

LGB ALLIANCE AUSTRALIA



**Submission to the inquiry into the
state education system in Victoria**

About LGB Alliance Australia

Our Vision

Lesbians, gay men and bisexuals living free from discrimination or disadvantage based on their sexual orientation.

Our Mission

To advance lesbian, gay and bisexual rights

We advance the interests of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, and stand up for our right to live as same-sex attracted people without discrimination or disadvantage.

We will ensure that the voices of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals are heard in all public and political discussions affecting our lives.

To highlight the dual discrimination faced by lesbians

We amplify the voices of lesbians and highlight the dual discrimination experienced by lesbians as women who are same-sex attracted in a male-dominated society.

To protect children who may grow up to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual

We work to protect children from harmful, unscientific ideologies that may lead them to believe either their personality or their body is in need of changing. Any child growing up to be lesbian, gay or bisexual has the right to be happy and confident about their sexuality and who they are.

To promote free speech on lesbian, gay and bisexual issues

We promote freedom of speech and informed dialogue on issues concerning the rights of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. We assert that different opinions, even those we may disagree with, should be heard as part of the public debate.

You can find out more about us on our website – www.lgballiance.org.au

You can get in contact with us on email – contact@lgballiance.org.au

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Executive Summary

LGB Alliance Australia welcomes this opportunity for Victorians to reflect on the challenges facing our state school communities. Our submission focuses on the crucial matter of student wellbeing, including measures to address poor mental health.

We are Australia's largest organisation advocating solely for the rights of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals. Our vision is that lesbians, gay men and bisexuals live free from discrimination or disadvantage based on their sexual orientation.

Our submission aligns with one of our four guiding objectives: 'To protect children who may grow up to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual'. We work to protect children from harmful, unscientific ideologies that may lead them to believe either their personality or their body is in need of changing. Any child growing up to be lesbian, gay or bisexual has the right to be happy and confident about their sexuality and who they are.

We hold concerns in relation to the guidance given to Victorian schools about supporting students who express distress or confusion about their biological sex or their so-called 'gender identity'. While we accept that the vast majority of educators care deeply for their students and work hard to support them, it is clear that state schools are under intolerable pressure in general. This must make it harder for staff to respond to such complex and sensitive dilemmas. We are concerned that schools may be receiving guidance which, if acted upon, could place students at elevated risk of physical or psychological harm.

This matter is of particular concern to us as it seems likely that many of the affected students would otherwise have grown up to be lesbian, gay or bisexual adults.

Recent years have seen an extraordinarily steep increase in children in western countries presenting with distress about their biological sex. Many of these children are psychosocially 'transitioned', including at school. It is becoming evident that psychosocial transitioning is not a neutral or reversible act, but appears to encourage children on a pathway to long-term distress about their sex and, in some cases, to dangerous and irreversible medical interventions.

A very large proportion of these distressed children – perhaps the majority – show signs of growing up to be same-sex attracted. Therefore, we feel an obligation to raise concerns for their wellbeing, physical safety, and long-term development, as well as the wellbeing, safety and development of all other students.

As we do not have access to information about the extent of these concerns in Victoria, our recommendations focus on the need for high-quality, independent review.

Recommendations

1. Commission an independent, external review of the Victorian Department of Education and Training's policy on 'LGBTIQ Student Support' to assess the outcomes and impacts of this policy for students who have come out as LGB, students who may grow up to be LGB, and all other students. The review should pay particular attention to child safeguarding. It should be led by an independent, impartial reviewer with demonstrated expertise in child development and paediatrics, including the impacts of autism and trauma on children's behaviour and development. The review should be informed by the findings of the UK's Cass Review (independent review of gender identity services for children and young people), and should consider the many concerns raised about the so-called affirmation approach to childhood gender dysphoria, which many countries are now moving away from, including the UK, Norway, Sweden and Denmark.¹
2. Confirm whether the Safe Schools program, operating since 2010, has ever been subject to an independent evaluation. If so, release the findings (appropriately de-identified) and the terms of reference. If not, an independent evaluation should be commissioned and should involve full, meaningful community consultation.
3. Confirm whether the LGBTQIA+ inclusion workshops for students and teachers offered by Minus18 under DET's Mental Health Menu for Schools have been independently evaluated and, if so, what the outcomes and impacts were for LGB students and all other students. From the promotional materials, we were unable to ascertain the program creators' and deliverers' qualifications in childhood development, mental health, autism, and trauma recovery, all of which are highly relevant to children experiencing distress or confusion about their biological sex. If school workshops are teaching students that 'gender identity' is an objective fact (rather than a subjective belief), and that alternative beliefs about sex and gender identity should not be voiced in school, we are concerned that this would contravene Victorian DET's policy on Special Religious Instruction. That policy specifies that government schools are secular, must be open to adherents of any philosophy, and must not promote any particular faith or sect.
4. Review as a matter of urgency the provision of DET school-readiness funding to external providers to teach early childhood educators what appear to be highly contested ideological beliefs about biological sex and 'gender identity'.² We wish to ensure that early childhood educators are not being encouraged to believe that some 3- and 4-year-old children were 'born in the wrong body' and should be psychosocially transitioned. More specifically, we wish to ensure that educators are not being taught that psychosocial transition is appropriate for children who show gender non-conforming behaviours – behaviours which are very common in

