



The Governing Body Foundation calls on DBE to go back to the drawing board regarding Sex and Gender Issues in Schools

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All documents drafted by the DBE regarding the handling of sex and gender issues in schools should be withdrawn and bona fide consultation with all role players should be conducted before any such documents are issued to schools.’ So says Dr Anthea Cereseto, National CEO of the Governing Body Foundation (GBF), which represents 810(?) school governing bodies in South Africa.

It has come to the attention of the Governing Body Foundation (GBF) that the DBE has been drafting a number of documents which prescribe how sex and gender issues should be handled in schools, and which aim in particular to prevent discrimination and bullying of people who identify as LGBTGQIA+. Despite claims to the contrary, school governing body associations have not been consulted on these documents. The GBF therefore believes that the DBE should go back to the drawing board so that all stakeholders’ views are taken into account.

As an organisation which espouses the rights enshrined in the South African Constitution, we endorse the need to ensure that the rights of all children in schools are protected and respected irrespective of their gender or their beliefs regarding gender. We therefore condemn all forms of discrimination, bullying and stigmatising of any children, and in this context, LGBTQIA+ children in particular.

Because of this, we are deeply concerned that the DBE documents drafted and currently being drafted will lead to a strong backlash from many in our schools – learners, teachers and parents. The result will be that the very people whom these documents aim to protect will in fact be the targets of the backlash. In other words, the documents could produce the opposite effect to that for which they were intended.

The reason we say this is that the documents are based on – and prescribe - only one of the two major prevailing views on the relationship between sex and gender.

For many years it was universally accepted that there are two biologically based sexes, male and female (the so-called ‘binary’ approach). Related to this was the belief that, although socialisation plays a part, sex, in most cases, determines gender.

In more recent times an alternative view has developed – the so-called ‘non-binary’ approach. It sees gender as purely a social construct and advocates that people should count as men or women according to how they feel or what they declare, instead of their biology.

As the documents stand, they represent only one approach to these matters - the non-binary approach - and everyone in the school is expected to agree to, and to promote, this approach even if they disagree with it.

This view has been met with a backlash from people who reject the underlying philosophy. Proponents of the non-binary approach sometimes cast these critics as ‘conservatives’, ‘bigots’ and ‘homophobes’ (derogatory terms which reflect a lack of respect for diversity of views). While this may be true of some, it is certainly not true of all. Among those who protest are psychologists, clinicians, biologists, evolutionary biologists and other academics, as well as parents of children who underwent transgender surgery and then regretted it or committed suicide, as well as de-transitioners themselves.

Those who reject the non-binary approach would challenge some of the assumptions in the documents and argue first that biological sex has an objective basis and that it is a scientific fact and second that sex and gender are closely related for the vast majority of people – that people are born male or female; that gender is not *purely* a social construct; and that there is no such thing as gender fluidity. In the light of this they maintain that teaching children, especially young children, that gender is an open choice (i.e. advocating gender self-identification) could lead to confusion and anxiety for those who are comfortable with their birth status. They maintain, too, that parents’ rights have been compromised in terms of what their children are taught about sex and gender. This is contrary to Education White Paper 1, which indicates that parents are primarily responsible for their children’s education.

‘Besides the fact that foisting one approach on all flouts people’s constitutional rights to freedom of thought, conscience and expression,’ says CEO Dr Cereseto, ‘we are deeply concerned that the DBE documents will lead to a backlash from many in our schools – learners, teachers and parents – and harm the very people they were intended to protect.’

The GBF does not subscribe to – or presume to prescribe – either of the two main views. It believes that allowance should be made for a plurality of views.

‘We believe, therefore,’ says Dr Cereseto, ‘that the DBE should withdraw all its documents on this matter and undertake genuine, open consultation where all views can be presented and all feel free and safe to express their views. We believe that the documents should be fundamentally revised to reflect a diversity of opinions. All of these should be equally respected and none should be foisted on people who do not agree with them. Mutual respect – not a one-side respect - should be the basis of all gender education and practices in schools. This obviously has implications not only for the guidelines for handling matters of sex and gender in schools but also for the training of teachers and for the curriculum.’

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Notes to Editor:

The Governing Body Foundation (GBF) is an organization dedicated to supporting and empowering governing bodies in South African schools. As an influential advocate for effective school governance, the GBF provides guidance, resources, and training to help governing bodies fulfill their responsibilities and enhance educational outcomes. The organization assists in developing policies, codes of conduct, and strategies that promote school safety, inclusive practices, and educational excellence. Through its initiatives, the GBF aims to foster collaboration between schools, parents, and education authorities, ensuring a conducive learning environment for all learners. The GBF's work is rooted in the principles of good governance, transparency, and accountability, with a focus on promoting the interests and well-being of students, educators, and school communities. To learn more about the Governing Body Foundation and its initiatives, please visit www.gbf.org.za.