

Surrey trying to preempt anti-homophobia policy?

'We could do better,' trustee admits



By **Natasha Barsotti**

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Surrey school trustee Charlene Dobie is supportive of developing a stand-alone anti-homophobia policy for the district. "I've reviewed the other policies in the other districts, and I feel that they're explaining it in more detail." Credit: sd36.bc.ca

The Surrey school district is proposing minor changes to its anti-discrimination measures ahead of a June 21 board meeting in which students will make a case for developing specific anti-homophobia policy, *Xtra* has learned.

Laura Barker, second vice-president of the Surrey Teachers' Association (STA), says the changes to the district's anti-discrimination and human rights policy were raised at a June 19 meeting with district superintendent Mike McKay.

Barker says McKay framed the changes as a kind of policy housekeeping, saying it was "time to tidy up the current language a bit."

McKay did not respond to *Xtra's* attempts to contact him.

The current policy says, "The Board acknowledges the diversity of the Surrey and White Rock communities, and shall not tolerate any discrimination within the school district which is contrary to the BC Human Rights Code."

In the proposed change, the words "any discrimination" will be replaced with "racism, homophobia or any other form of discrimination," Barker says.

Another change would add homophobia to the policy's educational programs aimed at eradicating racism and discrimination.

Barker says information about the changes was sent out to education stakeholders, who were told they had a week to provide input. “It’s a very fast turnaround,” she says. “I don’t think [the trustees] have voted on it yet. I think they’ll probably vote on it during this meeting coming up, [but] I’m not totally sure on the timelines there.”

While Barker says the changes are a step in the right direction, they’re not adequate, according to the teachers’ association.

Barker doesn’t know if trustees are opposed to developing stand-alone anti-homophobia policy. “I explained what the students are asking for and why we want a stand-alone policy: the education component that’s in there, the curricula integration component, the training for counsellors — that it’s much broader in its scope,” Barker explains.

She says McKay seemed supportive of a stand-alone, broader policy. “He basically said, ‘I don’t know how the trustees will respond,’ but he himself was open to having that discussion. He didn’t say we’re not interested in that because of x, y or z.”

Barker says it’s interesting that the policy changes are coinciding with student presentations about the need for specific anti-homophobia policy. “There’s noise being made, so maybe they thought this was a good first step, or would placate people,” Barker offers, but she hastens to add that she “can’t speak to their motivation.”

She says she’s aware that trustee Charlene Dobie is supportive of developing a stand-alone policy.

“I’ve reviewed the other policies in the other districts, and I feel that they’re explaining it in more detail, and I think that it would be a good thing for Surrey to have that as well,” Dobie tells *Xtra*. “We should be making it known that we do support students and staff, and I think that we should talk a bit more about how to include it in curriculum, so give some direction that way.”

Dobie confirms that the board’s language changes, included in a package of reviews of different policies, were presented at a June 7 board meeting. But she says she wants the anti-discrimination and human rights policy to be removed from the vote on the policy package and brought back after there’s been more consultation. “We could do better,” she says.

She says she’ll be making a motion to that effect at the June 21 school board meeting. She says she doesn’t have a seconder to the motion. Asked if the board is opposed to having specific anti-homophobia policy, Dobie says she can’t say.

Neither does she know if the language changes are an attempt to avoid developing a stand-alone policy. “I really can’t say that; I don’t know,” Dobie replies.

“I think history shows that they’ve had some issues before — not necessarily all of these trustees,” she notes.

Barker says she thinks the trustees’ biggest fear is a repeat of “[the book-banning mayhem](#).”

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