

Health and Sex-Ed changes are long overdue, says MPP

By Brock Weir

Ontario was once a leader when it came to health education, but has since fallen behind the likes of British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan, according to Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard. But, now it is time to play catch-up.

While an announcement in Brampton kept Mr. Ballard from meeting with parents protesting the Province's new health curriculum and directly addressing their concerns, he said the current curriculum is 15 years out-of-date and that needs to change.

?The current curriculum is from 1998 and that means it was written before things like Facebook, Instagram and Spaphat even existed. Safety on the internet is a big part of our updated curriculum and that is just a small example of why I don't think we are moving too fast.

?I find a lot of people who have concerns with the new health and phys-ed curriculum haven't really sat and studied it. It is not a big document and I encourage any parent to give it a read-over and they will have a better understanding of what teachers will be doing. I can't think of another government document that has been so fully consulted with parents, with educators, with religious figures. We have had great feedback and buy-in from the Catholic community. We have also had great feedback and buy-in from the Muslim community and over 4,000 parents just a few months ago, the chairs of every parent council across Ontario was asked for feedback, 4,000 parents alone right then and there. Every educational body, religious body, parents and students have all been asked for input [and] this has been ongoing in 2007.?

Mr. Ballard said he puts his trust in the parents and teachers who say the information is age appropriate.

Locally, he added, he has sat down with ?a couple of parents? with concerns and after walking them through the curriculum their concerns were addressed.

?We have really attempted to find their concerns in the curriculum only to find their concerns, whoever is informing them, is not basing their concerns on what is really written in the curriculum,? he said. ?I think one of the biggest misconceptions is there is a section of scenarios and questions that may seem inappropriate. This is not information that is necessarily going to be passed on to children, but it is information to teachers on how to answer questions that children might ask for whatever reason. It is not information that is part of a lesson, but if a child comes up to a teacher and asks what X, Y and Z means, the teacher has a well-thought-out answer to inform the child.

?With the current curriculum, teachers were telling us they were at a loss because kids weren't asking these questions at this age in years gone by. Now we have age appropriate answers, but I think some people have read the curriculum and thought this information is going to be passed on to all the children, and it is not. It is only if the children ask.?

Based on the Ontario Human Rights Code, Mr. Ballard said the document is ?really fundamental stuff?, introducing broad concepts of consent from a young age, including not hugging someone unless it is okay to do so.

?All of the focus seems to have been on the sex curriculum which is only one part of this whole curriculum update. This curriculum includes a lot of work around mental health, a lot of work around health relationship, around consent and those kinds of things and not all about the plumbing.?

If any time a parent is uncomfortable with what is being taught to their kids, they still have the right under provincial law to withdraw their child from the class in question, noted Mr. Ballard, adding no one is ?forcing? a child to take the program.

?Let's face it, as uncomfortable as it may make all of us who are parents, our kids are maturing earlier than when we were in school,? he said. ?They are maturing earlier than 10 years ago, certainly much earlier than 15 years ago and kids today need information

about their bodies, about health, sooner than my generation did, for example. I think it is a smart thing to do to address the pressing issues and make sure our kids stay healthy and lead good lives.?