young boys and girls who later grow up to be LGB adults. And we wish to ensure that educators are not being encouraged to teach 3- or 4-year-old children that they each have a 'gender identity' more important than their physical bodies – a belief which has no factual basis and which preschool children cannot interrogate. We recognise this matter falls somewhat outside the inquiry's terms of reference, but we feel such concern that it seemed necessary to raise it here.

Our concern for children's safety and wellbeing

Recent years have seen an extraordinarily steep increase in children in western countries presenting with distress about their biological sex. For example, Victoria's Royal Children's Hospital gender clinic treated approx. 100 patients in 2014; by the end of 2022 numbers had risen to 1,100.³ In the UK, referrals of children to the Gender Identity Development Service grew from 50 per annum in 2009 to 2,500 per annum in 2020, with 4,600 on the waiting list.⁴ Meanwhile, the cohort of children reporting gender dysphoria has switched from majority biological males to predominantly adolescent females, with autism vastly over-represented. For example, initial data from Victoria's Royal Children's Hospital found autism traits in 45% of patients.⁵

It is possible that the true number of children distressed about their sex is much higher than the patient numbers of public gender clinics can capture. For example, in 2022 Mission Australia's large national survey of 20,000+ teens aged 15-19 found that around 1 in 23 Victorian teens (4.3%) described themselves as something other than their own biological sex. This suggests to us that significant numbers of adolescents find their own bodies a source of distress and/or believe that changing their sex would increase their social acceptance and belonging. This raises concerns about the wellbeing of those teens, who (according to Mission Australia) present with unusually high rates of psychological and social difficulties.⁶

LGB Alliance Australia comments on this matter because we know that so-called gender non-conformity and even cross-sex identification is very common amongst children who, if left alone, will grow up to be same-sex attracted adults.⁷

Traditionally, lesbian, gay and bisexual communities have always held space for 'gender non-conformity'. As children, many of us disobeyed narrow, sexist rules about how girls and boys were expected to behave. Our communities have always included (for example) men who love fashion and women who love fixing cars, and we at LGB Alliance Australia are proud of this fact. However, when vulnerable children feel profound distress about their own bodies and take extreme measures to try to escape their biological sex, we feel deep anxiety for their wellbeing and safety.

Distress about gender disproportionately affects children who would otherwise grow up to be lesbian, gay or bisexual adults. This is charted in the history of the Gender Identity Service in the UK by the award-winning journalist Hannah Barnes, *Time to Think: The Inside Story of the Collapse of the Tavistock's Gender Service for Children* (2023). In a patient survey from 2015, the clinic found that three-quarters of the adolescent female patients (biological girls) described being attracted to other females, while 60% of the male patients (biological boys) were same-sex attracted. Many clinicians raised concerns, describing young patients who struggled with their sexuality in homophobic environments.⁸

A former GIDS staff member described parents reacting 'Thank God my child is trans and not gay or lesbian', and recalled hearing a young patient say 'When I heard the word lesbian, I cringe. I want to die ... I'm gonna vomit if I hear the word lesbian another time'. Distressed by such insights, some former staff members called their work 'conversion therapy for gay kids'.⁹

Dr Lisa Littman's survey of parents of adolescents with rapid onset gender dysphoria in the United States also found same-sex attraction was over-represented – in this cohort, 41% of adolescents had expressed a 'non-heterosexual sexual orientation' before identifying as transgender.¹⁰

Similarly, Littman's survey of 100 'detransitioned' young adults, who had undergone medical transition and later changed their minds, found that only a minority – 8.7% of biological females and 38.7% of biological males – described themselves as having been heterosexual before transitioning. Almost a quarter (23%) agreed that one reason they had sought to change their sex was homophobia or difficulty accepting themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual. Young participants told Littman:

