

Vancouver Catholic schools adopt transgender policy



James Keller, The Canadian Press

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VANCOUVER -- Catholic schools in Vancouver have adopted a policy that could allow transgender students to use the pronouns, uniforms and washrooms that match their gender identity after a human rights complaint forced the local archdiocese to balance its religious teachings with the rights of transgender children.

The lawyer for the 11-year-old transgender girl behind the complaint says Catholic Independent Schools of the Vancouver Archdiocese appears to be the first Catholic school board in North America to implement such a policy.

Tracey Wilson's doctors determined she had gender dysphoria, but the Catholic school she attended indicated it could not accommodate her request to be treated as a girl.

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Wilson's family moved Tracey and her siblings to the public school system and filed a human rights complaint, which has now been resolved with the school board's new policy.

"This is, as far as we know, certainly a North American first and probably a world first," said the Wilson family's lawyer, Barbara Findlay, who spells her name without capital letters.

"Not only is it important for the students in Vancouver who go to Catholic schools, but it will serve as a template for other Catholic school districts everywhere."

The document, released by the archdiocese Wednesday, said students' needs will be handled on a case-by-case basis. The independent school board said students and their families can formally request to be accommodated, and a case management team consisting of doctors, teachers and a pastor will come up with a plan for each student.

Such plans could include using a student's preferred name, gender pronoun and uniform.

Doug Lauson, the superintendent for Catholic Independent Schools of the Vancouver Archdiocese, said students could be permitted to use the washroom that matches their gender identity or be given access to a private washroom.

Instead of transgender, the school board prefers to use the term gender dysphoria, which is defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as having a "marked difference between the individual's expressed/experienced gender and the gender others would assign him or her."

The policy stresses gender "expression" and notes Catholic teaching says people cannot change their sexual or gender identity. The document says the school cannot support or accommodate a student who wants to transition from one gender to another.

Lauson said the policy strikes an appropriate balance between meeting the needs of students and respecting the school board's religious teachings.

"We are people of the Catholic faith. Our schools will be as inclusive as we can while still retaining our Catholic identity."

Tracey, who is preparing to enter Grade 6, has spent nearly two years in the public system, which she describes as "amazing." She and her siblings have no plans to return to her former Catholic school.

Tracey said she hopes her story -- and the policy she helped create -- will help other transgender children.

"When I was going through the process of noticing my difference, I felt alone and not accepted and it was very hard," she said in an interview.

"It was just a horrible process and I don't want that to happen to anybody else."

With the release of the policy, the Wilsons have agreed to drop their human rights complaint. The family will also receive an undisclosed payment from the archdiocese.

School boards and other public institutions across Canada have been struggling with how to approach transgender students.

The Vancouver School Board recently updated its own policy for transgender students after a contentious debate that saw critics musing about whether the policy would scare away international students and hurt property values.

The city's parks board also approved new rules earlier this year to accommodate transgender people in local park facilities.

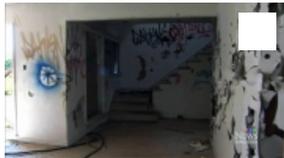
The Wilsons' lawyer said Vancouver has made significant progress recognizing transgender rights, and she said the new policy for Catholic schools is now part of that.

"This case together with the Vancouver school board and the parks board cases have made Vancouver a leader," said Findlay.

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