

Public consultation: Sexual education as part of Ontario's public education curriculum

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Introduction

Changes in Canadian demographics resulting in a number of emerging trends affecting the role, content, and implementation of sexual education within school curriculums (REF). As such, the Ontario provincial government has considered removing sexual education [as it currently exists] from the public education curriculum. This decision would affect the public school, as well as the Catholic school, systems. Demographic factors identified and discussed as evidence within this policy proposal fall under the categories of childhood queer acceptance, religious influences of [existing and new] citizens, and [perceived] ineffective public engagement by the provincial governments of 2014 and 2018.

The aforementioned categories will be outlined in greater detail under the *Evidence* section in order to substantiate the topics as evidence for a modified public consultation regarding sexual education in Ontario public school curriculum. Furthermore, the public consultation recommended will involve greater engagement and participation coupled with an increase the number of stakeholders required to participate in order to reach a reasonable consensus.

The remainder of this proposal will fall under sections entitled *Engagement, Design & implementation, Assessment & evaluation*, and *Conclusion*, providing a comprehensive summary comprising of this proposal.

References will be noted as in-text citations for reference in works cited on a separate page following the conclusion.

1. Evidence

1.1 Contemporary queer culture in childhood

The acceptance of the LGBTQ+ communities is becoming more widespread throughout Canadian society, exemplified by Pride celebrations across the nation, accompanied by positive media accounts of these events in domestic news media; The Canadian Broadcasting Company, as well as Global News have web pages dedicated to news in the LGBTQ+ communities (CBC; Global News). In addition, technological innovation allowing children greater access to entertainment media on devices that are not always monitored by parents and/or guardians, has the potential to expose children to content that could be considered adult sexual content, including intercourse and queer gender identities.

This observation, coupled with the increased interest in anti-bullying, cyber-bullying, as well as mental health, mental health research, and related public health services, supports a “safe space” for kids in school (PrevNet/Queens University). This “safe space” seeks to nurture not only children with traditionally accommodated mental or physical disabilities, but to provide a non-judgmental environment accepting of children who do not identify with gender assigned at birth, as well as those who conform to either traditional binary gender identity.

Taking the potential for increased acceptance and exposure to queer gender identities into consideration, as well as that the LGBTQ+ community has more to do with sexuality and sexual orientation than gender, it would be realistic to presume that LGBTQ+ identity could be considered a topic that should be discussed in sexual education [within the public education system or privately].

1.2 Religious influences

According to both the 2014 and 2016 Census, Canada has seen a steady rise in the number of immigrants accepted into Canadian society (Stats Can). In light of contemporary

events, such as the civil unrest following regime changes and natural disasters occurring in a multitude of nations, one can assume this trend has persisted. While many immigrants are content with adopting aspects of Canadian society,

Canada exists as a country delighting in its cultural diversity with Ontario accepting the largest number of immigrants in recent history (Stats Can); as such one can assume there are a variety of religious practices by its citizens. Furthermore, one can assume that the differing religious beliefs inform differences in morality, affecting how parents view sexual education included in the health curriculum.

While the Catholic school has [obvious] religious and associated moral values. However, they receive a level of public funding while accepting students who do not strictly identify with Catholicism, and such should be treated in the same manner as the public school system in regards to sexual education.

1.3 Previous stakeholder consultations (2014 & 2018)

The public consultation executed by the provincial government in 2014 claimed to have consulted with one parent from each elementary school and 4000 parents across the province (Toronto Star). This is less than one parent per school; it is also not indicated whether these parents were from diverse and/or rural regions or amalgamated in dense areas (Toronto Star; Ontario).

The public consultation executed in 2018 included participants from a large array of stakeholders, including students, employers, and organizations. It is certainly important to hear from students who will experience the sexual education curriculum, to introduce them as a stakeholder group requires more administrative work that may slow down the process, and their

potential naiveté may not address major problems around sexual health. This public consultation also included employers and organizations as stakeholders; unfortunately, these entities possess the potential financial stake in the education curriculum, therefore having the potential to skew data with bias. On top of that, the two modes of consultation included surveys and town halls with their aggregate data available on Ontario's Ministry of Education website (Ontario). This information may be decipherable by the general public and may also include opinions of citizens who are not considered primary stakeholders (such as religious leaders, grandparents, or those without children and/or are uninvolved with the Ontario's Ministry of Education (Ontario)). This consultation also introduced a number of large changes, having the potential to dilute the arguments/responses made by stakeholders.

