

A PROVACATIVE HOAX OR BODY SHAMING? A SCHOOLTEACHER SHOWS UP FOR WORK LEAVING A SCHOOL BOARD TO SCRAMBLE

NATALIE ASSAAD

Wilfrid Laurier University

PRESCOTT C. ENSIGN

Wilfrid Laurier University

Warning: This case study concerns sensitive material which may be upsetting for some readers. The issues brought out include discrimination, body dysmorphia, body challenges, body shaming, gender expectations, gender identity, gender expression, and being sexualized.

With Just a Post

It was a crisp September morning in 2022 as Kayla Lemieux, a 39-year-old shop class teacher at Oakville Trafalgar High School, headed in for another busy day. It started out like any other – kids socializing, others ditching class – until it was not. Unbeknownst to Lemieux, students were snapping images of Lemieux and posting them online. The photos and videos went viral almost immediately and thrust the Canadian high school and teacher aggressively into the spotlight.

What drew controversy and the number of social media shares were Lemieux's breasts. Parents were outraged, claiming the teacher's appearance was a distraction to students (Morphet and Oliveira 2023). Threatening messages and posts, including ominous warnings of shootings, were repeatedly directed at the secondary school and protests were held outside it.

Shortly after the news broke, the Halton District School Board (HDSB) released a statement to *blogTO* stating, “The Halton District School Board is committed to establishing and maintaining a safe, caring, inclusive, equitable and welcoming learning and working environment for all students and staff” (O’Neil 2022). However, as the severity of the risks increased, HDSB passed a resolution in late September 2022 requesting a report, which according to Curtis Ennis, HDSB’s Director of Education, would address “various considerations regarding dress codes” before the end of November (DeClerq 2022a).

In January 2023, Ennis was asked by the HDSB for a draft “professionalism policy” that would include a “dress code” as an element (DeClerq 2023). The situation escalated such that Lemieux was then placed on paid leave in an attempt to quell the bomb and gun violence threats against the teacher and school (Morphet & Crane 2023).

Exhibit 1. Photos of Lemieux That Went Viral

Source: Kennedy (2023)



As things began to spiral out of control, the HDSB was faced with difficult decisions. Could it get Lemieux to provide medical reasoning as to why the breasts were so large? Could it ask Lemieux to dress differently? Could it take a stance that the teacher's breasts were not a distraction for students' wandering eyes? Were the breasts even real, or was this part of a stunt or political message? Did it even matter; was this simply a matter of freedom of expression?

The School Board

In operation since 1967, as of 2019, the Halton District School Board was made up of 105 elementary and secondary schools within the region. In total, the board served 64,000 students and had over 8,000 staff. The HDSB was one of the largest English school boards in Ontario (Halton District School Board 2019).

The HDSB's mission was to *"inspire every student to learn, grow, and succeed."* Its vision was to enable students to explore their potential, passions, and strengths while contributing positively as a global citizen. The key pillars of the HDSB were engagement and achievement, stewardship of resources, and equity and well-being for students, staff, and the system. It required staff to be a part of that positive change (Halton District School Board 2018).

Evidence or Explanation?

Kayla Lemieux was registered with the Ontario College of Teachers under the name Kerry Luc Lemieux. Since 2006, Lemieux had been listed as a teacher *'in good standing.'* Despite a spotless reputation, once the images spread online, there were swarms of parents, students, and internet sleuths itching to figure out if Lemieux's breasts were real or not. The teacher made two proclamations in an attempt to put an end to the drama: Lemieux was intersex and suffered from gigantomastia (Morphet, Klein, and Golding 2023).

Intersex: *“An umbrella term used to describe situations where a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit within the binary of “male” or “female” (Planned Parenthood n.d.).*

Gigantomastia: *“With roughly 300 known cases reported worldwide, gigantomastia is a rare condition where those assigned female at birth¹ will experience excessive breast tissue growth that leads to the development of extremely large breasts” (Cleveland Clinic 2022).*

However, once Lemieux *“admitted that she had nothing from a doctor to back up the claims”* to provide to news outlets, Lemieux’s candor only served to fan the flames (Kennedy 2023). Whether Lemieux had medical documentation may have been immaterial if the dispute moved toward free expression.² The HDSB was seeking to resolve whether the public had a right to know the contents of Lemieux’s private health records. If the HDSB could get Lemieux to release them, that could serve as a defense to silence noisy critics. Otherwise, it looked to be an uphill battle for the board to decide whether it wanted to support Lemieux and how it would navigate this ethically ambiguous and culturally contentious territory.

