



May 6, 2016

Kim Kovalchick, Supervisor
Michigan Department of Education
Coordinated School Health and Safety Programs Unit
P.O. Box 30008
Lansing, MI 48909

To Members of the State Board of Education:

Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC), the official public policy voice of the Catholic Church in this state, wishes to submit its comments regarding the State Board of Education's (SBE) recently proposed "Statement and Guidance on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments for LGBTQ Students." While the intent of the SBE's Statement and Guidance is to address learning environments primarily for transgender persons, the proposed guidance has created widespread confusion, as evidenced by the thousands of comments submitted by citizens across the state. The SBE's suggested policies for public schools have raised serious concerns regarding the role parents play in the education and development of their children, student privacy, the first amendment right to religious liberty and, perhaps most critically, the very nature of the human person.

In the Catholic tradition, all persons, regardless of their orientation or identity, are to be treated with dignity and respect (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 2358.) The Catholic Church seeks to respond to transgender persons with care and compassion, as there are a variety of emotional and psychological needs that must be acknowledged on a case-by-case basis. Yet introducing children to questions about gender ideology when they are at a vulnerable stage in their development deserves reconsideration. Schools would be well-served to encourage each student to develop his or her gifts and talents free from judgement and without feeling – or being pressured into believing – that somehow their gender, determined at conception, was a mistake. The truth of creation must be acknowledged: that man was made in God's image; He made them male and female. Pope Francis offered his reflections about the human body in the encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*:

The acceptance of our bodies as God's gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning is an essential element of any genuine human ecology.

(continued)

Officers: Most Reverend Allen H. Vigneron, Archbishop of Detroit, *Chairman*; Most Reverend Paul J. Bradley, Bishop of Kalamazoo, *Vice-Chairman*; Mr. Patrick E. Heintz, Traverse City, *Secretary/Treasurer*

Board Members: Most Reverend Earl A. Boyea, Bishop of Lansing; Ms. Susanne Boxer, Hancock; Most Reverend Joseph R. Cistone, Bishop of Saginaw; Most Reverend John F. Doerfler, Bishop of Marquette; Mr. Mark Feldpausch, Delton; Sr. Rose Marie Kujawa, CSSF, Ph.D., Livonia; Mr. Roger Playwin, Grosse Pointe Park; Most Reverend Steven J. Raica, Bishop of Gaylord; Mr. Steven F. Roznowski, Lansing; Rev. William J. Rutkowski, Saginaw; Most Reverend David J. Walkowiak, Bishop of Grand Rapids

Mr. Paul A. Long, *President and Chief Executive Officer*

As stated in Section 10 of the Revised School Code: “It is the natural fundamental right of parents and legal guardians to determine and direct the care, teaching, and education of their children.” Similarly, the Catholic Church teaches that parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 2223), as they play a primary role in their child’s social, emotional and sexual development. The proposed Statement and Guidance, conversely, diminishes the role of parents by appearing to foster a rejection of biological sexual identity without question and without parental involvement. By permitting a student to adopt a new sexual identity at school while maintaining their biological identity at home, the proposed document would allow for a student to create and sustain a harmful dual identity.

The SBE document not only weakens the role of parents, it also appears to engrain in all aspects of the school environment a promotion of false gender ideologies. The document creates a wide-range of student privacy concerns related to the use of restrooms and locker rooms as well as participation in physical education classes and intramural and interscholastic sports. Lacking from the document is a discussion of the religious liberty rights of school personnel – administrators, teachers, support staff, etc. – and their involvement in activities or curriculum that violate the individual’s longstanding religious and moral convictions. Additionally, concerns arise when school support groups highlighted in the SBE document engage in advocacy efforts for local, state or federal policies that promote an agenda contrary to a student’s faith background.

For the aforementioned reasons, Michigan Catholic Conference recommends the State Board of Education rescind its Statement and Guidance document as it creates as many health, safety and learning challenges for students and families as it seeks to alleviate. Going forward, MCC encourages the Board to ensure all students are safe from any form of bullying, harassment or intimidation; to recognize the diversity of the student body, including religious beliefs; and to promote tolerance for parental rights, student privacy, and the time-honored importance of family and the truth of the human person.

Sincerely,

Michigan Catholic Conference