



Petitions of Helen Houghton: Stop transgender teaching in New Zealand schools

Report of the Education and Workforce
Committee

May 2020

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Dr Parmjeet Parmar
Chairperson

Petitions of Helen Houghton

Recommendation

The Education and Workforce Committee has considered the petitions of Helen Houghton—Stop transgender teaching in New Zealand schools—and recommends that the House take note of its report.

Request to stop transgender teaching in New Zealand schools

The petitions (both written and online versions) were presented to the House on 2 April 2019. The petitions request:

That the House of Representatives urge the Ministry of Education to remove learning intentions for teaching gender diversity in the sexuality education guide and to remove the gender diversity teaching resources on the Te Kete Ipurangi website.

The petitioner gave the following reason for the petitions:

I believe that teachers are already required to create a safe environment for all students regardless of race, religion, language, disability, and sexuality. They do not have a separate requirement to teach the content of minority groups in the curriculum, therefore why should there be a new expectation to include the teaching of gender diversity. I believe that endorsing gender discordance as normal via public education and legal policies will confuse children and parents.

We asked the petitioner to provide a written submission about the reasoning behind her request. The written submission is available on the Parliament website. We also heard from the petitioner in person. We also asked the Ministry of Education to provide a written submission on the petitions.

The petitioner, who is a teacher, is opposed to teaching that covers gender diversity. Some of the reasons that she gave were as follows:

- She told us that she considers teaching about gender diversity goes against the ethical standards she committed to under the teaching code of practice.
- She considers that such teaching denies the rights of teachers, in terms of any personal beliefs about gender diversity they may have.
- She does not think there has been sufficient community engagement about what is being taught in schools about gender diversity.

Transgender students at school

The ministry told us about a nationally representative Youth'12 survey of secondary school students conducted in 2012.¹ In the survey, over 8,000 students answered a question about their gender. Of those, 96 students (1.2 percent) reported being transgender, and 202 (2.5 percent) reported being unsure.

The ministry noted that the survey found that approximately one in five transgender students had experienced bullying at school on a weekly basis. This was nearly five times higher than the proportion of students who were non-transgender.

Context of the New Zealand Curriculum

In its submission, the ministry noted that:

The New Zealand Curriculum is underpinned by values of diversity, equity, and respect and recognises human rights. These values ensure the rights of all students to self-expression, identification, and support.

The Education Act 1989 requires boards of trustees to provide physically and emotionally safe environments for all children, young people, and staff. The ministry told us that schools' duty of care to students to keep them safe includes safety from homophobic and transphobic bullying.

Sexuality education as part of the curriculum

The ministry said that, as part of the New Zealand Curriculum, schools are expected to provide a broad education that includes health and physical education (HPE). Sexuality education is one of the seven key areas of learning in HPE.

The sexuality education guide that this petition refers to² noted that sexuality education is different from sex education. It says:

The New Zealand Curriculum supports a holistic approach to sexuality education as defined by the hauora model, which includes physical, social, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects. This is much broader than "sex education" which relates only to the physical aspects of sexual and reproductive knowledge.

It goes on to say:

[Sexuality education] encompasses learning about physical development, including sexual and reproductive knowledge, gender identity, relationships, friendships, whānau and social issues. It sits within the broader area of relationship education, which also includes social and emotional learning (SEL), and violence prevention education.

The New Zealand Curriculum is broad and holistic, and is not prescriptive. The ministry noted that boards of trustees and schools design their own local curriculum. As a result, the

¹ The survey is discussed on page 3 of the ministry's submission.

² Ministry of Education, Sexuality Education: A guide for principals, boards of trustees, and teachers, page 3.

exact resources used to develop and deliver sexuality education programmes vary between schools.

The ministry told us that it is acknowledged that parents, family, and whānau are interested in the sexuality teaching that will be part of their young people's education. Therefore, boards of trustees are required to consult with their school community at least once every two years on their draft health curriculum. After schools have completed this consultation, they must adopt a statement about the delivery of the health curriculum.

Once a statement is adopted, schools can teach the health curriculum to students. Parents and caregivers can write to the school principal requesting that their child is excluded from any particular element of sexuality education.

Guides for sexuality education and inclusivity provided by the ministry

Resources to support a wide range of educational matters are developed by the ministry, including for teaching and learning sexuality education. Such resources are themselves not mandatory for schools.

In 2015, the ministry revised the guide to sexuality education for principals, boards of trustees, and teachers (referred to earlier). The ministry pointed to the following examples from the guide about suggested levels of learning, as they apply to different age groups:

- Ages 5 to 7: students are questioning and discussing gender stereotypes, and learning to respect their peers.
- Ages 8 to 12: students are discussing their differences and feeling good about themselves. They might also question messages and online social media environments related to gender, sexuality, and diversity.
- Ages 12 to 15: students are learning about the physical and emotional effects of sexual identity.
- Ages 15 to 18: students are critically exploring a wide range of issues relating to gender and cultural norms.

The ministry has also developed an LGBTQIA+ inclusive education guide, which came about after requests from schools and its regional offices. It told us it was asked to develop guidance to assist schools in responding to the needs of their students and communities. The ministry said the guide is designed to support school leaders and teachers to “plan with diversity in mind, to understand and give visibility to LGBTQIA+ students, to examine gender roles and norms, but not to teach or promote a specific view”.

ACC's Mates and Dates programme

We note that in 2019, we conducted a briefing on the Accident Compensation Corporation's (ACC) Mates and Dates programme. While the petition does not specifically refer to this programme, it was raised during our consideration of this petition.

Mates and Dates is described as a “healthy relationships programme for secondary students”. It is a voluntary programme for schools, and aligns with the HPE learning area of

the curriculum. The programme's aim is to reduce sexual and dating violence through teaching young people the knowledge and skills to engage in safe, healthy, and respectful relationships. One of the themes in each module in the programme is "identity, gender and sexuality".

We asked ACC what information is provided to parents regarding the content of the Mates and Dates programme. ACC noted that while this responsibility primarily rests with schools that wish to run the programme, the programme providers will support schools with information and resources to give to parents. It also recommends an information evening is held for parents. Parents are able to contact the school to opt out of the programme.

Our response to the petition

The committee would like to thank the petitioner for bringing this matter to the attention of the select committee. The importance of a quality sexuality education programme for all young people has been highlighted by previous select committees.

The current curriculum takes into account changing social climates, youth health research, and broader understandings about sexuality and sexuality education. All young people need access to information about sexuality-related issues—gender being one of the key areas.

All teachers and communities have the right to make representations to their boards of trustees every two years when the localised health curriculum is up for review.

Appendix

Committee procedure

The petitions were referred to us on 2 April 2019. We met between 3 April 2019 and 27 May 2020 to consider them. We received written submissions from the petitioner and the Ministry of Education, and heard oral evidence from the petitioner.

Committee members

Dr Parmjeet Parmar (Chairperson)
Dan Bidois (from 27 May 2020)
Simeon Brown (until 27 May 2020)
Hon Clare Curran
Golriz Ghahraman
Hon Nikki Kaye (until 27 May 2020)
Denise Lee (until 27 May 2020)
Marja Lubeck
Jo Luxton
Hon Tim Macindoe (from 27 May 2020)
Mark Patterson
Erica Stanford (from 27 May 2020)
Jan Tinetti
Nicola Willis

Evidence received

The documents we received as evidence in relation to this petition are available on the Parliament website, www.parliament.nz.