¹ Notable erudites Sokal and Dawkins (2024) spoke against the medical establishment’s recent adoption of the “assigned at birth” qualifier: *“A baby’s name is assigned at birth; no one doubts that. But a baby’s sex is not “assigned;” it is determined at conception and is then observed at birth, first by examination of the external genital organs, and then, in cases of doubt, by chromosomal analysis. Of course, any observation can be erroneous, and in rare cases the sex reported on the birth certificate is inaccurate and needs to be subsequently corrected. But the fallibility of observation does not change the fact that what is being observed — a person’s sex — is an objective biological reality, just like their blood group or fingerprint pattern, not something that is “assigned.”*”

² A similar situation had occurred; a 50-year-old trans swimmer had been competing against teenage girls. Melody Wiseheart (who previously competed as Nicholas Cepeda) had been showering and changing in the locker rooms with those as young as 13 years of age. Swimming Canada and Swim Ontario, which sanctioned competitive events, defended Wiseheart’s participation (Koenig 2023).

A School Teacher

The Right to Medical Privacy

According to the *Personal Health Information Protection Act* 2004, c. 3 (PHIPA) of Ontario, each region ought to have Health Information Custodians who had a duty to ensure that each patient's health information was stored securely, and that confidentiality and privacy were protected. The only instance where a patient's personal health information was shared was if consent was given first, or if it was to other health units in a scenario where health care must be administered. Lemieux was under no legal obligation to provide evidence as to why the breasts were the size that they were. Plus, while Lemieux had little control over the general public's reaction to their body, Lemieux had to be able to trust that their employer had Lemieux's best interests in mind. Attempting to defend Lemieux by exposing their medical history to the public could subdue parents' anxiety and quiet internet trolls, but it would be an invasion of privacy.

This capitulation would have drastic ramifications for teachers across Canada. What if a teacher started wearing a hat and the board demanded to know whether they had cancer, alopecia, or a receding hairline? Nonetheless, as substantial threats of gun violence and bombings continued to mount, the board wanted little more than to put the affair to rest. Would an exception for this exceptional incident set the precedent for teachers and school boards moving forward?

The Right to Equitable Treatment

The HDSB recognized "*the rights of students, staff, parents/guardians and community members to equitable treatment without discrimination based upon gender identity and gender expression*" (Rocca 2022). This entitlement was also protected by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, the Code "*prohibits discrimination because of gender identity, such as that faced by [...] intersex persons.*" Given that Lemieux identified as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community as an intersex person, they had a legal right to be treated with equal dignity and

respect (Part I – The context: Sexual orientation, human rights protections, case law and legislation). However, the HDSB wrestled with how much self-expression was tolerable. A cisgender teacher choosing to get breast augmentation surgery or wear a push-up bra had been and continued to be acceptable (Bovy 2022). It was not as though the board was privy to cisgender women’s undergarment or cosmetic choices to begin with. Did it have a right to judge how Lemieux presented? Could the HDSB say what the cup size of obscenity was? What about its staff and/or students with naturally large breasts? It seemed inconceivable that a schoolboard could mandate reduction mammoplasty.

Suppose that Lemieux’s breasts were, in fact, prosthetics. It could be argued that the large breasts were not a necessity for them to express their identity as female or to present in a more feminine manner. From cup sizes A to F, there were lots of options before Z that may have appeared more natural and in line with social norms and expectations. Students who snapped the images likely would have been publicly shamed for taking and sharing pictures/videos had that been the situation - even more so if Lemieux were a cisgender woman. However, who is to say that wearing large breasts was not how Lemieux felt most comfortable and most like themselves? Given that Lemieux had scarcely been interviewed, no one could assume to know what they were thinking nor what made them most comfortable in/with their body.

