

Supporting Gender Transitioning in Schools

The goal of this document is to help all schools across Manitoba support trans and gender diverse students effectively throughout their schooling, including those who are transitioning.

The process and nature of gender transitioning will mean different things to different students. Therefore, it is crucial to find out what the transitioning means to the individual child or youth who is being supported.

Transitioning may be conceptualized as having two distinctive but related aspects: social and medical.

- The *social* aspect of transitioning is choosing to live life in one's preferred gender. This could include
 - changing name(s)
 - changing preferred pronoun(s) (e.g., he, she, they, them, zie)
 - changing gender expression (e.g., clothing, footwear, grooming) to be consistent with gender identity
 - breast binding (flattening breast tissue to create a male-appearing chest using a variety of materials and methods)
 - packing (wearing padding or a phallus-type object to give the appearance of a penis)
 - choosing to use washrooms or change/locker rooms consistent with gender identity instead of biological sex
- The *medical* aspect of transitioning is the process and means of changing one's body physically. Medical treatment is provided in a series of phases that include
 - psychological assessment and counselling (individual and/or family)
 - medication to block natural hormones or to feminize or masculinize the body
 - surgery to primary and/or secondary sex characteristics (e.g., breasts/chest, external/internal genitalia, facial features, body contouring)

Note that the WPATH publication *Standards of Care* (Coleman et al.) clearly outlines the appropriate steps regarding medical transitioning for those under the age of majority. Specifically, WPATH considers genital surgery an irreversible intervention and, therefore, states that genital surgery should not be carried out until after the age of majority and when a number of other criteria have also been met.



While some transgender children and youth may choose to undergo both social and medical aspects of transitioning, others will choose to undergo only the social aspect. It is important to recognize that a student's preferences and choices with respect to transitioning may change over time and that the support offered by the school will need to address these changing needs.

If students identify that they want to transition and are not connected to community resources, they can be referred, or may self-refer, to the Gender Dysphoria Assessment and Action for Youth (GDAAY) program, located within the Health Sciences Centre, Winnipeg, and supported by the Children's Hospital Foundation of Manitoba. GDAAY serves children and youth throughout Manitoba and provides both assessment and services to make social and medical transitions.



"The Canadian Trans Flag was designed by Ottawa Graphic Designer Michelle Lindsay. It is a simple and very recognizable design. The colours are bold with the Trans Logo spanning the flag to represent the confidence and pride we have in the Trans Community. The horizontal bands are Sunset Magenta and Ocean Blue. They come together to represent the unlimited horizons the Trans Community has in this world."

Source: Canadian Trans Flag. www.transflag.com/.
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Timing of the Transition Process

The decision of when to transition may be a difficult and challenging question for trans and gender diverse children and youth, and their families. Some may choose to transition into their authentic gender identity at any point in the school year, and others when they are changing schools (e.g., from Middle to Senior Years). Some students in Manitoba have made a successful transition during their time in Middle and Senior Years schools. The "right time to transition" will be an individual one; the point at which the child or youth feels ready to transition from one gender to another will be the right time. The school must work with the student, the family, and other systems involved to understand how best to support the transition process, including the potential of changing schools within or outside the school division.

"Look for the hidden blessings. The bad stuff is going to be easy to see. It's going to be right in your face. But there are blessings too. Amazing chances to love and to be loved. To see your child blossom. To find out about your own issues and find freedom from the dark places inside that you didn't even know were there. Look for those things" (parent of a trans youth, Central Toronto Youth Services 18).



Developing and Implementing a School-Based Gender Transition Plan: School Roles and Responsibilities

“Strategic efforts to promote bonding among students should be in place, as this is related to personal, emotional, behavioral, and scholastic success. Teens must therefore have a true connection with at least one adult on campus who periodically checks on them, builds them up with encouraging words, asks meaningful questions about their lives, and issues gentle reminders that he or she is there if the student ever has any need for help—or even if the student just wants to chat about how things are going (which typically involves expressing socio-emotional needs that the adult can help meet)” (Hinduja and Patchin, *School Climate* 88–89).

Ideally, when a child or youth has made the decision to transition and has approached the school for support, many hours of assessment and counselling will have taken place between the student, the student’s parents/guardians, and appropriate mental health professionals who specialize in gender dysphoria. The role of the school then becomes one of supporting the transitioning student and the parents/guardians. A staff person should be identified to help coordinate the open communication that is critical to a successful school-based transition. This may be a school counsellor, psychologist, or social worker who is (or can become) knowledgeable of trans and gender diversity issues and the potential challenges the student may face in school. The staff person can ensure that accurate information is shared and a gender transition plan is in place.

