

Revised Proposed Advocacy Resolution P24-05

Preserving Safe and Inclusive Spaced for 2SLGBTQI+ Students

ASCA preface:

Advocacy policies proposed for ASCA Member consideration belong to the Sponsor, until such time as they are moved and seconded on the floor of the ASCA Annual General, or General, Meeting. As such, a Sponsor of a Proposed Advocacy Resolution (PAR) may modify, or entirely withdraw, their PAR. Sam Livingston School Council has exercised this right, by revising their original submission (Preserving Safe and Inclusive Spaced for 2SLGBTQI+ Students) for ASCA Member consideration at the April 28th, 2024, ASCA Annual General Meeting. This **revised** PAR (P24-05 on the AGM Agenda) was received by ASCA on 04.22.24 and posted separate from the AGM Package on 04.23.24

P24-05 REVISED

Preserving Safe and Inclusive Spaces for 2SLGBTQI+ Students

Note: Revisions/additions noted in green font.

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Issue:

Within the province of Alberta, supports for 2SLGBTQI+ students are already in place. In other provinces across Canada, there have been legislative changes to erode similar supports. We believe it is important to ensure these supports remain intact in the province of Alberta.

Background:

While the number of 'out' youth and the acceptance of them in their communities is increasing, many 2SLGBTQI+ youth still live in fear of being rejected by their family and peers and are afraid of queerphobic bullying. Research out of Toronto indicates that potentially as many as 1 in 5 homeless youth identify as 2SLGBTQI+, and that they are more likely than other youth to be on the streets instead of in shelters due to queerphobia and the fear of violence. Putting this in context, it's important to note that approximately only 4% of Canadians aged 15+ identify as 2SLGBTQI+, meaning a disproportionately high number of 2SLGBTQI+ youth end up experiencing homelessness.

In addition, they often face discrimination. An Alberta study noted that three quarters of trans youth faced discrimination because of their gender identity and more than half because of their sexual orientation.

Repeated discrimination can weaken self-confidence and lead to mental health issues, including suicidal ideation and self-harm. Research indicates that approximately 30% of youth suicides are by 2SLGBTQI+ youth. This risk of suicide is even higher if youth have not come out yet or have not been accepted by their family. Family relationships are important, and while younger trans youth generally reported feeling their parents cared about them, 81% reported their family did not understand them at all or only understood them a little, and only about 1 in 3 had an adult in their family they could talk to about problems. The same Alberta students noted that 75% of trans youth reported self-harm in the past year, nearly 65% reported thoughts of suicide in the past 12 months and more than 2 in 5 had attempted suicide.

One way to maintain supportive environments is through the continued support of Gay Straight Alliances/Queer Straight Alliances (GSAs/QSAs) within schools. Under Section 35.1 of the Education Act, students in Alberta have a right to establish a voluntary student organization intended to promote a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment. This includes GSAs or QSAs. The

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Government of Alberta notes that 2SLGBTQI+ students are more likely to feel safe and are more comfortable being open about their sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression in schools with GSAs/QSAs because they provide a place to create a sense of belonging. They go further and note that when students feel accepted for who they are, it can positively impact both academic performance and self-esteem as evidenced through:

- greater school attachment
- improved attendance
- increased sense of empowerment and hope
- new friendships
- improved home and school relationships
- increased comfort being visible as 2SLGBTQI+ or as allies
- reduction of stress due to hiding one's identity
- increased confidence
- enhanced sense of pride

While GSAs/QSAs are an excellent and proven approach to supporting 2SLGBTQI+ students, visibility also matters. As with many other forms of inclusion, seeing relatable examples in curriculum and resources and adjusting policies, forms, and signage to use gender-inclusive terminology can make 2SLGBTQI+ students feel seen, safe, and included.

Following submission of this resolution, the Alberta Government signaled their intention to change current practices regarding 2SLGBTQI+ policies. It is anticipated that this fall, the Government will formally introduce changes to legislation. The anticipated changes as they relate to education are:

- Parents will need to give permission before a student aged 15 and under can use a name or pronoun at school other than what they were given at birth. Students who are 16 or 17 won't require permission, but schools will need to let their parents know first.
- Parents will have to opt-in students to every lesson about sex education, sexual orientation, or gender identity (currently, the law requires one notification, and parents can opt-out)
- Teachers need to get any third-party instruction material on gender identity, sexual orientation, and human sexuality approved by the Education ministry before they are used in the classroom.

While it is unclear how these changes will be implemented, it is clear that many critical stakeholders were not consulted prior to the announcements including students, parents, and teachers. Below is a list of organizations that have voiced concerns with the proposed changes:

- Alberta Teachers' Association
- Canadian Pediatric Society
- Alberta Medical Association
- United Nurses of Alberta
- Social Workers Association of Alberta
- Canadian Anti-Hate Network
- Canadian Women's Foundation
- Women's Shelters Canada
- Several (over 5) YWCAs
- Several (over 40) queer representing community organizations

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Concerns raised include:

- “We are concerned about how students may feel forced to suppress their identities and to be afraid of reaching out to teachers as an avenue for support. Transgender youth are five times more likely to think about suicide and nearly eight times more likely to attempt it than other children. We must be mindful of the vulnerability of these students and their need for safety, security, and support.” ***Alberta Teachers’ Association***
- “We are also deeply concerned about your announcement to require parental opt-in for each instance a teacher intends to give formal instruction on subjects involving gender identity, sexual orientation, or human sexuality in schools. This will pose an extremely high barrier to formal education on these fundamental and universal topics for all of Alberta’s children and youth. Comprehensive, evidence-based, medically accurate, and age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health education has an overwhelming evidence base for its impact on positive health outcomes. As such, it should be a priority for the overall health and well-being of adolescents and the downstream positive effects on the population as a whole. Open communication on issues of gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and human sexuality is key to improved well-being and health outcomes and can reduce risk of illness and disease, sexual exploitation and violence, stigma, misinformation, harassment, bullying, prejudice, and discrimination. Comprehensive sexuality education is therefore essential to ensure that children and youth have access to accurate information and are equipped to make healthy and informed decisions.” ***Canadian Pediatric Society***
- “We strongly urge the Premier to reconsider the proposed policies and offer her the opportunity to collaborate with experienced professionals, including Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists, to find a better way. One in which all Albertans feel accepted, loved, and have access to the care they need to become their best selves.” ***Alberta Medical Association***
- “Children and youth want and need to be unconditionally accepted and loved. Trans children and youth are not always ready to share their intimate thoughts and feelings with their parents. They may turn to trusted teachers until they are ready to share with their families. Parents have a responsibility to create safe, trusting, and loving relationships with their children, and in doing so, young people will tell their families about their preferred pronouns and/or name. Forcing teachers and schools to notify parents and to seek parental consent from unaccepting families will place children in harm’s way. Youth homelessness is known to very often be caused by breakdowns in family relationships (Quilty, et al., 2022), and this is especially true for ‘Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth [who] are 120% more likely to be homeless than cisgender and heterosexual youth’ (Ormiston, 2022). When educators are forced to notify parents and guardians about their child’s gender, they may put that child at risk for homelessness, which has doubled in Edmonton alone over the last three years (Smith, 2022; Homeward Trust Edmonton, 2024).” ***Social Workers Association of Alberta***

The concerns above are echoed across many of the open letters issued by organizations concerned that these proposed changes will cause harm to some of Alberta’s most vulnerable children and youth. Many of these organizations are also willing to be part of an authentic, open, and meaningful consultation process.

In addition to these concerns, there is the administrative burden these changes will place on schools, parents, and even the Ministry of Education. Requiring parents to sign a form for a name change (there

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are many reasons why a name change could happen, including shortened names like Samantha to Sam and going by a second name instead of a first) and/or an opt-in form for every lesson about sex education, sexual orientation or gender identity will be overwhelming. Teachers will need to take time from their already full days to create and track the forms and busy parents will need to ensure they are watching for and signing the forms as they come. Teachers will also need to take extra time to submit materials to the Ministry of Education for approval and track that they have received the necessary permissions to use the materials required. The Ministry of Education will also need to take time to review all the submissions and issue approvals or rejections.

Resources:

<https://www.alberta.ca/gay-straight-alliances>

<https://oipc.ab.ca/privacy-laws-gay-straight-alliances/>

<https://oipc.ab.ca/resource/school-clubs/>

<https://www.aclrc.com/2-lgbt-youth>

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/12-581-x/2022001/sec6-eng.htm>

https://apsc-saravyc.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2018/04/SARAVYC_Trans-Youth-Health-Report_Alberta-V2-WEB.pdf

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/danielle-smith-unveils-sweeping-changes-to-alberta-student-gender-identity-sports-and-surgery-policies-.7101053#:~:text=and%20a%20psychologist,-,Alberta%20parents%20will%20need%20to%20give%20permission%20before%20a%20student,let%20their%20parents%20know%20first.>

https://cps.ca/uploads/advocacy/Gender-affirming_care_in_AB_Public.pdf

<https://www.albertadoctors.org/news/statement-from-scap-on-gender-affirming-treatments>

<https://www.una.ca/1493/decisions-about-medical-care-must-not-be-left-to-politicians-una>

<https://www.myswaa.ca/news/statement-on-alberta-anti-trans-policies>

<https://egale.ca/egale-in-action/egale-canada-and-skipping-stone-foundation-condemn-albertas-attack-on-2slgbtqi-people-and-promise-legal-action/>

(1 Recommendation replaced by 7 Recommendations. Wording being maintained as identical to previous 1 Recommendation appears in black font below)

Recommendation #1:

That the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) advocate to The Minister for Education and other education stakeholders and partners to pause the proposed changes until meaningful consultation on the substance of the policy, not only its implementation, has occurred with key stakeholders including 2SLGBTQI+ students, 2SLGBTQI+ community-based organizations, teachers and the ATA, parents and ASCA, and school board associations.

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Recommendation #2:

That the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) advocate to The Minister for Education and other education stakeholders and partners to maintain the current legislation for one notification with an opt-out option for sexual education.

Recommendation #3:

That the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) advocate to The Minister for Education and other education stakeholders and partners for the preservation of GSAs/QSAs in all schools in Alberta with continued protections surrounding the personal information of students participating in GSAs/QSAs. These protections should continue to allow students to participate in GSAs without fear of their families or others being notified.

Recommendation #4:

That the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) advocate to The Minister for Education and other education stakeholders and partners to continue to allow teachers to use third-party, evidence-based, medically accurate sexual education and gender and relationship materials in developmentally-appropriate ways without requiring prior approval from the Ministry of Education.

Recommendation #5:

That the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) advocate to The Minister for Education and other education stakeholders and partners to support schools and school boards to be gender inclusive on school forms, websites, and communications, recognizing that gender exists on a spectrum, not as a male/female binary.

Recommendation #6:

That the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) advocate to The Minister for Education and other education stakeholders and partners to support professional development for teachers to provide the knowledge and skills to a) respond immediately and in developmentally ~~age~~-appropriate ways to discriminatory language and behaviour, b) use inclusive language, and c) incorporate positive examples that affirm and embrace differing sexual orientations and gender identities.

Recommendation #7:

That the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) advocate to The Minister for Education and other education stakeholders and partners to allow students to use a name and/or pronoun that is different from the one they were given at birth without requiring parental permission.