

The 2015 Health and Physical Education Curriculum and You

In 2015, the Ministry of Education announced the new *Health and Physical Education Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8*. It is to be implemented during the 2015-2016 school year. The expectation for all teachers will be to plan and teach according to the curriculum.

One of the features of the new curriculum is the expansion of curriculum expectations concepts to be covered in the Human Development and Sexual Health component. Some of these have sparked controversy in pockets of the province with occasional media attention. This is not a reason to avoid your duties with respect to the new curriculum. However, it may be a reason to be particularly prepared and to be in close communication with your school administrator with any questions or concerns.

Human Development and Sexual Health

The curriculum should be read as a whole but the following is a brief snapshot of some key elements of the Human Development and Sexual Health provisions that seem to be part of the controversy:

- Grade 1: Ability to identify body parts, including genitalia.
- Grade 3: Ability to (a) identify characteristics of healthy relationships, including accepting differences, being inclusive, showing mutual respect and (b) describe how visible differences and invisible differences (the list includes gender identity and sexual orientation) make each person unique and identify ways of showing respect for differences in others. Included in a sample discussion is reference to same-sex families.
- Grade 4: Ability to describe physical changes in males and females at puberty and the emotional and social impacts that may result from these changes.
- Grade 5: Ability to identify parts of the reproductive system and how the body changes during puberty and to describe the processes of menstruation and spermatogenesis and how these processes relate to reproduction and overall development.
- Grade 6: Ability to identify factors that affect the development of a person's self-concept, including a variety of factors among which are cultural and gender identity; ability to assess the effects of stereotypes, including homophobia and assumptions regarding gender roles and expectations, sexual orientation, gender expression and others and the ability to propose appropriate ways of responding to and changing assumptions and stereotypes. Understanding how to lay a foundation for healthy relationships through a clearer understanding of physical, social, and emotional changes during adolescence is included.

- Grade 7: Ability to explain the importance of a shared understanding about delaying sexual activity, consent, communication, and making decisions. Also included is an ability to identify common sexually transmitted infections; identifying ways to prevent STIs, including HIV, and/or unintended pregnancy by delaying sexual activity and then using condoms; a range of issues related to sexual health.
- Grade 8: Ability to identify and explain factors that can affect an individual's decisions about sexual activity, including personal readiness, personal limits, peer pressure, self-concept, awareness and acceptance of gender identity and sexual orientation, personal or family values, religious beliefs, cultural teachings, etc. Also included is the ability to demonstrate an understanding of gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation and identify factors that can help individuals of all identities and orientations develop a positive self-concept.

As with any area of the curriculum, teachers need to approach the teaching of the new curriculum with sufficient preparation and with good judgment. Professional boundaries must be maintained.

Equity and Inclusive Education

ETFO has welcomed this new curriculum. ETFO's policy on Equity and Social Justice calls for proactive measures which result in equality, promote diversity and foster respect and dignity for all. The inclusion of issues related to gender identity, same-sex families and sexual orientation is an extension of the Ministry's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, the stated goal of which is to honour diversity and to reflect in the curriculum the diversity of students and school communities. It also furthers the goals of the Provincial Code of Conduct for schools (which is to be incorporated into each school's code of conduct) that calls upon all members of the school community to respect and treat others fairly regardless of, for example, race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, or disability.

The Ontario *Human Rights Code* is also relevant to the curriculum and its inclusion of issues concerning sexual orientation and gender identity. The *Human Rights Code* includes gender identity and sexual orientation as protected grounds. Education is one of the services that the *Code* applies to and the *Code* requires that services be offered without discrimination on the basis of the protected grounds.

Anti-LGBTQ or transphobic rhetoric in school environments, whether by students or parents, may contribute to an unlawfully poisoned environment: be sure to report all incidents to your school administrator. ETFO has called for the Ministry to develop updated resources and training for members to successfully introduce this and the other aspects of the revised curriculum. We encourage all teachers, both permanent and occasional, to access this training and resources and familiarize yourself with the principles and expectations of your board's Equity and Inclusion policy.

Objection on Religious Grounds

School boards have anticipated that some members of school parent communities may object to their children remaining in the classroom for some of the topics discussed in the new curriculum. Some school boards have explicitly confirmed that requests to have students exempted from lessons touching on gender identity and same-sex families or sexual orientation will not be honoured because of their commitment to Equity and Inclusive education. Exemption from these components of the school curriculum would undermine the respect for dignity called for by the Ministry's strategy.

Some boards have communicated a process by which parents might attempt to assert that exemptions of students are required from some or all of the curriculum as a form of religious accommodation. Whether such requests for accommodation will succeed or not is not known at this time and will depend on Board processes. From ETFO's perspective, members should never be called upon to determine or assess any parental assertion of religious accommodation. This is an issue for school administrators to address according to the board's processes or policies.

If you have a concern about these processes or the nature or scope of exemptions being allowed, we encourage you to contact your local president.

Training and Resources

Given that some parent communities have reacted strongly to the new curriculum, ETFO expects that the Ministry and school boards will demonstrate strong leadership in its implementation. Members should not be the target of parental objection: direction should be given by school administrators on where to direct such concerns.

It is important that teachers have up-to-date information and resources to enable them to cover the curriculum topics in age-appropriate ways to ultimately promote student safety, health and well-being. Be alert to training opportunities and resources offered through your board. If concerned about a lack of resources or training, raise this with your administrator and contact your local. If training has been offered but has not been accessible to occasional teachers, contact your local.

If unsure about how to approach any of the topics in the new curriculum, seek input and direction from your school administrator and the appropriate board resource consultant. Occasional teachers who receive a plan for an assignment that includes a sexual health component may wish to seek direction from the school administrator about whether the lesson should proceed or whether an alternative lesson should be delivered so that the sexual health component may be delivered by the returning classroom teacher who may be more known to the students.

ETFO recommends that colleagues implementing the curriculum for the same grade level consider coordinating efforts in terms of planning, teaching, selecting resources and seeking consistent advice from school administrators.

For further information, contact your local ETFO president or Professional Relations staff in PRS at 416-962-3836 or 1-888-838-3836

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