The *Ontario Human Rights Commission* made it clear that everyone had a right to define their own gender identity. It had gone so far as to note that the root causes of discrimination and harassment were the harmful social stereotypes about gender perpetuated in society (Part I – The context: Sexual orientation, human rights protections, case law and legislation). Was Lemieux’s choice to don huge breasts with erect nipples a choice at all? It was a protected right by the *Ontario Human Rights Commission*.

According to the Center for American Progress’s survey to collect data on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals, done in partnership with the University of Chicago, intersex respondents

reported that they experienced higher rates of discrimination compared to other non-intersex LGBTQIA+ individuals (see Exhibit 2). The duality of having to hide one’s true self at work while being open outside of it was known to induce feelings of alienation and self-loathing (Yilmazok 2023). If Lemieux’s life being thrust under a microscope was for the “crime” of presenting how they felt most comfortable, that would be a disheartening reality for other LGBTQIA+ youth and adults alike in Oakville, Ontario and beyond. The HDSB was legally required to provide an environment that protected Lemieux and all other LGBTQIA+ persons who interacted with its services, be it as a student, parent, or staff member. The HDSB surmised that some backlash against Lemieux’s gender expression was triggered by fear of the unknown.

Exhibit 2. Discrimination faced by Intersex and Non-intersex LGBTQIA+ Individuals

Source: Medina and Mahowald (2021)

Share of LGBTQ+ intersex and nonintersex individuals who reported engaging in behaviors in order to avoid experiencing discrimination in 2020

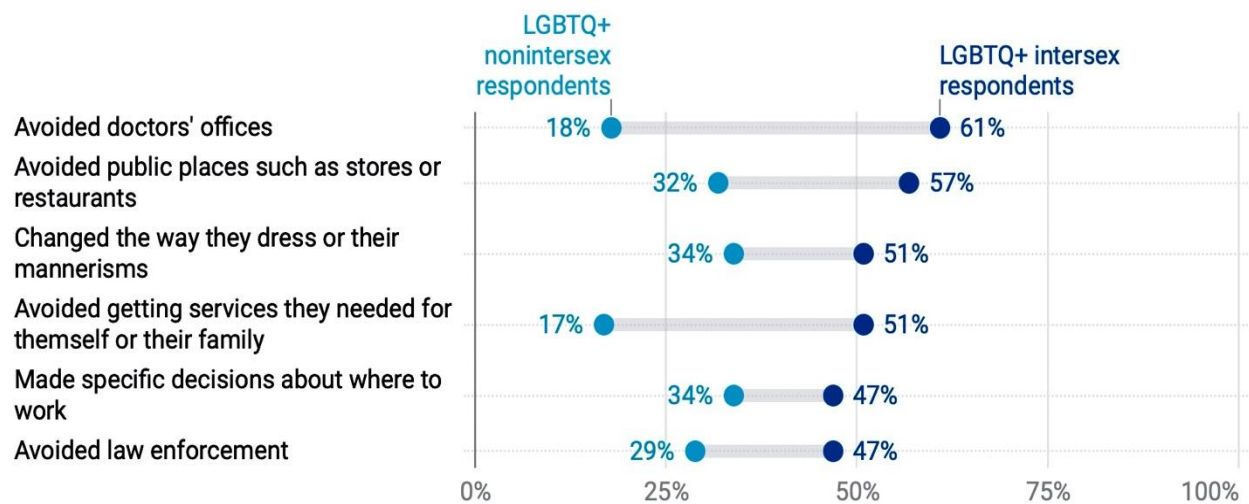


Chart: Center for American Progress • Source: Center for American Progress and NORC at the University of Chicago nationally representative online survey of 1,528 LGBTQIA+-identifying adults, June 2020, on file with the authors.

The Plight of Being a Woman

Regardless of whether Lemieux's breasts were real, the situation exposed the dark underbelly of being a woman or female-presenting individual in society. Regarding the dress code dilemma faced by school boards, Sagan (2015) stated, "*Schools have tended to restrict girls' clothing to prevent distracting their male counterparts.*" Biases in dress codes not only negatively affected girls, but such prejudices also instilled girls with the belief that their bodies were sexual, evil distractions that must be covered, and boys were taught that they could not or need not control their actions or think for themselves. It was unlikely that a boy would be sent home for wearing a shirt that showed off his muscles too much, distracting the girls.

