

# Bullying pushes transgender student out of school

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TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Noémie LeBlanc quickly made friends when she transferred to École Mathieu-Martin in Grade 10 after she moved from Moncton to Dieppe, but those friendships ended when her classmates learned she used to be a boy.

"When I first came out, I thought I had the freedom to be myself," said Noémie, 16, who began to transition from male to female when she was 14. That freedom has been lost to transphobic bullying, she said.

The bullying became unbearable last spring when a group of boys electronically distributed photos of Noémie as a boy to other students through a mass text message.

Noémie was sitting in the cafeteria when the photos were sent, said her mother, Jolyne.

"She ran out of the cafeteria upset because everyone was looking at her and laughing," Jolyne said.

Distraught, Noémie went to the administration office to report the incident, and was sent home by herself in a cab, her mother said.

"I felt like I had almost nobody who was there to support me," said Noémie.

Daniel Bourgeois, the vice-principal of Mathieu-Martin, said the students responsible for the mass distribution of photos have been identified, but would not say how many students were involved or discuss any disciplinary action, citing privacy regulations.

Bourgeois also confirmed staff sent Noémie home in a taxi following the incident.

"She didn't have any other way to get home and we didn't want her to walk home in the rain," he said.

Noémie said she knew she was a girl from an early age, but didn't tell her friends and family until around her 14th birthday.

"I was really tired of putting up a different image," she said.

But Jolyne said she knew her daughter identified as female when she saw Noémie praying to be a little girl when she was two years old. She said she wasn't surprised when Noémie came out and began to transition.

"She was always like a girl. She didn't act like a boy," she said.

Noémie began to dress as a girl and wear makeup two years ago while a student at École L'Odyssee. For the most part, students were accepting of her transformation, she said.

"Wherever you are, there won't be 100 per cent support, but it was pretty supportive," she said.

But when Noémie transferred to Mathieu-Martin, she said the student body was not as accepting.

It wasn't just the sneers and whispers behind her back, Jolyne said; her daughter was shoved around in the hallways and humiliated by derogatory jokes and name calling.

"Every day was hell for her just walking through the school," her mom said.

Noémie said she had to change lockers several times because of hurtful comments, like students calling her "it".

"People would laugh, people would point," she said.

Conversely, she often sat alone at lunch, sometimes in tears, she said, and students would pass by her without a word.

Noémie started hormone treatments in April and is now in the process of medically transitioning. Jolyne said her daughter has been meeting with a specialist from the Horizon Health Network to oversee the treatments, and her family doctor referred her to a mental health counsellor two years ago to support her through the transition.

Noémie said she is telling her story publicly to create awareness of the struggles that transgender students face in high school.

"There is no reason why I should hide who I am just because of society," she said. "It's not easy to just push it [the bullying and negative reactions] aside and brush it off, but I do try my best to keep a positive perspective."

"People aren't always educated about the subject, so they don't know how to react to it."

Dr. Elizabeth Saewyc, the executive director of the Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre and a professor at the University of British Columbia School of Nursing, said transgender youth are more likely than others to be physically bullied.

Saewyc said adolescence is a time when gender identity and gender norms are solidified.

"When young people don't fit the gender stereotypes, there is a fair amount of policing that goes on in high school," which often takes the form of bullying and harassment, she said.

A Canadian Trans Youth Health



Noémie LeBlanc, right, said her mother Jolyne has been her biggest supporter as she faced transphobic bullying at École Mathieu-Martin. PHOTO: SARAH SEELEY/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Survey conducted in 2014 shows that 1 in 3 transgender youth are physically bullied in school. The online survey was completed by 900 transgender youth across the country, ranging in age from 18 to 25. It was conducted by researchers from several Canadian universities and community organizations and funded by the Canadian Institute of Health Research and the Institute for Gender and Health.

Following that photo incident, Jolyne pulled her daughter from school while she waited for administration and the district to come up with a plan to address the bullying. For the remainder of the school year, Noémie was home schooled with a tutor paid for by the district.

Saewyc said a school can create an inclusive environment by having policies in place to prohibit bullying in general, and specifically bullying based on sexual orientation.

