

DATE: June 6, 2017

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Human Sexuality Education and Voluntary Student Organizations
(Response to Request for Information #212)

ORIGINATOR: Leona Morrison, Managing Director, Inclusive Learning

**RESOURCE
STAFF:** Lisa Austin, Marlene Hanson

REFERENCES: March 21, 2017 Board meeting (Trustee Chubb)
[School Act](#)
[AEBB.BP Wellness of Students and Staff](#)
[HFA.BP Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity](#)
[HFA.AR Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity](#)
[GI.AR Teaching and Learning Resources](#)

ISSUE

The following information was requested:

That the Administration provide policy, regulation or legislation that are in place to assure parents and that materials provided to students in matters of human sexuality education and any school-sanctioned clubs are in place to ensure that our District's standards are met.

Also, provide the mechanisms and/or processes that are in place to ensure that policy, regulation or legislation are being followed.

BACKGROUND

On June 1, 2015, Alberta's amended *School Act*, also known as Bill 10, came into effect. Section 50.1(1) of the *School Act* requires school boards to notify parents where "courses of study, educational programs or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises include subject matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion or human sexuality". School boards must provide parents with the opportunity to exempt their children from instruction that primarily and explicitly involves this subject matter. According to the *School Act*, this does not apply to incidental or indirect references to these areas. (*School Act*, Section 50.1 (1-3)).

Secondly, Section 16.1(1) of the *School Act* provides the law permitting students to "establish a voluntary student organization, or to lead an activity intended to promote a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging." Further, the law requires that a staff member facilitate the establishment of the organization or activity, and supervise its ongoing operation. The *School Act* states that "if there is no adult available to serve as a staff liaison, the Minister shall appoint a responsible adult to work with the requesting students in organizing the activity or to facilitate the establishment, and the ongoing operation, of the student organization at the school." All principals in Edmonton Public Schools are certified teachers, and as such, any designated facilitator of a student club in a school is under the supervision of a certified teacher.

The selection of all teaching and learning resources used in the school is guided by Administrative Regulation [GI.AR Teaching and Learning Resources](#) with criteria requiring that resources be consistent with and be appropriate for the respective programs of study, the program's instructional philosophy, and for the age, social and emotional development and learning style of the students for whom the materials are selected.

CURRENT SITUATION

In our commitment to providing high quality learning and working environments that are welcoming, inclusive, safe and healthy (Strategic Plan Priority 2: Goal One), Edmonton Public Schools strives to assure parents and the community that the teaching of human sexuality education, and the establishment of voluntary student organizations, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) or Queer-Straight Alliances (QSAs) are guided by legislation, board policy and administrative regulations, and professional responsibility.

It is important to note that human sexuality education and the establishment of voluntary student organizations, such as GSAs or QSAs, reside independent of each other, in legislation, in board policy, and in content.

Human Sexuality Education: Teachers in Edmonton Public Schools are required to follow the Alberta Education program of studies for the teaching of sexual health education. Lessons about human sexuality begin in Grade 4, and are found in the Wellness Choices section of the [Health and Life Skills Curriculum](#). Both the Health and Life Skills Program of Studies and the [Senior High Career and Life Management Program of Studies \(CALM\)](#) guide teachers in teaching outcomes that focus on wellness, personal, relationship, life learning, career and life, and resource choices. Curriculum related to the teaching of sexual health education does not currently include any outcomes directly related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Edmonton Public Schools' public website includes a [Parents' Guide to Teaching Sexual Health](#) page which provides parents with an overview of the curricular outcomes related to sexual health at each grade level, the role of the parent in supporting the teaching of sexual health or in requesting exemption for their child, and links to the [Teaching Sexual Health website](#) of Alberta Health Services. This comprehensive website was developed by Alberta educators and health professionals, to provide up-to-date, evidence-based information and strategies for teachers and educators teaching the human sexuality components of the Alberta Health and Life Skills, and CALM Program of Study, as well as resources to help parents in talking with their children about human sexuality topics. The website also provides foundational health information for teachers and parents, support for managing sensitive topics such as disclosures, links to resources and lesson plans on topics in the curriculum; lessons on emerging topics that are not explicitly covered in the current Program of Study, related to student safety, including giving consent (Grades 9–12); and resources for parents to help their children stay safe from cyberbullying, homophobic bullying, and other forms of bullying.

For students of all ages, sexual health education must be science-based and free of bias; honour self-worth and dignity; be inclusive of personal, family and social values; respect individual differences; provide a supportive environment for students to learn and ask questions; and use age-appropriate teaching methods and materials.

Voluntary Student Organizations: Voluntary student organizations, such as GSAs or QSAs are school-based groups that work to create welcoming, caring, respectful and safe spaces for sexual and gender minority students and their allies in schools. The purpose of a GSA or QSA is for students to meet,

socialize and support one another as they discuss their feelings and experiences related to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. ([Alberta Teacher's Association, GSAs and QSAs in Alberta Schools: A Guide for Teachers](#) p. 17).

