

**Community partners Teaching and Encouraging Acceptance
to Counteract Homophobia and Heterosexism (CTEACH)
c/o 42 Dixon St., Thunder Bay, ON P7B 3J5**

August 30, 2004

Marilyn Gouthro
Director of Education
2135 Sills St.
Thunder Bay, ON P7E 5T2

Dear Mrs. Gouthro,

This letter is written to express our indignation, frustration and extreme disappointment at the perceived failure of the Lakehead District School Board and its administrators to seriously address the systemic bullying and harassment pertaining to sexual orientation that occurs in Thunder Bay schools. Although the Board may feel that the concerns we brought forward have been addressed by the letter dated 14 June 2004, we wish to inform you that this is not the case.

On the nineteenth of November 2003, Gabe Picard, a student, brought the issue of homophobic and heterosexist harassment to the surface following an incident at Hillcrest High School. To his credit, the principal of Hillcrest did take action with the immediate problem. However, it soon became clear that this was not an isolated event but merely one episode in an ongoing and systemic pattern of bullying and harassment regarding sexual orientation. Given the systemic nature of this problem, it was decided by Gabe's family and the school principal that the issue would be best addressed on a Board-wide scale.

To this end, Ellen Chambers Picard, Gabe's mother, attempted to address this issue with senior Board administrators, but both Mr. Sutherland and Mrs. Gouthro refused to meet with her. To quote Mr. Sutherland, "I feel we are dealing with it correctly." As a result of this refusal a group of concerned people, (CTEACH), met to find a way to address the issue of homophobic harassment. Subsequently, a letter was sent to Mr. Ron Oikonen, requesting a chance to outline these concerns to the Trustees, as per the procedures. In his letter of 10 May 2004, Mr. Oikonen refused CTEACH's requests, stating that the Board of Trustees was not the "appropriate venue." Instead, "the Chairman of the Board asked that this matter lie in Instructional Services" (as Ms Pharand stated to us in our meeting on 2 June 2004).

It was clear from Mr. Oikonen's letter that he either misunderstood the intent, or was unwilling to look at the real issue. However, we optimistically looked forward to our meeting with the Board on 2 June 2004. During that meeting we expressed a number of

times the need for direction from the highest levels of the Board in order to ensure that existing policies are fully implemented.

There is evidence from several sources that this is a systemic problem that has been previously identified by many students and some staff. However, there has been no inclination to try and address the problem. Unfortunately administrators seem at a loss as to what to do without clear direction from the Board. The only solution that was presented to Gabe was that he report every incident to the principals so that the consequences could be meted out on a case-by-case basis. This was disappointing to Gabe and he felt unprotected due to the fact that the school was unwilling or unable to be proactive in addressing homophobic harassment. Responding to Gabe Picard's parents' concerns about what the School Board could do, several administrators suggested that "this is Thunder Bay," that "he could transfer," that "there are many things the Lakehead Board doesn't teach, [for example] we don't teach creationism," and "we don't teach alternate lifestyles," and that "you can't change a culture."

In fact, the Lakehead Board is known for being proactive, changing culture and direction most recently with proposed changes to the Board restructuring. If the school system can't "change a culture," as quoted here, then it is a complete failure as an educational system when it comes to human rights. Individual teachers have been able to effect change and reduce harassment simply by being clear about what is expected. A Safe Schools Committee Report from 1997 identified the problem and even recommended solutions. There has obviously been no follow-through, as this report came from the same school that Gabe Picard has attended. However, this issue is not confined to one school, it is a system problem. Over a number of years, students attending a support group repeatedly complained about the failure of the schools to deal with harassment around sexual orientation.

At the outset of our meeting with the Board on 2 June, we made it *very* clear that we were looking for real solutions to a serious long-seated and ongoing problem in the high schools. We were forthright in our request for action that would benefit the students and gave a number of positive suggestions to help the Board achieve this. We quoted policies that are not being implemented and pointed out that good intentions amount to nothing without the actions to back them up. For example, Policy 7030 states: ". . . all employees, students, Trustees and volunteers have the right to freedom from harassment because of . . . sexual orientation. Harassment will not be tolerated." Despite this policy, it appears that no one thus far has been prepared to address this as the serious problem it is. In short, it appears that Policy 7030 of the Lakehead District School Board has never been put into action in its entirety.

