

**26 January 2021** – We are a group of students and supporters staging a peaceful demonstration at 5pm today outside the Ministry of Education (MOE) at Buona Vista (you can read messages from individual protestors at the bottom of this press release). We call on Minister Lawrence Wong to end discrimination against LGBTQ+ students by MOE schools, so as to uphold the fundamental right of all students to education within a safe and supportive school life.

Discrimination and harassment against LGBTQ+ students is a long standing issue in our schools which damages their wellbeing and denies access to safe and supportive education. Most of us demonstrating today have experienced this first hand.

Students themselves, human rights and civil society groups, as well as educators, counsellors and other professionals working with young people, have raised concerns about discriminatory and intrusive practices by schools, which hurt both LGBTQ+ students, as well as heterosexual and cisgender students, by undermining privacy, bodily autonomy and well-being. These practices include (but are not limited to):

- Checking and controlling whether students' clothes, hair and bodies match gender norms imposed by schools, including through intrusive clothing checks (e.g. examining underclothes)
- Prohibiting and policing students' dating and intimate relationships, including punishing or shaming students for relationships
- School counselling which treats LGBTQ+ identities as problems to be done away with (e.g. conversion therapy) rather than affirming students' autonomy and identities
- Disrespecting students' confidentiality and outing them as LGBTQ+ to family members or other persons without their consent
- Physically excluding students from school based on whether they look like a gender the school imposes upon them. Home-Based Learning (HBL) could be offered, but not imposed, for all students whose circumstances might make HBL a preferred option for a period.
- Refusing to use gender pronouns requested by students
- Censoring mention and open discussion of LGBTQ+ experiences and identities, including by disciplining or policing educators
- Continuing to discuss LGBTQ+ identities mainly in the context of informing students during sex-ed that Section 377A deems homosexual conduct illegal and opposed to societal norms, and failing to provide LGBTQ-inclusive information on sexual and reproductive health and well-being.

MOE has a duty to protect the human rights of LGBTQ+ students in its care. Your recent statements on this matter have not acknowledged the harm your schools have done to trans students, nor committed to concrete actions to alleviate this harm. You have merely stated that your current practices are good enough when it is abundantly clear from the

testimonies of trans students that they are not. MOE seems more invested in defending itself than in caring for the well-being of trans students.

The cost of MOE's failures in eradicating these harmful practices is the health, well-being, and sometimes, the lives of LGBTQ+ students. And that is too great a cost for us to bear.

In schools, children and young people learn how to treat others in society. Civic lessons instruct them to respect and be kind to others. Do the institutions practise these same values, in their treatment of students? Young people learn much more from what they see others do, rather than what they are told. Schools that practice transphobia reinforce a transphobic society. It is urgent that we put an end to discrimination in schools' policies and practices.

Today, we build on the work and care of the many groups and individuals who have spoken for LGBTQ+ rights over the years, even though each of us acts alone, and not in affiliation with any association. We believe that gathering in support of our beliefs is an important and legitimate form of expression in a democratic society, and we are putting our bodies on the line to stand in solidarity with all LGBT students, past and present.

We envision a society that cares deeply for the well-being of all children in Singapore, where no child has to struggle to survive, and has every opportunity to thrive in the life they have chosen for themselves.

We urge MOE to acknowledge and apologise for the harm done by schools to LGBTQ+ students through their schools' discriminatory practices, and to clearly and explicitly commit to end such discrimination in the education environment. This must include working closely with students themselves and LGBTQ+ groups to understand their concerns, and to draw on and implement their existing concrete ideas and expertise.

Messages from individual protestors:

"I have seen and heard of far too many generations of transgender students who have been subjected to the disciplinary violence of MOE-run schools - me included - with regards to the regulating of hairstyles, wearing of gendered uniforms, the lack of access to medical treatment, and the prevention of trans alumni returning, among other forms of discrimination. I want to see Transgender/Queer students at the table with MOE on educational policy, and for the Ministry to accede and assist to the needs of Transgender/Queer students." —*Lune Loh (she/they), student activist*

"As an LGBTQ+ student who has experienced discrimination in school, I feel uncomfortable having to recite the pledge every morning - "based on justice and equality" - knowing that this is not true, and that our national leaders who should be at the forefront of upholding this

national promise are severely lacking in doing so. I am here today in solidarity with fellow students who have faced transphobia by systems that are meant to protect them. I would love to say "we deserve better", but the fact is that we are fighting for the bare minimum."  
—*Elijah Tay (they/them), founder of My Queer Story SG*