As explained in the Alberta Education Bulletin on [Creating Welcoming, Caring, Respectful and Safe Learning Environments](#), (Alberta Education, May 2015), GSAs or QSAs are school-based groups that promote welcoming, caring, respectful, safe and inclusive learning environments for sexual and gender minority students and their allies. GSAs/QSAs are grounded in the principles of promoting:

- equity for sexual and gender minority students
- safe, caring and inclusive spaces for all students
- healthy, respectful relationships to prevent or eliminate bullying and discrimination

The bulletin further explains that GSAs/QSAs are not dating clubs, nor do they promote sexual activity or behaviour. They are about valuing diversity, promoting safety, fostering respect and improving school and peer connectedness.

There are a variety of mechanisms and processes in place to ensure that District standards are met in the teaching of sexual health, as well as in the establishment and operation of GSAs. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

Teachers' Guidelines: The [Teaching Quality Standard in Alberta](#) established under the authority of legislation and policy, guides teachers in their professional judgment, in matters of legislated, moral and ethical frameworks to teach or provide guidance in this subject matter.

Teachers must also adhere to their [Code of Professional Conduct](#), which holds them to a standard "*which maintains the honour and dignity of the profession.*"

Principals' Responsibilities: In their supervisory capacity, principals ensure that District standards and values are met, by communicating legislative and policy updates and expectations within their schools, for the teaching of sexual health. Principals must ensure that the Letter of Notification ([Elementary / Secondary](#)) is sent home for consent to participate in the lessons, and that alternate activities are arranged for students whose parents request that students be [exempted](#) from the lessons.

Central support to schools is provided for the teaching of sexual health education by teacher consultants in the Diversity Education and Comprehensive School Health (CSH) Unit. The District's *Guide for Teaching Sexual Health Education* (updated January 2017) is made available to all teachers, to guide their understanding of District expectations, and for accessing approved community partners, to support the teaching of sexual health outcomes.

Ongoing professional development is provided through in-services, teacher communities of practice, and a CSH Newsletter. In February 2017, a professional learning day that included more than 200 teachers and pre-service teachers was held in partnership with the University of Alberta, Faculty of Education and community partners, who were pre-approved by Alberta Health Services, to support teachers in the teaching of sexual health outcomes.

A further mechanism is provided centrally through the Diversity Education and CSH Unit. A lead teacher network has been established in CSH. Guided by two CSH Consultants, a regular CSH electronic newsletter is distributed, which provides clarity around legislation and policy expectations, highlights events occurring in schools, and provides information about professional development opportunities.

When establishing voluntary student organizations, such as a GSA or QSA, principals contact one of the Edmonton Public Schools' Diversity Education consultants who specialize in Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI). Currently, the District has two certified teachers who serve as Diversity Education consultants for SOGI work, employed within the Diversity Education and CSH Unit of Inclusive Learning. During a school consultation, the consultant provides support to the administration and relevant staff, in understanding and implementing legislation, District policy and provincial expectations for establishing and operating a GSA. Other guiding documents include Alberta Education's [Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions](#) (Alberta Education, January 2016)

District standards are communicated through GSA lead teachers as well as each school's designated "Safe Contact." The Safe Contact is a staff member appointed by the principal to voluntarily serve within their school community. The staff member is publicly identified within the school community as a designated Safe Contact resource person. The role of the Safe Contact is to actively listen, consult, engage, advocate for, and support gender diverse students, their families, and school staff, to feel safe, valued respected and included. The safe contact:

- serves as a liaison between the District's Diversity consultants for SOGI and their school community, in supporting implementation of legislation and policy
- models respectful and inclusive language and behaviour which supports the principles of diversity, equity and human rights
- helps sexual and gender minority students and their families to find age-appropriate support and access to nonjudgmental resources
- supports the creation of safe spaces such as GSAs/QSAs and social justice clubs
- provides support to students who are bullied or feel unsafe because of actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, or gender diverse family status

All Safe Contacts are required to participate in a three-hour training session provided by the District's Diversity consultants for SOGI. An advanced level of training has been added in the past two years, for all Safe Contacts, related to supporting transgender students.

The consultant is also available to speak to parents during School Council meetings, about the purpose and function of a GSA.

Diversity Education consultants communicate regularly with each other and with the Supervisor of Diversity Education and Comprehensive School Health, about questions and issues emerging in schools.

KEY POINTS

- The topics of human sexuality education and voluntary student organizations, such as GSAs or QSAs, reside independent of each other, in legislation, in policy, and in instructional materials.
- The teaching of human sexuality education and the establishment of voluntary student organizations, such GSAs or QSAs are both guided by legislation, board policy, administrative regulations, and professional duty.
- Central support is provided to schools, in matters related to both human sexuality education and the establishment of GSAs and QSAs, in the form of consultation, professional development, and access to appropriate resources.

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