

## **Position Statement** (V.2)

### *Supporting students with gender dysphoria: the approach of the Catholic Schools Office Diocese of Maitland Newcastle*

This paper sets out the guiding principles upon which the Catholic Schools Office and the Diocese of Maitland Newcastle base their approach in supporting students with Gender Dysphoria. This paper also establishes a process to guide Diocesan Catholic School Principals in managing requests for such support.

According to the statement on *The Nature and Purpose of the Catholic School* (2010), schools in the Diocese of Maitland Newcastle commit to:

- nurturing each individual's growth in faith and unique potential
- offering outstanding educational experiences founded on Catholic values
- fostering partnerships between parents and staff in the education of their children
- creating communities of respect for each other, the wider society and the earth
- encouraging active engagement in social justice issues, the service of others and the promotion of peace.

## **Preamble**

*"Despite the existence of gender-variant individuals in every culture and throughout time, many people are unaware that diversity in gender expression and sexual formation is a naturally occurring phenomenon."* (Riley et al, 2013, p. 1)

As Christians, we believe that we are all made in the image and likeness of God, and thus we must also embrace the notion that our diversity of physical, psychological and spiritual conformations are also in God's image. The observant adult, watching a child grow and develop, wonders at how each individual child is different in so many ways from any other child. Those God-created differences make each child unique. Often those differences are what we love most about each child.

However, sometimes those differences vary so far from prevailing norms of behaviour and expression, that we have difficulty understanding. There is increasing self-identification of children whose physical characteristics do not match their own understanding of who they are. These children are often described as having 'gender variance' or the medical term of 'gender dysphoria'. In current times, in the western world, we are experiencing "*... a changing climate where children are speaking out about their feelings and parents are willing to respond to their child's gender variance in a positive manner*" (Riley et al, 2011, p. 182). In our school communities, parents of children with gender dysphoria are asking for support. This support is most often requested when the need for their child to transition to his/her affirmed gender is identified.

Current research, though limited, has examined this growing understanding of children with gender dysphoria, and identified appropriate ways of supporting them. *“Gender-variant children’s needs were ... to talk about their feelings and be accepted, respected and given information. Following this, they then needed to be supported to express their gender, to meet gender-variant peers, to have strategies for bullying, and to be advocated for, protected, and treated as equals”* (Riley et al, 2011, p. 192). This, of course, has important implications for schools, especially when the child and the parents seek to transition from the birth-identified gender to the child’s affirmed gender – while the child is enrolled at school.

## Definitions

**The Anti-Discrimination Board definition of ‘transgender’.** People with Gender Dysphoria are also known as ‘transgender’.

*“Under NSW anti-discrimination law, a person is defined as transgender if*

- *they identify as the opposite sex from their birth sex by living or seeking to live as their identified sex;*
- *they are in the process of changing over to the opposite sex;*
- *they have lived as a member of the opposite sex in the past;*
- *they are intersexual (born with indeterminate sex); or*
- *they are thought of as a transgender person.*

*A person does not have to have had sex change surgery or hormone therapy to be considered transgender under the NSW Anti-discrimination Act, or have a new birth certificate.”* (NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, 2011, p.10)

### **DSM5 defines ‘Gender Dysphoria’**

*Gender Dysphoria is a general descriptive term that refers to the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one’s experienced or expressed gender and one’s assigned gender. Although not all individuals will experience distress as a result of such incongruence, many are distressed if the desired physical interventions by means of hormones and/or surgery are not available ... the focus is placed on the dysphoria as the clinical problem, not identity per se.*

**Transition:** *“Commonly understood to mean moving from one thing to another (e.g. childhood to adulthood), the process of transition suggests a journey where a person leaves one situation (e.g. set of physical attributes, name, pronoun, etc.) and arrives at another. [Transgender students describe] transition as becoming or affirming the gender that they always knew they were on the inside ...”* (Smith et al, 2014, p. 39)

**Gender variance is not about sex or sexuality: it is about identity.**

## Reflections for Leaders in a Catholic School context

*“The Catholic School as an educational institution and as an instrument of the Church’s teaching ministry proclaims the following:*

- *The Christian ideal of life is that of life redeemed;*
- *Each student has an inalienable dignity;*
- *The Catholic school is basically concerned with the development of each student’s intellectual abilities in an environment which supports a synthesis of culture and faith and life;*
- *The home, the school and the church should be in active partnership.”*

(CEC NSW, 2006, p.1)

*“... the Catholic school has continued to share responsibility for the social and cultural development of different communities and peoples to which it belongs, participating in their joys and hopes, their sufferings and difficulties, their efforts to achieve genuine and communitarian progress.”* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, para 5)

*“The gospel tells us to constantly run the risk of a face to face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction”* (Francis 1, 2013, p. 71)

*“When we live out a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and seeking their welfare, our hearts are opened wide to the Lord’s most beautiful and creative gifts. Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God. Whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God.”* (Francis 1, 2013, p.192)

*“Although children have no choice but to live in the world that is made available to them, society does have a choice about how to treat them. With respect to gender variance, we may ask: can society, professionals and schools facilitate a child’s self-identification instead of policing conformity to gender norms? Can the stigma of gender variance be eliminated so that children whose behaviour harms no-one can live in peace, while embracing their differences?”* (Riley et al, 2013, p. 13)

## Guiding Principles

In dealing with children with Gender Dysphoria, Anti-Discrimination legislation directs particular courses of action.

- **NSW Anti-Discrimination Act.** The Act specifically identifies that it is unlawful for a person to be discriminated against because of their transgender status.  
*“A person does not have to have had sex change surgery or hormone therapy to be considered transgender under the NSW Anti-Discrimination Act, or have a new birth certificate. All people who are counted as transgender must be treated fairly in the workplace. They should generally be allowed to use toilets and change rooms of their preferred gender and to wear dress or uniform of their preferred gender, unless it is not ‘reasonable with regard to all the circumstances’ to do so.”* (NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, 2011, p.10)

In addition, the Catholic Schools Office Diocese of Maitland Newcastle refers to the following established principles, protocols and practices.

- **Supporting students with additional needs:**
  - Gender Dysphoria is a recognised medical condition that requires medical support and intervention. In schools, a medical diagnosis and the subsequent recommendations are the requirements for instituting appropriate intervention and support for a child with additional needs.
  - Children with a diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria are thus to be supported in appropriate ways as determined by recommendations from an appropriate medical authority/doctor, and with consultation between the parents and the school. This approach follows the usual processes and protocols regarding support for students with additional needs.
- **Preferential option for the poor**
  - Our Christian responsibility to care for those in need
  - Jesus is our guide in all our actions: in his own community, he not only acknowledged those on the margins of society – he embraced them and drew them to himself (Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, the leper). He included them in his community.
  - Jesus said: “Let the children come to me – for of such is the Kingdom of heaven” (Mtt.25:40) *“This reminds us Christians that we are called to care for the vulnerable of the earth.”* (Francis 1, 2013, p. 155)
- **Pastoral care**
  - We work towards achieving schools that are inclusive of all and which cater for diversity in all its forms. *“In its ecclesial dimension another characteristic of the Catholic school has its root: it is a school for all, with special attention to those who are weakest. ... respond[ing] to the needs of the socially and*

*economically disadvantaged.*” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, para 15)

- The culture of Catholic schools around diversity and inclusivity, the acceptance of those who are different, anti-bullying approaches
- **Educative process** (students, staff , parents)
  - Schools are about learning. Identifying the needs of a student with Gender Dysphoria is an opportunity for the school community to grow in knowledge and understanding. A process of education about gender diversity should be undertaken, involving school staff in the first instance, and by invitation to the parent community.
  - *“Education was identified as a need for counsellors and medical professionals, for school staff, for parents and for community programmes. The aim of education is to increase knowledge and general awareness about gender variance. Education across the various sectors was identified as a way to increase acceptance of gender variance and counter assumptions that biological sex is always in alignment with gender expression and/or identity.”* (Riley et al, 2013, P. 8)
- **Support of Parish Priest and Bishop**
  - Systemic Catholic schools exist in the context of parish communities within a diocese. In order to optimise the successful integration and support of students with Gender Dysphoria within the community, the support of the Parish Priest and the Bishop should be sought by the principal and the Catholic Schools Office.

## A Process for School Principals

When principals receive a request for a student with Gender Dysphoria to transition to his/her affirmed gender, the previously identified values and principles should be reaffirmed. Respect for the dignity and worth of the child should be the priority at all times and this directs a loving, non-judgemental and supportive approach, aimed at the child's wellbeing.

The following process should be followed.

1. The principal will consult with the Assistant Director to identify key stakeholders and establish a communication strategy to ensure ongoing dialogue and consultation. Key stakeholders should/could include the following:
  - a. Parents of the child
  - b. Assistant Director and/or Director of CSO
  - c. Parish Priest and/or Bishop
  - d. School Counsellor and/or other CSO personnel

Consulting with stakeholders throughout the process would normally occur through the principal and the Assistant Director. The process to be engaged upon would be time-framed to

- i) determine the desirability and/or feasibility of transition, and
- ii) to work towards an agreed outcome.

All stakeholders will be kept informed of progress as the issues are worked through.

2. The principal will meet with the parents to gather information about the child's situation. The following information should be sought:
  - a. Medical reports. A report from the child's GP and/or paediatrician is essential. Other medical reports might also be sought: e.g. Psychologist, Psychiatrist ...
  - b. Any other formal information or reports: e.g. Court Orders
  - c. Current stage of child's living in his/her affirmed gender
  - d. Family circumstances (e.g. siblings who may also attend the school)

In the first instance, the principal might meet with parents on his/her own. At subsequent meetings, the principal might include other stakeholders as appropriate, for example, the Assistant Director or an expert in the issues under deliberation. The principal should explain the process that needs to be followed at school, before transition is approved and commenced. Parents should be reassured that although this may take some time, the goal is to achieve a successful and supportive result for the child concerned.

3. Based on the information obtained in 2., and with the support of the stakeholders, the principal may enter into a good faith arrangement with the parents to establish a transition plan which should include:
  - a. Strategies to support child at school (see attached Support Plan Scaffold)
  - b. Strategies to support any siblings
  - c. Protocols for child's intimate needs at school and as part of school functions

- d. Staging an information/education session for school personnel prior to transition. Provision of expert information and advice should be sought.
- e. Consideration of types of information/education to be made available to the parent community (e.g., Letter from principal, information session ...)
- f. Consideration of the types of information/education appropriate for the student body, especially the child's class group: for example, a review of the school's Anti-Bullying Policy, or using Harmony Day to celebrate diversity and difference.

Depending on the school context, there may be other elements to be included in this process. At all stages, through the principal and the Assistant Director, stakeholders will be kept informed of the process. Sensitivity for the wellbeing of the child and family, and the needs of the school staff and students, should guide the process.

- 4. In the event that the transition of the child to his/her affirmed gender is not supported by one or some of the stakeholders, the matter would need to be referred to the Director of the Catholic Schools Office who would consult with the Bishop to determine the outcome. At all times, the pastoral care of the child would be of paramount consideration.

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08/07/2015

V2. 03/02/2016 (*updated DSM5 Definition*)

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