

Feb. 13, 2023

### An Open Letter to the RCCDSB Community

We have received many requests from our community to provide comment with respect to widespread media reports around the events that have taken place at St. Joseph's High School on both November 25, 2022 and on February 6, 2023. While for confidentiality reasons, we are unable to speak about the specific matter or provide any personal information about any student, we can, however, provide the following:

The Renfrew County Catholic District School Board deeply respects religious freedoms. This is fundamental to our values as a Catholic school board. Our Mission states:

'We are an inclusive Catholic learning community called to love unconditionally and educate hearts and minds in the way of Christ'.

As a community of believers, we strive to reverence the dignity of the whole person. The Board deeply respects human rights and by doing so, we nurture the well-being, self-worth, and potential of each individual. In matters of human rights, the Board draws on guidance from the policies issued by the Ontario Human Rights Commission and directives issued by the Ministry of Education.

As a guiding principle, the Renfrew County Catholic District School Board's top priority is the safety and well-being of our students. As part of a Catholic community, we expect that values will be expressed respectfully and in a way that is not harmful to others. While all our students are entitled - and encouraged - to share their beliefs – it cannot be at the expense of others. No one should be made to feel unsafe or marginalized. Bullying behaviour that creates an unsafe space for our students is not tolerated.

Many have asked for clarification of our washroom use policy/practice. We adhere to the following statement found on the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) web page – 13.4 Washrooms and Change Rooms:

#### 13.4.1 Access based on lived gender identity

Access to washrooms is a basic physical need at the core of human dignity for everyone. Yet washrooms cause significant barriers for trans people and are one of the public spaces they avoid most.[117]

The Code allows for restriction of services or facilities to persons of the same sex for reason of "public decency." [118] Facilities such as washrooms, change rooms and locker rooms are typically segregated based on sex. Trans people have the right to access these facilities based on their lived gender identity.

An organization's washroom facilities and any related policy should not negatively affect trans people. A trans person who identifies and lives as a man should have access to the men's washrooms and change rooms. A trans person who identifies and lives as a woman should have access to the women's washrooms and change rooms.

A trans person should not be required to use a separate washroom or change room because others express discomfort or transphobic attitudes, such as, "trans women are a threat to other women." Trans people themselves are at risk of harassment and violence when using these facilities.[120] Education and awareness will help dispel these kinds of stereotypes.

The majority of washrooms within RCCDSB and St. Joseph's High School are restricted by sex, and we do have universal gender-neutral single use washrooms available to all. However, the OHRC is equally clear that individuals have the right to utilize the washroom of their lived gender identity.

It is important to note, that we take a pastoral care approach with our community members who identify within the LGBTQ2S+ community. Part of this pastoral care approach for our trans youth are conversations around safety, bullying, harassment, and the process the student is following during their transition and what types of wrap-around care the school can provide to support the student and their family. The question of utilizing the restricted washroom of their lived gender is a process of support that takes time, and the question of safety is paramount during this process. We share this as some of the framing put forth by those who organized the protest at SJHS is that boys are utilizing the girls' washrooms and vice versa on a large scale. This is not the case and, as indicated above, for the trans youth across our school board, we do provide as much support and care as we can. For some of these youth, a final decision is made to access the washroom of their lived gender and we walk with them and support them during this process.

To our brothers and sisters in Christ, as we learn together, we truly hope that within the fullness of time we will come to a deeper understanding of those with different life experiences and find a way to support each other while ensuring that all our community feels safe and loved within our Catholic schools.

I conclude this open letter with a request to all. While I understand there may not always be agreement, I do ask that your communications with the Board be respectful, without hostility or harassment, and not to the detriment or well-being and safety of others. It is our expectation that we can work together with civility. To be clear, the Board will not tolerate any harassing or threatening communications to its staff. Such communications have been and will continue to be directed to the OPP. The safety and security of our staff and students is our priority.

If you have any communications on this issue, please do not direct these to any individual member of our staff. Please forward to [talk.now@rccdsb.ca](mailto:talk.now@rccdsb.ca)

Yours in Catholic Education,

Mark Searson

Director of Education