The polarizing difference between how each binary gender's body was governed led to mental health issues including anxiety and eating disorders in young girls (Hartnett 2022). If Lemieux had felt most like themselves when presenting as male and donned prosthetic abs or had pectoral muscles enhanced that popped out of a fitted muscle shirt, would there be this much backlash against those choices? Who would determine what body parts constituted as a distraction, regardless of gender? As seen in Exhibit 1, Lemieux's arms and midriff were both covered. The school could potentially penalize Lemieux for wearing shorts if the length or style did not abide by the requirements of decorum. However, there was no province-wide policy and few school boards in Ontario, including HDSB, had teacher dress codes. There was, however, a general expectation of professional attire that emphasized a positive and conducive learning environment.

If the changes that one's body underwent during puberty were not a choice, what about gender identity? It could be argued that Lemieux's life would have been easier if they were male presenting. Even assuming the breasts were not natural, did Lemieux have a choice in *how* they presented themselves as female? Regardless of whether Lemieux's choice in bust size was a sincere reflection of who they were, did it hover too close to inappropriate? What if they

presented male one day and wore a tightly fitted translucent dress shirt with the buttons undone and Ricky Martin hot pants (Exhibit 3)? Could such a line be drawn, and how and who decided when and where to move it next?

One student who spoke with *Daily Mail* indicated they were not bothered by how Lemieux presented themselves:

"I don't really care. It won't affect me," said a male student enjoying football with friends on the field behind the school on their last days of summer vacation. *"I guess everyone will be taking videos of her for TikTok and whatever, but I won't."*

His friend agreed. *"My parents told me about it, but I don't give a s**t. Let her be. It shouldn't be such a big deal"* (Kennedy 2023).

Exhibit 3. Singer/songwriter Enrique Martin Morales

Source: *Livin La Vida Loca* tour promotional photo



The School Board's Next Move

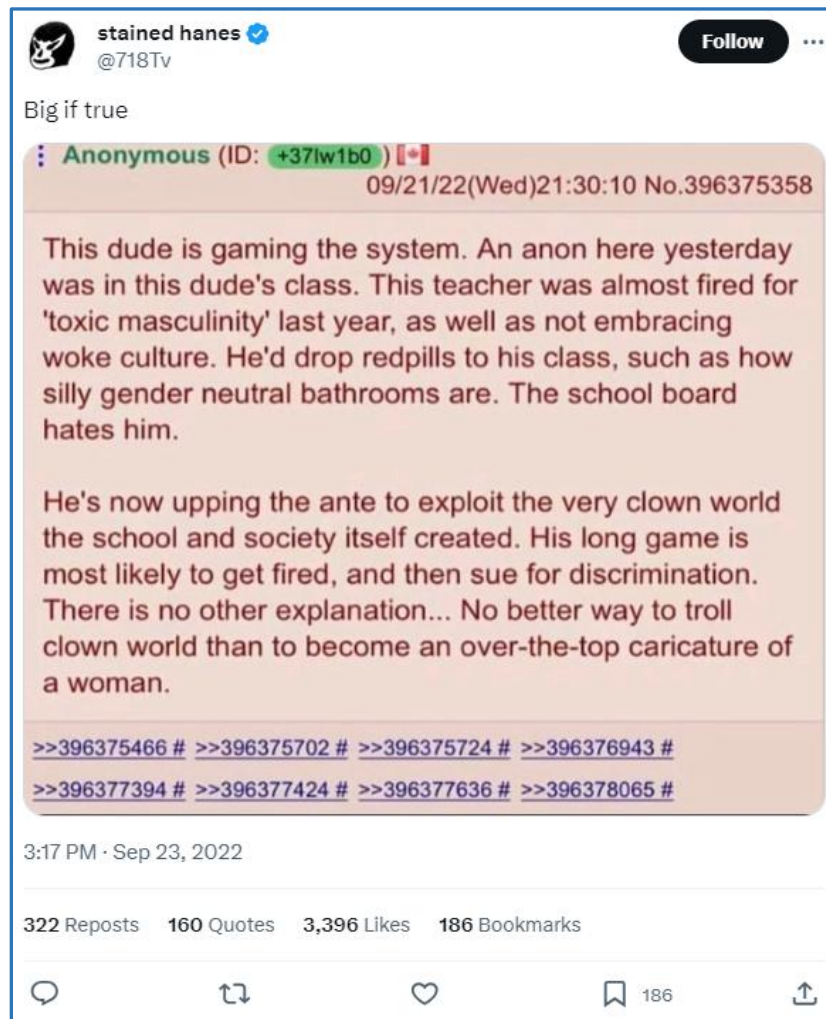
The uproar was fueled in part by anxiety that students' education was in jeopardy by an oversized bosom. If students were saying that they did not care, did it truly matter how Lemieux presented? Should the school board be debating this at all? By December 2022, the school did threaten students with suspension if they photographed the teacher (Rogers 2022; Warmington 2022).

