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August 24, 2023

OPEN LETTER TO:

Honorable Dustin Duncan, Minister of Education

Minister.edu@gov.sk.ca

Sent via E Mail

Dear Minister Duncan

Re: Parental inclusion and consent policies

The Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers has reviewed the recently announced policy changes regarding parental permission for pronoun changes and sexual health education. Social workers have a valuable role within the school system and as the professional body for social workers in Saskatchewan, we raise our deep concern about the changes announced on August 22. We strongly believe that these specific policy changes will have a significant impact on the rights of children in Saskatchewan, as well as the social workers who support them.

Registered social workers are required to follow a Code of Ethics to ensure safe and ethical practice. We believe that gender diverse young people are to be affirmed as the gender they understand themselves to be, as consistent with our values of respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons and social justice as defined in the *Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2005)*.

The inclusion of the parental consent clause for students under the age of 16 is an infringement of their personal rights and overall wellbeing. Trans and non-binary youth face greater risk of mental health challenges due to the discrimination and stigma that they face. The Being Safe, Being Me 2019 Results of the Canadian Trans and Non-binary Youth Health Survey from the University of British Columbia states that the majority of trans and/or non-binary youth (88%) indicated having a chronic mental health condition, such as depression or anxiety. This study also states that youth from the prairie provinces (94%) were more likely to experience a chronic mental health condition. In addition, almost two-thirds (64%) of the surveyed youth have seriously considered suicide within the past year, however those who felt connected to family and who felt safe at school were less likely to report considering suicide. The Ministry of Education policy changes result, for those youth under the age of 16 without an accepting adult in the home environment, the elimination of school as an option to find a supportive adult. This is unfortunate, as school should be a safe place for children. Thus, these changes can have mental health implications for the most vulnerable trans and non-binary students.

The parental inclusion and consent policies speak to teachers, however, do not address other professionals within the educational settings, such as social workers or psychologists. It is imperative that students feel safe and supported when seeking support from social workers within the school environment. Often students seek services from social workers during trying, isolated, or critical times. The new policy changes place restrictions on how social workers will be able to converse and provide information, which could directly impact a student's mental wellbeing. While it has been stated that the changes were driven by parents, it is concerning that this policy directly impacts the children and their rights.

We are also extremely disappointed that consultation with the various professions involved in the school system, other stakeholders, and experts in this area was not considered prior to this decision, as evidence-based practice is of the utmost importance to social workers.

The Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers strongly encourages you, as Minister of Education, to review this policy and conduct thorough consultation to ensure that students in Saskatchewan are provided with a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bren Shock BSW". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the letters "BSW" at the end being more distinct.

Bren Shock, BSW, RSW

President, Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers