

February 25, 2025

Good evening and welcome.

Today, as we gather on the eve of Pink Shirt Day, we do so with a profound sense of responsibility. Pink Shirt Day is more than just a day to wear pink – it is a call to action, a commitment to creating a culture of respect, dignity, and inclusion for all, especially for 2SLGBTQIA+ students, staff, and families. It is a day where we not only stand against bullying but also reaffirm our unwavering commitment to human rights, equity, and the fundamental principle that every child, staff, and community member deserves to feel safe and valued in their school community.

The origins of Pink Shirt Day must not be forgotten. It began in 2007 when a Grade 9 student in Nova Scotia was bullied for wearing a pink shirt because he was thought to be gay. His peers targeted him because pink is traditionally considered a "girl's colour" and any boy participating in anything perceived as traditionally feminine was assumed to be gay. This was an act of homophobic bullying – a punishment for challenging traditional gender norms around masculinity. By not performing his gender "correctly" he was attacked by his peers. Failing to talk about the homophobic roots of this bullying does a disservice to 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, who continue to face similar experiences today.

As a Board of Education, we know that schools must be places where all students – no matter their gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation – can learn and grow in an environment free from discrimination, harassment, and fear. Yet, in recent years, we have witnessed a troubling rise in policies, legislation, and actions that directly threaten the rights and well-being of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. Across Canada and beyond, regressive efforts seek to undermine gender-inclusive policies, restrict affirming school practices, and impose dangerous narratives that fuel discrimination.

We have seen this play out on the national stage. Just last month, Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre made deeply problematic comments about gender, aligning himself with harmful rhetoric that denies the lived realities of trans, two-spirit, and non-binary folks. His words echo the recent executive order signed by Donald J. Trump in the United States, which seeks to erase protections for trans and two-spirit individuals in schools and beyond. These actions are not just political talking points; they have real and devastating consequences for young people who already face disproportionate rates of bullying, mental health struggles, and exclusion.

The data is clear. Egale Canada's 2021 Second National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia in Canadian Schools found that 64% of trans students felt unsafe at school, with nearly half having seriously considered suicide. Seventy-seven percent of 2SLGBTQ Indigenous students reported being harassed at school in the year leading up to the survey, which was the highest percentage of any group, and were more likely to report skipping school due to feeling unsafe.

These numbers are not just statistics – they are a damning indictment of a society that has failed to protect the most vulnerable youth. As educators, leaders, and community members, we cannot be passive in the face of this reality. We must be resolute in ensuring that our schools remain safe, affirming, and empowering spaces for every student to thrive as their authentic self.

It is also critical that we extend our advocacy and support to 2SLGBTQIA+ staff members as well. School district staff who are part of the queer community deserve to work in environments where they can be their authentic selves without fear of discrimination or retaliation. Staff serve as role models for students, and their ability to be open about who they are fosters a culture of inclusion and acceptance. Protecting

queer and trans staff is not just an employment issue – it is a human rights issue. When schools are inclusive workplaces, they send a strong message to students that their identities are valid and celebrated.

The Burnaby Board of Education has taken important steps in reinforcing this commitment. The Board recently served notice of motion to update the District’s policy on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression. This reflects the Board’s unwavering belief in recognizing and valuing the diversity within Burnaby school communities and its commitment to ensuring that each individual contributes to the strength of the Burnaby School District’s culture. The Board is steadfast in its dedication to establishing and maintaining a safe and positive environment, free from discrimination, harassment, and intimidation, for all students, employees, and community members, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

Just last week, the Board reaffirmed this commitment in a message sent to the Burnaby Schools community. In it, we highlighted the importance of recognizing the origins of Pink Shirt Day as an awareness campaign about homophobic bullying and reiterated that homophobia and transphobia have no place in Burnaby schools. The message also acknowledged the importance of family and community partnerships in fostering a culture of respect and belonging, reinforcing that inclusion is a shared effort that extends beyond the walls of our schools.

This means enacting and enforcing strong policies that protect gender-diverse students, staff, and families. It means supporting district employees in fostering inclusive classrooms and workplaces. It means ensuring that every 2SLGBTQIA+ child, staff member, and community member in Burnaby schools knows they are valued and celebrated. But most of all, it means speaking out – loudly and unapologetically – against discrimination, hate, and fearmongering.

On this Pink Shirt Day, I challenge each of you to go beyond kindness. While kindness is essential, it is not enough. We must be vigilant and steadfast in our advocacy. We must oppose those who seek to erase, harm, or marginalize 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and adults. Equally important, we must hold our political leaders accountable to protect and uphold human rights, not undermine them.

To the Burnaby students, staff, and families in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, please know this: The Burnaby Board of Education is committed to ensuring your human rights are always upheld, your presence is respected, and your inclusion is guaranteed – not just on Pink Shirt Day, but every day.

Thank you.

**Kristin Schnider, Chair
Burnaby Board of Education**