Satire or Honesty ?

But what if all of this was a stunt? A prank done in bad faith by an individual who was so fed up and irritated with the 'woke culture' in today's world that they wanted to strike back. Redditors and "X" users alike speculated that Lemieux was perpetrating a mischievous act to exploit/expose the system. That in reality, Lemieux's objective was to dress provocatively, get fired, sue for discrimination and then walk away with a hefty payout (see Exhibit 4), or perhaps be put on leave with pay. An anonymous user claiming to have a friend in Lemieux's class relayed that Lemieux was almost fired for creating an environment rife with toxic masculinity and for dropping Red Pills in class (@718Tv 2022). The post suggested that perhaps it was the school board that pushed Lemieux to take this action, a backlash or response to school board policies and positions.

Exhibit 4. Reddit Post Speculating on the Reality of the Situation

Source: @718Tv (2022)



The *'manosphere'* referred to a growing number of boys'/men's groups, active both on and offline, that promoted misogyny and sexism. Being *'red pill'd'* implied a man learning about male supremacist ideas and accepting that feminine forces and feminist ideals oppress men (McCullough 2023). Such ideals went directly against the HDSB's mission, vision, and values. If the anonymous claims were true, the board would be extremely frustrated with Lemieux duping them (Harrington 2022). Would the HDSB not be derelict in its duties if it did not push this far enough to find out? If there was a possibility Lemieux was a women-hater, should the HDSB not investigate?

Even if this was a stunt performed by Lemieux to poke holes into LGBTQIA+ matters, did that change anything? The board stood firmly by Lemieux's side at the start and continued to support them despite the merciless backlash that had the potential to have harmful real-world consequences for the safety of students, staff, and community. Likely the only person who knew the truth was Lemieux. While the world might have only been able to speculate on whether Lemieux's actions were sincere or not, the ramifications this situation had on the LGBTQIA+ community, whether in school or beyond, were palpable. Moving forward, LGBTQIA+ teachers and students would likely think twice about how they expressed their gender identity or might even reconsider being 'out' in school.

Conclusion

The HDSB needed to decide what the right next step(s) were in this predicament. Could it request Kayla Lemieux's private health records to better defend them? Should HDSB demand Lemieux dress differently to appease parents? Should it fire Lemieux to stop the onslaught of threats? If so, on what basis or grounds? What was the best path forward for the board, the community, and Lemieux? Precedent was about to be set.



NATALIE ASSAD obtained a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science as well as an Honours Bachelor of Business Administration, both from Wilfrid Laurier University. Prior to that she was a student in the Halton District School Board. She has served in volunteer roles, has credentials and certificates in technology and computer related realms. She has experience working in five programming languages and loves developing, testing code, and data analysis. She currently works at PepsiCo as an analyst to understand trends and uncover insights that drive data-driven decision making. She previously worked for TD as an analyst, Pepsico in IT support and analytics, and Nissan Motor as a development analyst.



PRESCOTT C. ENSIGN is a Professor of Strategic Management at the Lazaridis School of Business and Economics, Wilfrid Laurier University. His PhD is from École des Hautes Études Commerciales, Université de Montréal. He has served on the faculties of state universities in California and Ohio as well as several in Canada. He is a recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship and has received recognition for his teaching and research. Recent publications focus on applied business ethics; Indigenous entrepreneurship; social enterprises and innovation; and economic and social development in rural and remote areas. The latter includes on-going research on the impact of federal and provincial policies on the survival of Canada's 60+ short line freight railways serving rural and remote enterprises and communities.



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