2. Engagement

All participants opting to engage with the consultation will be required to provide their knowledge of the sexual education portion of the health curriculum as it currently exists, whilst commenting on the segments they approve [or disapprove] of. Participants will also be asked about their sentiments to the proposal of removing sexual education entirely from the Ontario education curriculum will also require a response.

2.1 Stakeholders as participants

The initial consultations will target parents of children currently enrolled in elementary and secondary public, or Catholic, schools, providing them with an opportunity to articulate their concerns and opinions, as well as be given the opportunity to be selected to participate in subsequent focus groups; Simultaneously, educators who have taught the sexual education

section of the health curriculum will be given an opportunity to provide feedback on the curriculum.

Educator-parents electing to identify with the parent group will be given the opportunity to submit responses to the parental survey, as well as the survey provided to health educators [or those who have taught the sexual education section] by their union. Focus group selection and participation of this demographic will be monitored in order to disperse these participants in each focus group session, to ensure each focus group session is provided with parent experiences, teacher experiences, and parent-teacher experiences.

Parents will be strongly encouraged to apply for participation in focus groups as a way to voice their opinions. Teachers and/or teacher-parents will as they make up the majority of focus group participants. Parents of secondary school students, to their discretion, will be provided a space for their children to articulate their opinions of the sexual education their children have received thus far.

Ontario's Minister of Education will be required to issue an official update on the number of surveys received and how many are still required before moving on the phase II of the consultation, being the implementation of focus groups. The Minister will also provide the percentage of surveys received indicating 'yes' to removing sexual education and 'no'.

3. Design & implementation

3.1 Parental survey access and distribution

The first step in the consultation is to prepare a comprehensive brochure relaying the main topics and corresponding grade of existing sexual education portion of the health curriculum. URLs for the consultation's website, as well as the direct URL link to the survey

will be provided on the back of the brochure. Educators will be provided with the unique school 4-digit code allowing parents to enter into the survey.

In order to account for large school populations, 3000 brochures will be mailed via Canada Post to the heads of schools who will be responsible for distributing to educators to send home with each child in their classrooms. Extra brochures can be held by the office should a brochure be misplaced by a child or parent and can also be transferred to other schools in the area who may require more brochures. However, schools whose student population exceeds 3000 are encouraged to reach out to the brochure distribution team, whose information will be communicated to the heads of school, as well as indicated on the study's government website in a 'Contact' page.

To proceed with the online survey made available to parents [and parent-teachers] will need first be required to input the code assigned to the school provide their names, and enter their child's or children's OEN (Ontario Education Number) which is unique to every student; OENs are located on report cards. The demographic information they will be required to input includes (1) Salary¹, (2) citizenship status, (3) ethnocultural identification, (4) initial opinion on the proposed removal of sexual education from the overall curriculum². Following the input of each of these demographic signifiers, the survey will proceed with 2 optional, open-ended questions³, being (1) Do you support the removal of sexual education from Ontario's health education curriculum? (2) In your opinion, what would be the ideal situation regarding sexual education in Ontario's health education curriculum?

¹ Before taxes...options include (1) >\$12,000, (2) \$12,000-\$30,000, (3) \$30,000-\$75,000, (4) \$75,000-\$100,000, (5) \$100,000+

² Yes or no answer required

³ Responses to these answers will be capped at 500 words

It will be required to receive at minimum 2 complete surveys per school (9966 surveys) to move forward with the assessment and evaluation.

3.3 Educator survey access and distribution

Educators will be invited to participate in a survey mimicking the format of the parental survey; the surveys distributed to the educators will require a code in order to access the survey content. In addition to the four-digit code associated with the educator's(s') educational institution, the educator's code will begin with a zero digit at the start of the code. This application will allow for surveys received to be discernible from parental surveys submitted.