- 'Transitioning to male would mean my attraction to [other] girls would be "normal"'.¹¹
- 'being a 'gay trans man' (female dating other females) felt better than being a lesbian, less shameful'.
- 'I felt being the opposite gender would make my repressed same-sex attraction less scary'.
- 'I didn't want to be a gay man'.¹¹

LGB Alliance Australia feels deep concerns for vulnerable children and young people navigating such painful experiences. The situation is all the more concerning given that distress about one's physical sex also tends to present in children who are struggling with other vulnerabilities such as autism, mental health issues and serious trauma.¹²

The role of the school community

Being psychosocially transitioned to live as a member of the opposite sex – including at school – is not a neutral or reversible act for a child. Children cannot get back the time they spent believing that their bodies were 'wrong', that they belonged to the opposite sex, or that they had no physical sex. Nor can their peers reverse any harm this experience caused to them – e.g. girls who have been made to share showers or changing rooms with male students. Moreover, there is evidence to indicate that psychosocial transition is an important predictor of persistence of gender dysphoria in children as they grow older.¹³

This raises concerns that psychosocial transition may serve to cement a child's distress about gender, which may lead them towards medical interventions with serious and irreversible potential consequences, including (but not limited to) sterility, adult sexual dysfunction, and serious loss of bone density.¹⁴

In her review of the UK's gender identity service for children, Dr Hilary Cass said of social transition: 'It is important to view it as an active intervention because it may have significant effects on the child or young person in terms of their psychological functioning.'¹⁵

Therefore, the way that school communities respond to students expressing distress or confusion about their biological sex is key.

It is not our intention to vilify teachers, wellbeing staff or school leadership. We are confident that the vast majority of educators care deeply about their students and are eager to act in the students' best interests. However, state schools are facing unprecedented and intolerable pressure, including unmanageable workloads, frequent mental health concerns for students and staff, increasingly complex student needs, shortage of classroom materials, and frequent, serious aggression towards staff.¹⁶

Under these circumstances, we are concerned that many school staff are not well-placed to interrogate and assess different approaches to handling distress or confusion about biological sex amongst their students. Schools struggling to manage multiple competing pressures might well be at risk of accepting 'solutions', including from external sources, which they might not have accepted under happier circumstances. This can place staff in the risky position of implementing guidance which they might not have the capacity, knowledge, confidence or workplace safety to question.

School operations policy: 'LGBTIQ Student Support'

Given the risks associated with psychosocial transition and the particular vulnerability of children who may grow up to be LGB adults, we are concerned about several aspects of DET's policy for schools on 'LGBTIQ Student Support'.

The policy pays relatively little attention to the needs of students who are same-sex attracted. Rather, it focuses largely on gender identity, and appears to encourage or instruct schools to take an affirmation approach and facilitate psychosocial transition.

The policy urges schools to develop a support plan for 'students affirming their gender identity'. In creating a plan, schools should consider (amongst other things):

- 'catering to the students' affirmed gender identity';
- 'the referencing of and recording of student's affirmed name, gender identity, and pronouns (he, she, they and so on)';
- 'developing a communications plan that includes what information staff members and other students need to know to best support the student';
- 'the use of toilets, showers and change rooms that meet the needs of the student. This should be based on the student's gender identity and whichever facilities they will feel most comfortable using.'

DET policy states that the support plan should be created with the student's parents or carers 'where possible'. However:

'If no agreement can be reached between the student and the parent/s regarding the student's gender identity, or if the parent/s will not consent to the contents of a student support plan, it will be necessary for the school to consider whether the student is a mature minor. If a student is considered a mature minor they can make decisions for themselves without parental consent and should be affirmed in their gender identity at school without a family representative/carer participating in formulating the school management plan.'¹⁷

(Note: from our reading of DET's policy on 'mature minors and decision making', there appears to be no set age limit at which a student may be judged by school staff as a mature minor.¹⁸)

We believe this policy raises serious concerns about child safeguarding. It does not recognise the risks associated with psychosocial transition of children, or the potentially serious health impacts of a subsequent medical transition. It does not acknowledge the particular vulnerability of students who may grow up to be LGB, are on the autism

spectrum, or have experienced trauma. The discussion of students as 'mature minors' does not mention the risks inherent in adults encouraging children to keep secrets from their parents or carers. Nor does the policy seriously question whether a child has the capacity to understand and make decisions about such a complex and life-altering matter.