A gender transition plan that is unique to the particular student should be developed, taking into account the school culture, community culture, and family situation. In Manitoba, under *The Personal Health Information Act*, everyone’s medical history is considered highly confidential, and others are informed only on a “need-to-know” basis. For a transitioning student choosing to remain in the same school, or transferring to another school within the same school division, the reality is that the “news” will likely disseminate quickly. This reality should be considered as the gender transition plan is developed. Every effort should be made to ensure that the student’s right to confidentiality is maintained at all times.

In the process of determining how best to support the transitioning student, it is natural to focus on the individual student. Siblings of the transitioning student should, however, also be considered in terms of their own reaction to the process and possible need for support, the potential for bullying or harassment, or the role they can play in supporting the transition process (Wells, Roberts, and Allan 27).



As part of developing and implementing a school-based gender transition plan for a student, schools should take into account the following considerations. These should be reviewed even in circumstances where the student has transitioned over a school break or has not made the school aware of the transition.

Considerations in Implementing a School-Based Gender Transition Plan

- Keep the student at the centre of the planning and implementation process.
- Identify a qualified staff person to coordinate the student's gender transition plan.
- Plan with the student and the student's family how to deal with confidentiality and disclosure issues and how they want the school to communicate about the transition.
- Ensure the school principal or designate is prepared to address questions or concerns raised by other parents or students. Advise other staff about what to do if approached by parents or others in the community.
- Discuss the timing of the transition and any concerns about the transition date or time (e.g., examination period).
- Discuss when the student wants to have their preferred name(s) incorporated into informal records and discuss the process for changing formal records.
- Discuss and plan for access to washrooms, change/locker rooms, and school activities for the transitioning student in light of their preferences.
- Discuss with the student their experiences and perceptions concerning school connections and safety.
- Discuss and identify community and agency supports.
- Enlist support in preparing for the student's transition, from services and resources such as
 - Gender Dysphoria Assessment and Action for Youth (GDAAY)
 - Rainbow Resource Centre
 - Sexuality Education Resource Centre (SERC) Manitoba
 - other schools or school divisions that have had experience with a transitioning student
 - other students who have transitioned or parents/guardians who have a child who has transitioned



- Review legislation and policies about respect for human diversity, including student transition procedures and plans.
- Work with the school staff, other students, and parents/guardians to support the gender transition plan.
- Invite the community to a learning night—not about a specific student, but about the school being a leader in advocacy and social justice.
- Plan for and be prepared to work with students and staff at varying levels of awareness and acceptance who may
 - experience difficulty adjusting due to their own personal issues raised by a transitioning student
 - inadvertently address trans or gender diverse students inappropriately, such as using incorrect pronouns, making comments about dress, and so on
 - deliberately use incorrect pronouns, express blatant transphobia, and/or demonstrate bullying behaviours (including cyberbullying)
- Consider whether there is a need for students to receive trans and gender diversity inclusive information from school counsellors and/or knowledgeable community resource persons and organizations.

Post-Transition Support and Monitoring

School personnel can provide ongoing support for the transitioning student by maintaining a safe and inclusive environment that promotes a positive experience for all.

The school should consider reviewing the effectiveness of the student's gender transition plan and whether any revisions or changes need to be made.

“When a student (or an adult within the school system) transitions there is natural curiosity about the individual's transition. Usually, this curiosity quickly subsides and within a few days or weeks, the ‘novelty’ of the situation wears off, and the school environment returns to ‘normal’” (Wells, Roberts, and Allan 30).



Schools need to keep in mind that trans and gender diverse children and youth remain at greater risk of bullying and violence when compared with their cisgender peers, regardless of sexual orientation. The safety of the transitioning student should continue to be monitored by school staff. It is important that “any negative issues be promptly acted upon by the school administration. All . . . [members of the school community] must clearly see that there are swift consequences for any transphobic bullying or prejudicial behaviour” (Wells, Roberts, and Allan 30).

For more information on supporting transitioning students, see:

- Orr, Asaf, National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR), and Joel Baum, Gender Spectrum, with National Education Association (NEA), American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Foundation. *Schools in Transition: A Guide for Supporting Transgender Students in K-12 Schools*. 3 Aug. 2015. www.nclrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Schools-in-Transition-2015.pdf (4 May 2016).