Educator surveys will require participants to provide the same demographic information as included in the parental surveys⁴, and an additional 'yes or no' query into whether they identify as a health educator; in addition to the open-ended questions previously mentioned from the 3 short answer questions, also capped at 500 words, educators will be required to answer (1) Briefly describe your experience with sexual education in elementary and secondary schools, as a child and teenager, respectively?, (2) How long have you been involved in the sexual education program as an educator? What, if any, changes have the program undergone during this time? (3) Please indicate any topics that you believe should be removed, modified, or removed? Educators will also be required to answer a fourth question; would you like to participate in a focus group consisting of parents, educators, and parent-educators?⁵

⁴ (1) Salary (see footnote), (2) citizenship status (3) ethnocultural (4) initial opinion to the proposed idea (see footnote 1)

⁵ Yes or no answer required

The additional questions to educators will ideally provide insight into what parts of the curriculum are stressed the most across Ontario in order to promote the design of a program that can be implemented almost identically.

Educator surveys will be required completion three weeks past the date of distribution, as the number of health educators employed at each school differs.

3.3 Focus group eligibility, moderation, and conduct enforcement

Eligibility for participation in one of approximately 700 focus groups lasting ~one-hour, and consisting of 10 members, will be determined by submitting 250-500 brief, well-articulated brief describing the concerns and opinions they would bring to attention, as well as signing a contract of conductivity [forbidding harassment or violent behavior]. These interviews would run for approximately one-hour each, for 7 hours a day, over a period of approximately 100 days.

Volunteers of age 19-25, with relevant professional experience (i.e. graduated or currently studying to become an educator, science in biology or anatomy, social work, etc.) will be asked to apply to review focus group participant applications. They will be required to review 75 applications each; thus, the number of volunteers required will be based upon the number of applications received. The volunteers will not receive financial compensation but will be offered a professional reference for their participation from the consultation agency. Snacks, coffee, water, and cold drinks will be provided by the Ministry of Education.

Researchers at universities or other notable institutions with relevant experience in data collection from focus groups will also be encouraged to apply as a volunteer moderator. There will be 14 moderators in total, each conducting 50 interviews, up to 7 hours each day (note: this does not necessarily mean 7 focus groups, though the recommended allotted time for each is 1

hour). If there is an insufficient number of suitable applicants, experienced moderators will be asked to participate [with appropriate compensation from their respective ministries] from the provincial Ministries of Public Health, Education, and Justice. Should there not be sufficient applicants, ministers will be required to appoint members of their department to act as a moderator as an assignment, with appropriate compensation from their respective ministries.

The moderator will inform the participants of the recording of the focus group, ask each participant to introduce themselves, as well as whether they identify as a parent, educator, or both. Focus group participants would be provided a sheet of 3 prompting questions; These open-ended prompts will include (1) What has been your experience with sexual education so far (this can include your own, your child's, or your teaching)? (2) Why do you think the removal of sexual education from Ontario's health curriculum is necessary? (3) Why do think the removal of sexual education from Ontario's health curriculum is unnecessary?

Focus group location will be decided by the moderator (a public, convenient location) for all participants selected in the area [with some potential outliers] and will be financially covered by the ministry of education. If a participant must travel using public transit, or with a personal vehicle for longer than 45 minutes, they will be compensated for both journeys [there and back] by the Ministry of Education.

Aspiring political transcribers will be encouraged to apply as volunteers for the transcription of each focus group. It is ideal that to have 70 volunteers, each transcribing 10 focus groups. They will be allowed access to the recordings via an encrypted email from the agency allowing them to work where, and when, ever is convenient. Due dates will be one month from the finish of the focus groups. Updates on repetitive arguments or issues will be sent to the Ministry of Education, for the Minister to disseminate during his weekly report to the

public. These volunteers will not receive financial compensation, but professional transcription software will be purchased for each [with lifetime access] and will be awarded a professional recommendation from the agency.

4. Assessment & evaluation

Assessment of the focus groups will include a summary of arguments from the moderator for each focus group, as well as a summary of the overall themes and most notable arguments overall. The transcriber will be expected to do the same. These findings, as well as both educator and parent surveys, and focus group applications will be submitted in a comprehensive package the Ministry of Education for qualitative analysis. It is assumed they will use this information to inform the removal or implementation of sexual education in the health curriculum.

It is recommended that the Ontario provincial government re-asses the issue in 5-10 years, with updated considerations in regard to contemporary society.

Conclusion

In toto, it is asserted that the public consultation as described in this proposal takes into consideration the relevant societal changes and exposure towards gender and sexuality as sufficient evidence for public participation. The intricate plan consults all levels of adult stakeholders affected, while making participation accessible for a diverse range of individuals. Design and assessment promote professional, effective, and efficient modes of communication, thus encouraging effective and efficient implementation of outcome.

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