

From: [REDACTED]
To: [House of Assembly - GAA](#); [Anita Dow](#)
Subject: [Submission] Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools
Date: Wednesday, 31 July 2024 6:08:05 PM

Good evening,

Please find below my submission to the inquiry.

-----Submission starts -----

Dear Committee Chair

I came out in year 9 (2015) at a Catholic school on the North-West Coast. While most staff and students were supportive, I experienced a number of comments and indirect actions that simply would not have occurred to non-LGBTIQA+ students. Shortly after I came out, the Archdiocese circulated the *Don't Mess with Marriage* booklet to every student, making it clear to me that as a person my school system did not want my rights to be equal. At the time, having only just come out, this felt like the school system I'd been in for 8 years rejecting my identity and indicating it would not support people like me. This booklet was not dissimilar to *We are Salt to the Earth*, which was recently sent to students across Tasmania. This letter makes it clear that if a student comes to terms with their sexuality or gender identity whilst attending a Catholic school, and hence finds their beliefs "at variance with those of the Catholic faith," then they should "seek alternative educational institutions".

It goes without saying that coming to terms with one's sexuality or gender is one of the most challenging things a person can do. This often coincides with the many other challenges of teenhood. The concept that a student's school would not support them through this process is deeply troubling. Indeed, the fact that instead of receiving support, they are being told to leave their friends, teachers and familiar soundings, at a time of great vulnerability, saddens me. It is indicative of a deeper issue within the system that I faced 10 years ago. Recognising the complete lack of visibility or active support for queer students after I came out, I felt the need for a support group. The effect of the *Don't Mess with Marriage* booklet had made it clear to me that establishing anything for LGBTIQA+ students would be difficult. I worked with a number of supportive staff members on how we might establish a group, considering different names, mandates and focuses. However it quickly became clear that a group openly providing support to vulnerable LGBTIQA+ students was simply not feasible in this schooling environment.

In contrast to that, my experience of boarding at The Friends' School could not have been more different. There was a culture of support and inclusion for LGBTIQA+ people. The Archdiocese equivalent – the Presiding Clerk at the Religious Society of Friends in Australia, Jo Jordan – circulated an open letter to the Prime Minister stating that Quakers support the right of adult couples in loving and committed relationships to marry, regardless of

gender. I give this example because the communications and decisions a school makes have a direct impact on the culture, and how students and staff act and feel. Communications of support create an environment where people are encouraged to be themselves, discrimination is not tolerated, and dedicated groups and events exist to support students as they navigate their journey of self-discovery. Meanwhile, communications condemning LGBTIQ+ people create a culture of fear and secrecy, where people do not feel comfortable to be themselves and people who feel it is their right to discriminate against people are emboldened to do so.

It saddened me to read recently that the situation has not improved across Catholic schools on the Coast, with [REDACTED] bravely sharing her story of coming out, and the discrimination, including physical abuse, that she faced. The fact that the situation has not improved, or perhaps even worsened in the last 10 years should be reason enough for this committee to take swift and decisive action to ensure the welfare of all Tasmanian school students, especially those most vulnerable.

Kind regards,

Sam Watson
(Former Tasmanian school student)

-----Submission ends-----