Furthermore, the policy does not recognise the risks that transitioning a student may create for other students – e.g. for girls who are instructed to change their clothes, sleep, use toilets, or play contact sports with biological males. The discussion of a communications plan does not mention whether the parents of other children will even be told about these risks.

At LGB Alliance Australia, we want to ensure that children, including children who may grow up to be LGB, are not placed at risk of harm. Specifically, we would like to clarify that children at Victoria's state schools are not exposed to any of the following:

- Being encouraged or instructed to use facilities with members of the opposite sex in situations which put them at risk of sexual harassment, assault, voyeurism, image-based abuse, or physical harm – e.g. changing rooms, overnight accommodation, showers, toilets, or secondary school contact sports teams.
- Being encouraged to believe that they were 'born in the wrong body' and need medical interventions to 'fix' them.
- Being encouraged to believe that they are at very high risk of suicide, self-harm, or homicide.
- Being encouraged to wear clothing which can cause physical damage - e.g. binders on girls.
- Being encouraged to keep secrets from parents or carers about topics of importance to the child's safety.
- Being encouraged to engage in anxious or excessive rumination about sex and gender - e.g. being prompted for pronouns, asked if they would like to change their sex, or urged to reflect on which 'identities' they relate to.
- Being taught demonstrably inaccurate information by trusted adults – e.g. being told that it is possible to change their sex or that their parents and doctors may have made a mistake about their sex at birth.

On the basis of publicly available policy DET materials, we are not confident that all students at state schools are safe from these risks at present.

LGBTQIA+ inclusion workshops for schools

Victorian DET's Mental Health Menu for schools includes 'LGBTQIA+ inclusion workshops for students and teachers', delivered by Minus18. These are available to secondary school

students (including 'Cohort specific sessions for LGBTQIA+ students') and to primary and secondary school staff.¹⁹

The workshops undertake to 'promote positive mental health to improve the lives of LGBTQIA+ youth'. Teacher workshops include 'definitions of varying gender identities and the gender spectrum, research examining barriers and discrimination, social and medical gender affirmation, what are pronouns, using inclusive language and tools to build safe and inclusive experiences for trans and gender diverse students and staff.' The promotional materials do not mention any specific provisions about LGB students.

Student workshops cover, amongst other things, 'basics of LGBTQIA+ identities' and 'exploring ways to take action to safely support peers'. Promotional materials note that presenters can assist schools with a range of situations, including 'in response to a specific incident' or 'supporting a student'.

We have not been able to discover what experience or qualifications inform the creation and delivery of the workshops or the provision of individualised assistance to school when working with vulnerable students. Given the high presentation of autism, trauma and other vulnerabilities in students who express distress about their biological sex, we think it is vital that any such programs have a rigorous evidence base, grounded in expertise in childhood development and child and adolescent mental health. We would also like to feel assured that the workshops have been informed by the growing evidence base about the risks of psychosocial transition and the disproportionate presence of LGB teens in gender clinics.²⁰

Furthermore, if workshops like these teach students the concept of 'gender identity' as an objective fact, rather than a subjective belief held by some people, this would seem to raise concerns in relation to Victorian DET's policy on special religious instruction. The policy states 'Government schools are secular and must not promote any particular religious practice, denomination or sect and must be open to adherents of any philosophy, religion or faith. If Special Religious Instruction is offered, it must operate as an opt in extra-curricular activity that students may only attend with parental consent.'²¹

LGB Alliance Australia sees gender identity as a quasi-religious belief, akin in some ways to belief in a soul. There is no measurable, factual evidence to support the existence of a gender identity for each person; rather, it is a matter of self-declared 'feeling'. As such, students who believe they have a gender identity should be welcome in school as much as anyone else, but their belief system should not be taught compulsorily to other students as if it were fact. Nor should other students be intimidated, shamed or punished for holding or expressing different beliefs.

It would be deeply inappropriate to teach students belief-based ideology in a secular state school.

Safe Schools program

Safe Schools program has been operating in Victorian state schools in various forms since 2010. It undertakes to provide information, resources and professional learning for teachers 'so that they are equipped to support LGBTIQ+ students'. Safe Schools is offered to primary and secondary schools for free under the School Mental Health Menu.²²

However, we have not been able to discover yet whether the program has ever been through an independent, external evaluation, other than a 2016 review of program resources for the national Safe Schools Coalition Australia, conducted under the federal government of the time.²³

If an evaluation has occurred in Victoria, we believe the terms of reference and findings (appropriately de-identified) should be made public. If an independent evaluation has not been conducted, we believe it should be done promptly, given the program's current and long-standing nature. An evaluation should consider fully the outcomes and impacts of the program for LGB students and for all other students at participating schools.

DET School Readiness Funding

Victorian DET's School Readiness Funding Menu provides funding to kindergartens to access evidence-informed programs and supports to help vulnerable children get ready to start primary school. Interventions are meant to focus on communication, wellbeing, and/or access and inclusion. We support this approach and feel confident that the vast majority of interventions are high-quality and beneficial.

However, we were deeply concerned to read about a couple of menu offerings. As far as we could tell from their public promotional materials, these products appear to provide kindergarten teachers with information and guidance about biological sex and 'gender identity' which could be seen as highly contested, ideological, and risky to children.

Obviously, LGB Alliance Australia does not have access to the full materials used by providers when working with kindergartens. However, their promotional materials raised concerns for us.

For example, 'The Gender Expansion' (Gender Inclusion Consulting) undertakes to teach early childhood educators about topics including 'Separating sex and the different spectrums of gender' and 'Gender diversity and its relevance to early childhood education'. The workshops promise to help early childhood educators in 'creating safe spaces to support the gender development of all children'. Their lead consultant

describes conducting research into 'how best to create spaces where children are free to express their true gendered selves'.²⁴

Meanwhile, 'Gender Glorious' (Body Safety Australia) aims to ensure that kindergarten educators 'demonstrate an increased confidence in embedding inclusion of trans, gender diverse and gender nonconforming children in practice' and promises to help educators create 'inclusive and equitable environments for boys, girls and gender non-conforming children' and learn about 'inclusive language, including pronouns'.²⁵

We agree it is vital that all children can participate equally in education, including children who may be confused or distressed about their sex. However, we are disturbed by what appears to be an implied normalising of the psychosocial transitioning of 3- and 4-year-old children.

This matter resonates painfully with our members, as many LGB adults recall being seen as highly 'gender non-conforming' when we were young children. Many of us were once boys who liked playing with dolls or girls who liked playing with trucks. We are deeply disturbed by the implicit homophobia and sexism that seem to sit behind initiatives which portray so-called gender non-conforming children as not really male or female, or as profoundly different to other children ('boys, girls and gender non-conforming children'). Even more disturbing is the suggestion that such children would be better off trying to change their sex – a pathway which can lead to dangerous and irreversible medical procedures – rather than simply growing up into (quite possibly) LGB adults.

Doubtless the creators and presenters of such products intend their offerings to be progressive, inclusive and caring, and would be offended and hurt by accusations of homophobia. Nonetheless, at this stage it is difficult for us to understand their products in any other way.

We would be glad to discuss these matters further with you. Please contact Susanna Williams at susanna.williams@lgballiance.org.au

¹ Dr Hilary Cass, 'The Cass Review: independent review of gender identity services for children and young people: interim report,' February 2022, <https://cass.independent-review.uk/publications/interim-report/>; Bernard Lane, ' "Yes, it's an experiment": Norway joins the shift to caution on gender medicine,' *Gender Clinic News*, 10 March 2023, <https://www.genderclinicnews.com/p/yes-its-an-experiment> ; Bernard Lane, 'Sweden transitions to caution,' *Gender Clinic News*, 2 March 2022, https://www.genderclinicnews.com/p/sweden-transitions-to-caution?utm_source=%2Fsearch%2Fsweden&utm_medium=reader2 ; Bernard Lane, 'Doubt in Denmark,' *Gender Clinic News*, 14 August 2023, https://www.genderclinicnews.com/p/doubt-in-denmark?utm_source=%2Fsearch%2Fdenmark&utm_medium=reader2

² See Victorian Government DET, 'School Readiness Funding Menu - List View,' https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/SRFmenu_list.aspx We refer especially to the public promotional materials for '[The Gender Expansion](#)' and '[Gender Glorious](#)'.

³ Natasha Robinson and Joanna Panagopoulous, 'Families trapped in a maze of gender anguish,' *The Australian*, 26 May 2023, <https://archive.md/2023.05.26-134642/https://www.theaustralian.com.au/life/trans-kids-and-their-families-lost-in-maze-of-gender-ideology-anguish/news-story/84859b3579ee2a5eb23de98d54b55b3a?amp&nk=09bfb8b87873632024cb6033dc36d355-1685108809#selection-207.5-207.49>

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⁸ Hannah Barnes, *Time To Think: The Inside Story of the Collapse of the Tavistock's Gender Service for Children*, Swift Press, 2023, <https://swiftpress.com/book/time-to-think/>

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