

November 21, 2019

Delegation at November 26<sup>th</sup> meeting of the OCDSB Trustee Meeting regarding Dress Codes.

Dear Trustees

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the school board's Dress Code Policy and Consultation.

My name is Jen Douek and I am here today to represent the Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women (OCTEVAW).

Firstly, OCTEVAW asked me to share part of a letter that I wrote to my son's school principal last year - as they fully endorse its message:

It is only the beginning of week three and I have a lot of concerns about the environment of learning and how the school is handling and modelling matters of gender, sexuality and respect. I am overhearing a lot of chatter from my son and his friends about "dress coding" and girls getting called out by teachers—in front of others!—about their clothing choices.

This is indirect information but it has already come up more than once. Can this really be a thing at [REDACTED]? A few conversations with other parents and students reveals that it is DEFINITELY a thing at [REDACTED]!

I have worked very hard to teach my son about respect and consent from the time he was a toddler. I did not expect that his school would tell him that the bodies of his classmates are targets for public commentary, evaluation and shame. Quite simply, it is not okay (and by "not okay" I mean "illegal") for a teacher to sexualize a student ("I can see your bra strap" and "raise your arms, let's see if I can see your midriff"). It is deeply humiliating, disrespectful and damaging to the student being singled out and it teaches other students that the policing of girls' bodies, what amounts to nothing less than sexual harassment, is part and parcel of coming of age.

I am appalled.

Our children deserve immediate assertive action to change this hostile climate. Please do not underestimate the import or impact of what is happening. This is where rape culture starts. I want none of it for my child or for any other child.

OCTEVAW would like to underscore that the current policy:

- Teaches girls that what they look like is more important than what they think; and
- Could be used as a tool to target and punish already marginalized students including young racialized girls and boys, and trans students (<sup>i</sup> <sup>ii</sup> <sup>iii</sup>). For example, a study in the US found that young black women in DC were disproportionately affected by dress codes<sup>iv</sup>.

We are keen to review the proposed consultation process that will be tabled this evening for the dress code consultation. Some key aspects that we expect to see in the consultation process include:

- Engaging students as leaders in this process, especially those with expertise in these issues including those in GSAs, feminist collectives and other relevant student groups.
- Consulting with every student in the Board through by devoting class time to this critical issue.
- Consulting with community leader experts in preventing sexual violence and promoting an inclusive school environment including OCTEVAW, the Sexual Assault Network, the Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre, the Sexual Assault Support Centre of Ottawa, CALACS francophone d'Ottawa and Planned Parenthood Ottawa.
- Integrating intersectional analysis to prevent marginalization of girls, gender diverse, racialized, Indigenous or other student populations.
- Identifying other progressive frameworks to inform this work, such as the Oregon NOW's model student dress code which has the following values<sup>v</sup>:
  - All students should be able to dress comfortably for school without fear of or actual unnecessary discipline or body shaming.
  - All students and staff should understand that they are responsible for managing their own personal "distractions" without regulating individual students' clothing/self expression.
  - Teachers can focus on teaching without the additional and often uncomfortable burden of dress code enforcement.
  - Students should not face unnecessary barriers to school attendance.
  - Reasons for conflict and inconsistent discipline should be minimized whenever possible. (Oregon NOW, p 1)

On behalf of OCTEVAW, thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective on this important issue, and we look forward to engaging in the public consultation process and encouraging other community organizations, parents and students to do so.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> National Women’s Law Centre “Dress Coded: Black girls, bodies, and bias in D.C. schools” available at: [https://nwlc-ciw49tixgw5lbab.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/web\\_Final\\_nwlc\\_DressCodeReport-1.pdf](https://nwlc-ciw49tixgw5lbab.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/web_Final_nwlc_DressCodeReport-1.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> WTSP news (August 22, 2014 “NAACP: 'Saggy Pants' ordinance targets black men” available at: <https://www.wtsp.com/article/news/local/naacp-saggy-pants-ordinance-targets-black-men/300244738>

<sup>iii</sup> Jan Hoffman (2009) “Can a boy wear a skirt to school?” New York Times available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/08/fashion/08cross.html>

<sup>iv</sup> National Women’s Law Centre “Dress Coded: Black girls, bodies, and bias in D.C. schools” available at: [https://nwlc-ciw49tixgw5lbab.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/web\\_Final\\_nwlc\\_DressCodeReport-1.pdf](https://nwlc-ciw49tixgw5lbab.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/web_Final_nwlc_DressCodeReport-1.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Oregon NOW (2016) “Oregon NOW Model Student Dress Code” available at: [https://noworegon.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2018/01/or\\_now\\_model\\_student\\_dress\\_code\\_feb\\_2016\\_1.pdf](https://noworegon.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2018/01/or_now_model_student_dress_code_feb_2016_1.pdf)