"You need to feel safe in order to learn," she said.

Bourgeois said school and district staff establish 'best practice' plans to ensure students in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ) community are accepted. He said bullying is not tolerated in the school.

"[When incidents like this happen] we work together to examine the situation and see what we could have done differently. We are always in the mode of improving ... the plan is always under construction."

When Bourgeois was asked if he was aware of multiple incidents of bullying

involving Noémie, he said he could not comment on them, citing privacy regulations.

This fall, Noémie returned to school hoping for a fresh start in Grade 11. Jolyne said she changed her daughter's name to Noémie on the school records at the beginning of the school year, but it wasn't early enough to appear as such on the school's attendance list. There, she was still listed by her former name, Patrick.

"[But] she had confidence in them.... They promised us this would be a good year," said Jolyne.

But problems arose early on. Noémie said she continued to be shamed and verbally attacked. "It was like I was back at square one."

One of the supply teachers instructing Noémie's gym class insisted on calling her Patrick, and made her play on the boys' team, said Jolyne.

Noémie said she felt embarrassed in front of her entire class and left the gym in tears.

"It's not something that you'd like to be reminded of often..." she said. "It really tore me apart and made me second guess my decision of going back [to school]."

Bourgeois, the vice-principal, said the situation was addressed directly with the supply teacher and "appropriate measures of action" were put in place.

When a supply teacher or staff member violates the inclusive environment policy, the school's administration meets with the teacher to discuss the incident and how it could have been

handled differently, Bourgeois said.

Marie-Josée Lagacé, the director of student services for the Francophone Sud School District, said staff in the schools have been trained to enforce the inclusion policy.

"Unfortunately, the supply teachers don't receive the same training. That's something that we are hoping to add," she said.

Julie McIntyre, the diversity and respect coordinator for the francophone side of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, said her department develops staff training for the Francophone South District in accordance with Policy 703. That policy states that all members of the school community learn and work together in an atmosphere of respect, free from homophobia, racism and forms of discrimination that could lead to bullying and harassment.

Lagacé said the consequences for bullying can range from meetings between staff and students or their parents, to internal and external suspensions.

"It always depends on the severity of the incident and the frequency of the incident," she said.

Saewyc said when a no-tolerance bullying policy is in place, it "does no

good if you don't actually enforce it."

Noémie's torment got to the point where she attempted suicide at her home on Sept. 18, her mother said.

Since then she hasn't been back to school.

Jolyne said she, Noémie's stepfather, Michel Cormier, and her sister, Veronique are there to support their daughter and sister, in everything from being a comforting shoulder on difficult days to shopping for clothes and makeup, from accompanying her to counselling appointments to helping in her fight to stop the bullying, but "it's heartbreaking to see your child have to go through all of this."

"We've always been supportive since she was little," said Jolyne. "I always remind her to be her true self and be proud of the person she is and has become."

But "when she is out of the door, she is out of our hands, so we do worry," she said.

Jolyne is in the process of getting Noémie transferred to another school. She said Noémie has begun seeing a psychiatrist and they are trying to line up a tutor so she can catch up on her schoolwork.

"[My treatment at school] was really a disappointment because I thought people had really changed," said Noémie.

She believes bullying can be prevented if students are more informed about the LGBTQ community.

"They should be more educated so they can be more aware and know how to approach these kinds of things," Noémie said.

Charles MacDougall, the spokesman for the Greater Moncton River of Pride, said students learn best when they are personally involved. He suggests that hands-on workshops and discussion groups about LGBTQ issues would be more beneficial than formal presentations.

MacDougall said Sida/AIDS Moncton and Maison de jeunes in Dieppe each offer services for transsexual youth.

Sida/AIDS Moncton hosts Safe Spaces, a weekly drop-in program for LGBTQ youth where they can socialize, play games, have group discussions or simply watch movies in a positive environment that promotes diversity.

The organization also distributes "Ally" cards to display in any place where there are accepting, supportive people willing to talk with LGBTQ youth.

The bullying Noémie experienced was "deplorable and sad," he said.

"I hope that many people have come in support of this young woman."

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