

Updated: Gender debate heats up over Toronto Catholic schools' code conduct

A heated gender debate at the Toronto Catholic District School Board took a new twist Oct. 30 when a committee recommended revising the board's code of conduct to replace government classifications of discrimination with wording compatible with Church teaching.

At issue in the months-long debate is whether four terms – gender expression, gender identity, family status and marital status – should be added to the school board's code of conduct to align it with an updated code from the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Opponents say adopting the wording violates Catholic beliefs on gender and natural law, while proponents want consistency with the province, which funds Catholic public schools.

After hours of often-contentious debate and presentations by parents, students and educators, the Education and Living our Catholic Values sub-committee voted 4-1 in favour of a code that would delete the government's detailed list of protected-rights categories. Instead of "listing specific characteristics of non-discrimination" it favours a code that is broadly inclusive of all people.

The motion read: "That all members of the TCDSB community shall respect and treat others fairly, as children of God, created in the image and likeness of God, of infinite dignity and worth."

The committee recommendation now goes to the full 12-member board of trustees, likely for review at its Dec. 5 meeting.

"A Catholic school board should be able to use Catholic language in its teachings, codes of conduct, policies and documents," said trustee Nancy Crawford, who introduced the motion. "Our constitutional right to exist as a Catholic education system should allow us to express our faith values among our community."

Some terms used by the Ontario Human Rights Code are contrary to Catholic teaching, Crawford said. "For example gender expression and gender identity are descriptions that are alien to the Catholic understanding of the person," she said.

The Ontario Ministry of Education's code of conduct states schools must "respect and treat others fairly, regardless of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, creed, sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status or disability." The committee wants to strike all of these specific references.

"The wording of the motion says 'all' – all peoples, all characteristics, and this includes others who are not identified and addressed to date," Crawford said.

"Far from setting a lower standard of treatment for particular members of the Toronto Catholic community, recognizing the dignity and worth of every person as grounded in being an image of God is the highest standard of all."

Crawford was supported on the committee by trustees Michael Del Grande, Garry Tanuan and Teresa Lubinski. The dissenting vote came from board chair Maria Rizzo.

Rizzo told the *Toronto Star* that she believes the board is obligated to comply with the government mandate and she was "sickened" by the vote and "by the hypocrisy, by the homophobia and the fear mongering."

Crawford said Catholic boards have "denominational rights" and therefore have leeway to interpret "policies that are at odds with a Catholic world view."

"Our proposed wording complies with the spirit and requirements" of the education ministry's code of conduct, she said.

Trustee Norm Di Pasquale disagreed with the committee's decision. He attended the meeting but is not a committee member. "This is a divisive issue but didn't have to be," he said.

"Ontario creates a code of conduct for schools that we need to be consistent with. The easiest thing to do to comply with regulations and the law would have been to make it consistent."

Student delegate Jacob Malliet told the committee that the government terminology conflicted with Church teaching. He cited statements from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and a current and past pope to argue gender theory is "is not in accordance with natural law or Christian revelation."

"It has, therefore, been explicitly rejected by Pope Francis and Pope Benedict XVI," he said. "So not only have the Catholic bishops stated that changes such as these are not compliant with Church teachings, so have both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis."

Rejecting government terminology could jeopardize funding for board charities such as The Angel Foundation for Learning, which could lose up to \$50,000 in sponsorships from organizations that only support agencies compliant with Ontario's Human Rights Code, claimed Di Pasquale.

"I am extremely concerned about the financial risk," said Di Pasquale.