



13 April 2022

Dear Girls' College Parents and Students

## GIRLS' COLLEGE LGBTQIA+ COMMITMENT AND JOURNEY

### INTRODUCTION

Last week the Rector wrote to the St Stithians community affirming the College's stance around diversity, equity, and inclusion with a specific focus on LGBTQIA+ matters. The Girls' College is a community where we are firmly committed to addressing matters linked to all forms of discrimination and intolerance and are firmly committed to the inclusive stance presented by our Council, the Rector's Office, and broadly speaking, the South African Constitution, which enshrines the rights of all people in our country.

Towards the end of last year, our Parent Diversity and Transformation Support Group ran a survey in which parents, students and staff participated. The survey results presented strong sentiments around LGBTQIA+ matters and the sense of belonging within our school. The survey revealed this as a clear area of importance to our students. The survey also revealed that our parents and students hold quite different perspectives, attitudes and values regarding LGBTQIA+ inclusion. With this in mind, we acknowledge that there is much work to be done, especially for us adults who are often more resistant and less comfortable speaking about this topic than our adolescents.

The Girls' College recognises the considerable diversity in gender expression and identity among our staff, our students, parent community and visitors to the school, which brings enormous strength to our College. It is something we are proud of and celebrate, especially knowing the diversity that exists both locally in our county and across the world.

At the beginning of next term, we welcome a transgender girl student to the Girls' College. I have been journeying with this student and her parents, as well as a comprehensive support team (both in house and external) over a number of months in order to prepare for her enrolment at our school. The family has a long history with St Stithians and are strong supporters of our College ethos and are firm in their desire to be a part of our College community.

To date we have run a number of workshops and seminars with our staff to ensure they are equipped with knowledge, understanding and importantly compassion as we continue on this journey in our College.

I am very aware that one's own upbringing, religious beliefs or cultural expectations may be at odds with the College's position on gender and sexuality, and perhaps even with your own child's sense of gender. It is often on occasions like this that we really start to reflect on our own gender for the first time, which is a part of what may make this an uncomfortable and challenging experience for many. You may be concerned about the school's reputation, how others may perceive you within your family and/or community, and perhaps you just want to close your eyes and hope this will all simply "go away". Matters linked to equity and inclusion are certainly not going anywhere; this is a lifelong process that schools, universities, workplaces and society at large will continue to grapple with as long as humans continue to pass judgement and see difference.

**INSPIRING EXCELLENCE. MAKING A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE**

Raising adolescents in the 21st century is challenging and sometimes seems completely overwhelming for us as parents and teachers. Raising adolescents is an undertaking that requires growth, ongoing learning, and more than ever, compassion. There are no one-size-fits-all answers as we raise and educate young people in our care. However, as a community we need to walk together in a partnership as we move from a place of concern, fear, confusion and wariness to a place where we can become active allies and wise counsel for our children, so that we can parent and teach with clarity and compassion. As humans, our ultimate goal is to be happy, authentic and productive members of society who should not be penalised for being oneself, no matter what that may be, racially, gender-wise or culturally. Staying connected to our teens is critical, even though we may have no personal lived experience of the world our young people are trying to navigate.

In this communication I have tried to identify possible areas of concern for our community, as well as how we can learn together, and importantly, where to get support.

## **LGBTQIA+ AND CHRISTIANITY**

At St Stithians College, we believe we have a duty of care to protect students and community members who are LGBTQIA+. This duty of care involves listening to the experiences of our LGBTQIA+ students to identify any harmful practices that inhibit the flourishing of all members of the Saints community, One and All.

Being a Christian Methodist school, we believe that all individuals are made in the image of God and should be free to live a life of dignity consistently with their sexuality and gender identity without fear or judgement. We have engaged extensively with our Council Church Committee, our School Chaplains and with our Bishop within the Central Synod, Faith Whitby, who are supportive in our striving for an inclusive and non-judgemental space. We recognise this is very hard for many members of our community who may have differing views or perspectives. We respect individual opinion; however, we request that as a community you too respect and buy into our ethos of One and All. We are uncompromising on this. Individuals' right to live a life of dignity and safety is not a matter of opinion.

Under the guidance of Superintendent Chaplain Reverend Madika Sibeko, our school chaplains will be hosting Christian parent discussion circles on the topic of LGBTQIA+ matters and Christian religion (and other Abrahamic religions). This support circle will run during Term 2. Please sign up via the link provided below. The Chaplains will share specific details of the session/s with individuals who have shown interest in the discussion circle.

[Discussion Circle Expression of Interest Form](#)

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### **What about admissions?**

The Girls' College admissions involves a rigorous process whereby a student's academic strengths, areas of interest and overall good fit for the College are evaluated. This process will not change. All students and families entering our College undergo an interview to establish whether they buy into the culture and ethos of our school, being a Christian Methodist school focusing on excellence and character development of the individual. We pride ourselves on striving to provide a real, relevant and holistic education for young women through our school curriculum and ethos. This is not altering in any way, and any family and or student joining our school understands this at the outset of the admissions process.

### **What about bathrooms/locker rooms?**

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Safe access to public bathrooms is an essential need for participation in civic life, in the workplace, in schools, and other public spaces. This is no different for transgender people. However, access to public bathrooms according to gender identity frequently sparks controversy, fear, panic, and many questions to the extent that transgender people face embarrassment and even expulsion from these spaces.

At the Girls' College we have gender-neutral bathroom facilities that all students should feel safe and comfortable using. Further to this, we have a fully neutral set of private toilets and shower facilities at the Sports Pavilion. Community members should look out for signage that simply says "bathroom", indicating facilities that are open for all to utilise, regardless of gender. Increasingly, all members of our community seek greater privacy and comfort when it comes to bathroom and locker room facilities, and hence, we are embarking on a campus-wide restoration project over the coming months.

### **What about trips and tours?**

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Transgender members of the Girls' College community will be treated as any other student would when it comes to trips and tours. When planning a school trip or tour, the teacher in charge has to take multiple factors into consideration. This includes room allocations, health and safety factors, and various administrative arrangements. In the case of gender identity, there is no one "correct" way, with each trip or tour presenting different logistics and contexts.

In the case of bathrooms, locker rooms, and trips and tours, it is behaviour, not gender identity, that would be grounds for removing someone from a space. If a transgender student is simply going about their activities, they have the right to be in the best-fit accommodation for them, just like a cisgender (non-trans) student.

### **What about sport?**

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Sport reflects the best of our school and community at large. In the sporting area, people are judged based on their skills, talents, and contributions, and not their identities. At the Girls' College, we believe strongly in the value of sport and physical exercise for a student's wellbeing, as well as the learnings that come from playing as a team through winning and losing together. Transgender students will be encouraged to participate in sports that align with their gender identity, skill level and interests. Different sporting federations have varying regulations regarding transgender and non-binary players, which may inform team selection and/or participation at *competitive* levels, especially provincially and nationally. There is currently much advocacy and action within this sphere. At school level (and beyond, where their involvement permits), our sports staff and coaches are committed to supporting an inclusive and welcoming space for all and will engage with students concerned around the nuances within each of the sporting codes.

## **LEARNING, EDUCATION AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH**

We recognise that for many people, matters linked to awareness and understanding of gender identity, gender expression, biological sex and sexual orientation are confusing and not well understood. It is absolutely fine to grapple with these matters; however, to extend your knowledge and confidence in this area, you are encouraged to join one of our many learning opportunities as detailed below.

## Online Workshops

### **SOGIESC Training**

Ms Leanne Horwitz has been running a series of online educational workshops. During the session Ms Horwitz takes you through basic SOGIESC training. SOGIESC is an acronym for sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics. The sessions are open, non-judgmental and provide opportunity for educational conversation about LGBTQIA+ matters.



Please look out for training sessions in our Term 2 calendar and weekly *Seriti* publication.

### **How Do I Talk to My Child About Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation?**

Our psychologists Ms Carey Dellbridge and Ms Refilwe Modisi have designed a workshop for parents who are unsure of how to enter conversations about these matters or support their child who may have questions, may require support or may have wonderings around gender and sexual orientation. Please sign up for this workshop below. Numbers are limited. Depending on demand, further workshops will be arranged. Click below to access to workshop signup form.



[Workshop Signup Form](#)

## RECOMMENDED READING AND RESOURCES

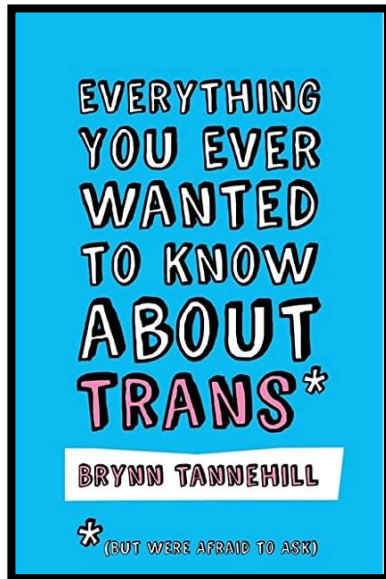
### **FAQ Document**

The campus Diversity and Transformation team has compiled a document of frequently asked questions – some of a general nature and some more specific to our context.

You may access the FAQ information [at this link](#).

### **Useful Websites**

- [Matimba](#) – a local, Johannesburg-based organisation that seeks to support young people who are transgender and gender variant
- [Genderdynamix](#) – is the first registered Africa-based public benefit organisation to focus solely on trans and gender diverse communities.



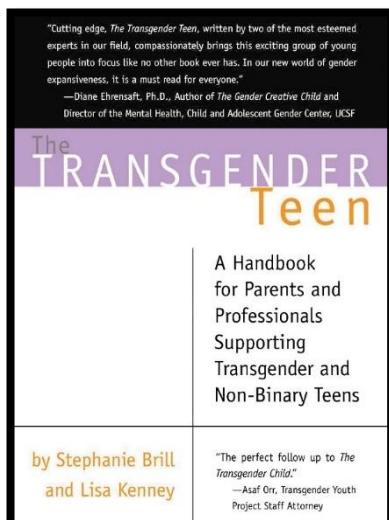
***Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Trans (But Were Afraid to Ask) – Brynn Tannehill***

*Paperback available via [Takealot](#), retailing at R425.00.*

Brynn Tannehill tells you everything you ever wanted to know about transgender issues but were afraid to ask. The book aims to break down deeply held misconceptions about trans people across all aspects of life, from politics, law and culture, through to science, religion and mental health, to provide readers with a deeper understanding of what it means to be trans.

The book walks the reader through transgender issues, starting with "What does transgender mean?" before moving on to more complex topics including growing up trans, dating and sex, medical and mental health, and debates around gender and feminism. Brynn also challenges deliberately deceptive information about transgender people being put out into the public sphere. Transphobic myths are debunked and biased research, bad statistics and bad science are carefully and clearly refuted.

This important and engaging book enables any reader to become informed the most critical public conversations around transgender people, and become a better ally as a result.



***The Transgender Teen – Stephanie A. Brill & Lisa Kenney***

*Paperback available via [Loot](#), retailing at R343-00.*

This comprehensive guidebook helps to bridge that divide by exploring the unique challenges that many families face every day raising a teenager who may be transgender, non-binary, gender-fluid or otherwise gender-expansive. Combining years of experience working in the field with extensive research and personal interviews, the authors cover pressing concerns relating to physical and emotional development, social and school pressures, medical considerations, and family communications. Learn how parents can more deeply understand their children and raise their non-binary or transgender adolescent with love and compassion.

## EXTERNAL SUPPORT GROUPS

The Girls' College has formed strong relationships and has received extensive support from experts working for Matimba. We can recommend support from the following organisations/people, both of whom are locally based in the Johannesburg area:

### Parental Support

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The team from Matimba are happy to chat: [info@Matimba.org.za](mailto:info@Matimba.org.za)

### Leading Counselling Psychologist Around Gender Matters

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Contact Jonathan Bosworth: [jonathan.bosworth@gmail.com](mailto:jonathan.bosworth@gmail.com)



At the Girls' College we are firm in our commitment to remain an inclusive and welcoming learning environment for all, regardless of one's race, sexual orientation, gender, culture and/or religious affiliation. We recognise that many LGBTQIA+ people face significant discrimination, rejection, and hatred and are the most vulnerable individuals within our community.

It is my request that we join together on this journey with a growth mindset and with a commitment to being less judgemental, and rather being open to learning and affirming of individual uniqueness. Schools are microcosms of our diverse society and as a community we owe our children the value of seeing difference not as a threat to be resisted, but as an invitation to explore and understand, expanding their capacity for citizenship and cultivating a humanity that inspires curiosity and is ambitious in making a world of difference.

Thank you for your support.

Yours faithfully

Handwritten signature of Dr SJ James

**Dr SJ James**  
Head: Girls' College