While Policy 8070 is quoted in the Board's response to us, it is our observation, and Gabe's experience, that the Board has not put its "beliefs" into action. Beliefs, opinions and attitudes are all meaningless without action. Should you, Mrs. Gouthro, ask Gabe if he has felt safe in his learning environment, his answer would be an unequivocal "no." He suffered weekly, often daily, abusive comments concerning sexual orientation directed

at him from his peers, for four years of high school. He listened to putdowns regarding “gayness” going unchecked in the presence of some teachers. Again, there has been no evidence provided by the Board, or experienced by students, that this Policy is anything more than a few meaningless words filling up space in the Board’s binder of Policy and Procedures. It is more than discouraging, it is reprehensible to have empty platitudes given to us as examples of what the Lakehead District School Board is doing. Some children in Lakehead District schools are unsafe every day, forced to endure harassment silently every day and yet are expected to learn about tolerance, acceptance *and* the rest of the Ontario curriculum.

In accordance with the Safe Schools Act, Policy 8070 also states that “prevention and intervention programs are essential to teaching appropriate behaviours and self-discipline.” In a learning environment where homophobic harassment occurs without consequence, students “learn” that this sort of abuse is an acceptable behaviour. Moreover, students learn that homophobic abuse is tolerated by those in positions of authority and by society in general. We would like a response *in writing* that will show Gabe, and all other students who have endured such abuses, that the Board has implemented this policy in a systematic way. We challenge the Board to give *written proof* that the Lakehead District School Board “provid[ed] opportunities for all staff to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to develop and maintain a welcoming and safe school environment.” (Policy 8070 E, Staff Development) We also suggest that the Board review Policy 8070 3.1, School Environment, and *explain to us fully* how this policy is being implemented in regard to the issue of systemic homophobic bullying and harassment, and how the Board will “establish a safe and secure school environment.” Please see the attached list for other policies that require review in terms of sexual orientation and harassment.

The Board, through Ms Pharand’s letter (14 June), gives only two suggestions to deal with the issue of systemic bullying and harassment regarding sexual orientation. Conducting a gap analysis of current resources, while important, is futile unless the Board is willing to commit to adding resources, initiatives and programs that reflect the sexual orientation of all students in our diverse school community. The Board makes no mention of, and is careful to avoid, commitment on this issue. The Board does not even name the problem as “homophobic and heterosexist bullying and harassment in the Lakehead District School Board.” The Board does not even state what some possible next steps arising from this analysis would be.

It is interesting that the Board will “continue to explore bullying prevention initiatives with our principals.” Yet, in conversation with two principals on this particular point, they are unaware of any current or past initiatives from the Board regarding bullying prevention. Clearly the Board is not sharing its initiatives with all of its principals.

From our perspective the Board’s response is an attempt to whitewash the whole issue and has diluted our entire meeting, as stated, to “shar[ing] resources and the promotion of

acceptance of all children in our schools.” The letter totally ignored the real problem, which is the failure of the Board and senior administration to ensure that existing policy is implemented properly. Even the fact that Gabe Picard has filed a complaint with the Ontario Human Rights Commission did not seem to make any impact. We suggest that the Board and senior administration review the “Policy on Discrimination and Harassment Because of Sexual Orientation” at the Ontario Human Rights Commission (www.ohrc.on.ca). If the intention of the Board is to value each individual, why is it that this intention needs further examination rather than a clear directive? The downplaying of this issue as the mere “provision” of a resource list is insulting to say the least. There has been, as it appears to us, an ongoing attempt to sweep our demands under the table and drag things out endlessly in the hopes that they will go away.

The School Board has the responsibility and obligation to address the issue of homophobic harassment in its schools. Although existing policies may need to be revised and enhanced, it is certainly clear that Policy 7030 has not been implemented with regard to “sexual orientation.” This failure on the part of the Board and administration not only affects those students and staff who may be gay or lesbian, it affects all students and staff and creates a poisoned atmosphere for everyone. It is the duty of a publicly funded educational system to ensure that all students are safe in its schools, and have the opportunity to grow up to become tolerant, accepting and unbigoted citizens.

School boards elsewhere in the province have recognized this responsibility and have taken constructive action. We have already provided the Board with the Action Plan adopted by the Thames Valley District School Board, which offers a possible model. Other boards such as Peel and Toronto can also provide excellent guidance.

We offer the following plan of action to address the problems of homophobia and heterosexism in the Lakehead District School Board.

