

## School Board, teachers union push back on sex-ed reforms

By Brock Weir

Back to School season is upon us, a time when parents and students are busily stocking up on books and school supplies so they're ready to face the year ahead, but there is also some uncertainty on just what might lie before them as the new Provincial Government moves to roll back recent changes to the Ontario's Health & Sex Ed Curriculum.

But, close to home, the York Region District School Board is pushing back on plans to re-instate Ontario's 1998 curriculum ahead of the beginning of classes next month.

Corrie McBain, Chair of the York Region District School Board (YRDSB), and Director of Education Louise Sirisko issued a joint statement last week calling on the Province to keep the 2015 changes to the Health and Physical Education curriculum in place and reverse their decision to remove findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from lesson plans.

“Although we are in the midst of summer, we are turning our minds to the beginning of school and what our students will be learning,” they said. “Recent Ministry of Education announcements affecting curriculum have created some uncertainty. We want to reinforce our board's commitment to remain steadfast in upholding the tenets of equity, inclusivity and the Ontario Human Rights Code. The announcement that the province's previous Health and Physical Education curriculum from 1998 will be reintroduced to all schools in September may be interpreted to mean that revisions reflective of today's world will no longer be taught. This may affect content on important topics such as consent, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Such changes require urgent clarification by the government given the significant impact it will have on our students.

“While we await direction from the Ministry, we want to assure our communities of our deep commitment to ensuring safe, equitable and inclusive learning environments for all of our students. Our newly revised Multi-Year Strategic Plan places a priority on upholding our values and championing equity and inclusivity. This means our students will continue to learn important and relevant information, and that our staff will have the resources and knowledge to support this learning. Our classrooms reflect and respect the diversity of our students, including those who identify as a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community.”

The cancellation of writing teams dedicated to “fulfil the findings of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission might also be interpreted as a wavering commitment to equity,” they claimed. But, “renewed commitment” to Indigenous partners is needed, along with fulfilling the commission's direction to “develop and make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, treaties and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada” a mandatory education requirement for students from Kindergarten through Grade 12.

“Over the remaining weeks before school, we will be seeking clarity from the Minister in regards to curriculum expectations,” they concluded. “We will be advocating that the critical learning expectations found within the revised Health and Physical Education curriculum effective 2015 remain in place. We will also be asking for a renewed commitment to the path of Truth and Reconciliation so that students are able to learn about the history of colonization and that we may collectively take the steps necessary towards healing and reinforcing strong and trusting relationships with Indigenous partners.

“We are committed to equity and inclusivity.”

According to Ms. McBain, responding to questions from The Auroran, the YRDSB received confirmation from the public that they “value equity and inclusivity” and, since their joint statement was released, feedback has been positive.

The lead-up to the 2015 reforms was also informed at the local level by feedback received from parents, trustees, and the Board's professional staff members, she added.

“We haven't received clarification or direction from the province regarding the Health and Physical Education curriculum. We remain committed to ensuring safe, equitable and inclusive learning environments for all our students. After much public consultation, our new Multi-Year Plan places a priority on upholding our values and championing equity and inclusivity. This means our students will continue to learn important and relevant information, and that our staff will have the resources and knowledge to support this learning. Importantly, our classrooms reflect and respect the diversity of our students, including those who identify as 2SLGBTQ.”

Also pushing back against the changes is the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), which advised its members Monday to “exercise their professional judgement when it comes to teaching all sections of the current curriculum.”

“The government's decision to revert to the 1998 Health and Physical Education Curriculum while initiating further consultation is irresponsible, discriminatory and jeopardizes the safety of the students that we teach,” said ETFO President Sam Hammond. “We need to prepare students for the world of 2018, not the world of 1998. The government's actions are in direct conflict with teachers'

fundamental responsibilities and obligations towards their students including the duty to ensure their safety and their fundamental human rights.?