons each of whom received education from the VSB (Franklin Elementary School and Templeton Secondary School) and who remain grateful for the high quality of care they generally received from teachers in that system, and as a professional ethicist, I write to support the letter of Ms. Cheryl Chang urging you to **defer consideration of this agenda item re gender dysphoria—or to defeat it.**

I sympathize with the children who feel marginalized in our schools. I grew up in a small city in northern Ontario: almost entirely white, with the only black guys in my school being the two American brothers (their dad was an Air Force officer assigned to the nearby CFB) with whom I played basketball and music. They confided in me sometimes what it was like for them, and that was my *second* education in being a minority. My *first* was growing up in a conservative Christian church such that our values were regularly treated as mere bigotry or stupidity by many of the well-meaning and progressive educators among my teachers and principals.

There is, as I trust you will appreciate, more than one axis along which people can be mistreated in the name of majority values.

Ethnicity and sex, with which this situation is too easily compared, just aren't the same as gender identity. You're black, I'm white; you're female, I'm male; and those are givens. Human beings deserve to be treated as human beings. The proposed policy, as I read it, however, is not merely prescribing justice to an unjust situation. It prescribes a form of *institutional therapy* on a matter of *mental health* that involves *plastic and shifting outlooks*—and a matter, furthermore, on which there is nothing like expert consensus. To reduce the question to mere justice seems to me to be a well-meant category mistake, and well educated people such as school board members need to help those they serve see that difference.

Those who promote this proposal say that they want the best for all kids. I'm sure they do. I, too, want the best for all kids, yet I oppose the policy. So let's be clear that one's merely wanting to help all kids doesn't mean that one preferred policy or another is *ipso facto* better for all kids. Our obligation instead is not merely to weigh our own motives but to do the best thing according to the best knowledge we can find. If it emerges over the next while, therefore, that these proposals are the best ways to help all kids cope with the wide range of gender- and sexuality-related questions in a high school, I'll be all for them. My concern is simply this: The VSB is about to rush ahead of where the experts are, and that seems to me to be, at the very least, dangerously unwise.

Instead, I suggest the following considerations:

- Teachers already have more than enough to do without asking them to take sides in complex and unresolved social and medical questions such as this one. Let them teach their subjects well, and refer troubled children to appropriate mental health resources.
- Gender dysphoria is a matter disputed at the highest levels of psychological and psychiatric expertise. The most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-V) only begins to reflect the deep differences among the top experts in this field. For the VSB to run ahead of the experts here would be dangerous and arrogant. And it could well open up the VSB to lawsuits we can ill afford.

(For popular level introductions, see Hannah Rosin, "[A Boy's Life](#)," *The Atlantic* [2008]; and Margaret Talbot, "[About a Boy](#)," *The New Yorker* [2013].)

- There is no reason to hurry on this question. Individual cases can be provided for well according to the 2004 policy, while the VSB can *be sure* that many children will be uncomfortable and even traumatized by the presence of members of the other sex in bathrooms, change rooms, gym classes, swimming classes, and the like. To knowingly plan to discomfit and discourage thousands of young people in the disputed interests of the very, very few is not enlightened, but doctrinaire.

It is tempting especially for those of us who wrestled with minority identities in school to identify strongly with the gender dysphoric kid at the centre of this policy. But our obligation as adults is to identify also with the "majority-values" kid whose struggles with self-image, sexual maturity, gender roles, and the like deserve protection and gentle treatment just as much as any other's. We really have to know we're right before we put many, many kids into troubling situations in restrooms, change rooms, gym classes, and the like. And I cannot see how VSB trustees can presume to know you're right on this one, given the state of the science.

So: Let the experts sort this out, keep caring for kids according to the current policy, and let teachers teach. And let's wait prudently for grounds adequate to justify these sweeping changes, if those grounds ever emerge.

Yours sincerely,

John G. Stackhouse, Jr., Ph.D.