

Pflag will continue to advocate for modern health curriculum in schools

By Brock Weir

A relevant sex-ed curriculum fosters safe spaces for students.

This is the message Pflag will continue to drive home to the Ministry of Education as the results of a public consultation for parents launched by the Government this past August that was billed as a way for parents to 'have their voices heard' on what their kids are taught in schools.

In response to this, Pflag Canada prepared its own submission to the Province, collecting responses from nearly 400 parents representing chapters across Ontario and the results were clear: parents want their kids to be taught information that is relevant and inclusive.

'We hosted our own consultation, which was within the parameters of what the Provincial Government outlined and the reason we did is that we're in a really unique position where parents of LGBTQ2 kids are the ones who are attending our meetings,' says Michael Blackburn, outgoing president of Pflag York Region. 'Every month, every day we're the ones getting the questions, concerns and calls from this very specific group.'

'We hosted an Ontario-wide consultation hosted by Pflag Canada from a wider lens and then York Region played a very active role as one of the leaders in community consultation. We had upwards of 400 responses from Ontario and we submitted a comprehensive report detailing the themes and findings that were exactly what they thought they would be: people are concerned and they want a relevant sex-ed curriculum that makes spaces safe for all students.'

Pflag's survey focused on three key areas: same-sex relationships and LGBTQ families, gender and sexual diversity, and consent and sexual activity.

The 2015 curriculum brought in by the previous Provincial government made key changes in this regard. It acknowledged in elementary school that kids can have two moms or two dads, and that being attracted to the same sex is natural, normal and happens to a lot of people. For gender and sexual diversity, the 2015 curriculum taught students in Grade 3 that 'differences make people unique and to respect people with different skin colours, physical abilities, cultural values, gender identities and expressions and sexual orientations.' It also taught Grade 6 students to 'challenge stereotype about gender roles, sexual orientation, and gender expression, and how factors like gender identity, body image and mental health can affect someone's self concept.'

Finally, in the arena of consent and sexual activity, Grade 6 students under the 2015 curriculum learned that consent is 'defined as a clear 'yes' and that anything else, including silence or uncertainty, is not consent.' In the next two grades, students learned the importance of clear communication with a romantic partner about all aspects of sexuality, not limited to intercourse, and the related risks of STIs.

Almost all respondents of the 463 responses received, bar two, agreed that each of these three areas of lessons should continue.

'As a woman with a young daughter who identifies as a member of the LGBTQ2+ community, having representation of her own natural experience of being attracted to females is essential to her health and well-being,' said one York Region respondent. 'Being included in the Ontario Curriculum meant that healthy conversations about her factual experience would be taking place which ultimately impacts both my daughter and her peers positively as stigma is lifted from a natural experience.'

Responding to the premise that 'inclusion, respect and a welcoming environment, including issues related to same-sex relationships and LGBTQ2 families in the elementary school curriculum will support the development of inclusive, respectful, and welcoming environments for all students, another York Region respondent agreed.

'For children who are LGBTQ, this education serves them by making their experience a safe and healthy one to discuss with no shame,' they said. 'This notion also applies to the many children who have gay parents. Furthermore, to those that don't, they gain the exposure and awareness about sexual diversity which in turn makes them better educated of the diversity in the real world while allowing them to accept and embrace all diverse individuals. This makes them into more aware, conscious, and empathetic individuals as they grow into their adulthood.'

Another, gave their own deeply personal account on the idea that 'confidence, identity and self-love' is important to the curriculum in enabling students to develop 'a strong and healthy sense of self, self-love and self-confidence' including introducing concepts relating to gender identity and attraction in elementary school.

'My child grew up in a discriminatory system,' they said. 'We almost lost him to suicide. Others were not so lucky - we did lose them. Our society must stop the hopelessness of our LGBTQ youth.'

Following the consultation, some stakeholders advocating for a rollback to the 1998 curriculum, including some in government, said

the consultation as rigged by stakeholders on the other side of the issue, but Mr. Blackburn says he disagrees. ?I don't think that is skewed; it is public opinion and that is exactly what a community consultation is ? you're soliciting public opinion and the public has spoken,? he said. ?I would be very surprised if they found different results as they continue to comb through everything that was submitted. Pflag is more than happy to meet with the government and to review this policy and have a say at the table. We extended that invitation when we submitted the formal report itself back in December. We have to wait to hear, but we are eagerly awaiting a yes from them to be able to participate to make sure we're honouring our LGBTQ2 kids and their allies, and making those spaces safe for everybody.?

Pflag preserved the identity of respondents quoted in their final report.

Mr. Blackburn will be succeeded as President of Pflag York Region by Tristan Coolman next month.