We recommend that the Board:

- 1) establish gay/straight alliances for students in all high schools this school year.
- 2) consent to a presentation by CTEACH and other community agencies to the Board of Trustees to identify issues and offer a further plan of action and community resources.
- 3)a. make an active commitment to existing policy.
 - b. provide direction to administration, including principals, to implement policy.
 - c. review all policies to make sure they are up-to-date and relevant regarding the rights of all students in respect to sexual orientation
- 4) provide training on gay and lesbian issues to school principals, guidance/student service counsellors, teachers.

- 5) access resources and services dealing with homophobia and creating a safe school environment in this regard, which are readily available through OSSTF and ETFO.
- 6) commit to ending homophobia and heterosexism, and creating a safe school environment for all students, particularly lesbian and gay students.
- 7) ensure that policy and procedure, particularly in respect to the issues discussed here, be transparent and widely communicated, and accessible eg. Board/school web sites, brochures, student codes of conduct, newsletters, classroom discussion, school councils, parent forums, etc.
- 8) establish a time line for the implementation of these new initiatives.

It is our intention to help ensure that the Lakehead District School Board implements current policies so that all students can learn without enduring the awful burden of bullying and harassment pertaining to sexual orientation. As a diverse group of concerned individuals, we have a vast amount of human resources, print information, knowledge and expertise that we are willing to share to guarantee that positive change occurs. Please contact us as you set up committees to deal with these issues as we are more than interested in sitting on them and offering our help and perspective, (Policy 8070 3.6).

We have sent copies of this letter to all of the Trustees and to the others listed below in order to make sure that all are aware of the seriousness of this issue. The larger Lakehead District School Board community also deserves to know about this regrettable situation. Promises of further analysis and continued exploration of initiatives need to be followed by immediate action. Children's well-being and safety depend on it. We are expecting a comprehensive reply in writing, with time lines included, as soon as possible. Please expect follow-up action if we do not receive a reply within two weeks of receipt of this letter.

Sincerely,

David Belrose

Gabriel Picard

Ellen Chambers Picard

for Community partners Teaching and Encouraging Acceptance to Counteract Homophobia and Heterosexism (CTEACH)

cc.

Sherri-Lynne Pharand, Supervising Principal

Lise Haman, Superintendent of Instructional Services

Ian Sutherland, Superintendent of Employee and Community Services

Ron Oikonen, Chair

Trudy Tuchenhausen, Vice Chair

Richard Burton, Trustee

Lori Lukinuk, Trustee

Jack Playford, Trustee

Ron Mokomela, Trustee

Deborah Massaro, Trustee

Beatrice Metzler, Trustee

Gerard Kennedy, Minister of Education

Bill Mauro, M.P.P.

Michael Gravelle, M.P.P.

Chris Lofts, President, LETO

Terry Hamilton, President, OSSTF

Carlos Santander-Maturana, Chair, Human Rights OSSTF

Patricia Moore, Chair, Human Rights ETFO

Nancy Wallace, Chair, Human Rights LETO

Ontario Human Rights Commission, G. Picard file

Cristiene Hall, Barrister

EGALE Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere

Policies that require review:

Personal and Sexual Harassment Policy:

7030, 2 Policy

7030, 4.5.1 Possible Effects and Results of Harassment (to the Complainant)

7030, 4.5.2 Possible Effects and Results of Harassment (for the Board)

7030, 4.8 Scope

7030, 4.9 (4.9.1, 4.9.2, 4.9.3) Administrative Responsibilities

Safe Schools Policy - System Expectations:

8070, 1 Rational

8070, 2 The policy

8070, 3 System Expectations A. The School Environment

8070, 3 System Expectations B. Violence Prevention in the Curriculum

8070, 3 System Expectations C. Intervention Program

8070, 3 System Expectations D. Code of Conduct

8070, 3 System Expectations E. Staff Development

8070, 3 System Expectations F. Roles and Responsibilities

Further to the overall policies outlined above there are specific sub-policies that have not been implemented to the greatest degree.

Safe Schools Policy - System Expectations:

8070, 3.1, 1i The School Environment

8070, 3.2i,ii,iii,iv,v,vi,vii Violence Prevention in the Curriculum

8070, 3.3 Intervention Program

8070, 3.4vi Code of Conduct

8070, 3.5 Staff Development

8070, 3.6 Roles and Responsibilities

Some particularly pertinent policies from 3.6:

All school members must:

- respect and comply with all applicable federal, provincial and municipal laws
- respect differences in people, their ideas and opinions
- respect and treat others fairly, regardless of their . . . gender or sexual orientation

Parents/Guardians will:

- iv. be invited to information sessions about the policies;
- v. be encouraged to assume a leadership role in the development of procedures and practices to support the policies.