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Open letter to the Minister of Education

24 April 2024

The Hon Erica Stanford
Minister of Education

Cc: Hon Matt Doocey, Minister for Mental Health and Minister for Youth
Hon David Seymour, Associate Minister of Education
Rt Hon Winston Peters, Deputy Prime Minister

Tenā koe Minister Stanford,

The Mental Health Foundation has asked the public to sign an open letter to you, the Minister of Education, opposing the removal of the relationships and sexuality education (RSE) guidelines in schools and kura.

The letter is unnecessary at best and mischief-making at worst because there has never been a government plan to remove RSE altogether. The coalition agreement was for “the removal and **replacement** of the gender, sexuality, and relationship-based education guidelines.” Minister Stanford, thank you for confirming this position when interviewed about the Mental Health Foundation (MHF) campaign by saying, “I emphasise the agreement to replace,” and adding that the current guidelines had important content you wish to keep.

Few people would disagree with the MHF’s desire for children to have “good-quality RSE [to] help young people become responsible, healthy and productive citizens.” But, far from being “evidence-based” as claimed, much of our current RSE Guide¹ is ideologically driven and teaches an unscientific belief in gender identity, as if it is fact, from the first year of primary school. The Guide binds students and teachers alike to the contested idea that everyone has a gender identity that trumps the physical reality of their sex. Teaching gender identities as real encourages every child who is experiencing difficulties to think a change of identity may be a route out of their own distress. Thus this ideology is doing terrible harm to **all** children and especially to same-sex attracted adolescents, gender non-conforming children, those with autism spectrum disorder, and those who have faced adverse life events. For the benefit of all children, the RSE Guide must be removed and replaced.

¹ <https://hpe.tki.org.nz/guidelines-and-policies/relationships-and-sexuality-education/>

The coalition government's policy to replace the Guide is unequivocally supported by the recently-released Cass Review² in the UK into gender identity services for children and young people. The Review was chaired by eminent paediatrician, Dr Hilary Cass, whose team spent four years investigating the international evidence for how best to treat gender-distress in children and found "remarkably weak evidence" for current practices, including those in schools.

The Cass Review found that there was no proven benefit and too many unanswered questions for the safe use of puberty blockers. It found that decisions about social transitioning (the adoption of clothing, names, and pronouns of the opposite sex) "*is not a role that can be taken by staff without appropriate clinical training*" and that early social transition is not justified by the evidence. Dr Cass strongly upholds the right of parents to be involved in life-changing decisions about their children.

Yet our RSE Guide recommends teaching children of 11 and 12 about "*variations in puberty, including the role of hormone blockers*" and instructs schools to "*allow ākongā (students) the right to determine their own identity and name.*" In its government-funded resource, *Making Schools Safer*,³ InsideOUT encourages schools to collude with students to keep secrets from their parents. "*To maintain a student's privacy, check with the student about the name and /or pronouns they want to be used in the records that parents and caregivers might see, as they might be different to the ones they use at school,*" it casually instructs.

Affirming children into adopting a transgender identity that denies biological reality and encouraging them to keep secrets is not neutral, compassionate, or safe. Treating puberty – the natural and necessary progression from childhood to adulthood – as an optional extra is absolutely not good-quality RSE and must end immediately.

Dr Cass discovered that guidelines for gender-affirming care around the world have been based on the recommendations of just two organisations – the Endocrine Society and WPATH (World Professional Association for Transgender Health).

These two guidelines are also closely interlinked, with WPATH adopting Endocrine Society recommendations, and acting as a co-sponsor and providing input to drafts of the Endocrine Society guideline. WPATH 8 cited many of the other national and regional guidelines to support some of its recommendations, despite these guidelines having been considerably influenced by WPATH 7. The circularity of this approach may explain why there has been an apparent consensus on key areas of practice despite the evidence being poor. (p130 of the Cass Report)

These circular endorsements have also shaped the New Zealand PATHA (Professional Association for Transgender Health Aotearoa) guidelines, and in turn the beliefs of transgender lobby group InsideOUT, which was contracted in 2022 by the Ministry of Education to provide resources for teaching RSE in our schools.

² <https://cass.independent-review.uk/home/publications/final-report/>

³ <https://www.insideout.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Making-Schools-Safer.pdf>

In response to the Cass Review, the UK Health Secretary, Victoria Adams, said in a statement to Parliament,⁴ “This Review strikes hard and strikes sure at an area of public policy where fashionable cultural values have overtaken evidence, safety, and biological reality. **This must now stop.**”

We, the undersigned, echo that demand. We agree that there is important content in the RSE Guide around consent, pornography, and healthy relationships that should be retained. However, all the discredited gender identity material that riddles the Guide must be replaced by content that is scientifically factual, evidence-based, and age-appropriate.

We strongly urge you, Minister Stanford, to both rewrite the 2020 RSE Guide as a matter of urgency, and to remove the tag of “trusted organisation” from InsideOUT and any other organisations that dogmatically continue to support the Guide despite the irrefutable evidence from Dr Cass that the wishful thinking it promotes is harmful to children.

Ngā mihi nui

Resist Gender Education

Speak Up for Women

LAVA - Lesbian Action for Visibility in Aotearoa

LGB Alliance Aotearoa NZ

The Women’s Rights Party

Genspect New Zealand

Save Women’s Sports Australasia

Aotearoa Support

Women’s Declaration International - New Zealand

FOWL - Feminist Older Women Lobbyists

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9c118CAsOU&ab_channel=DepartmentofHealthandSocialCare