

May 17th, 2021

The Honourable Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education
5th Floor, 438 University Ave
Toronto, ON M5G 2K8

RE: JOINT STATEMENT ON SUPPORTING 2SLGBTQ+ STUDENTS IN ONTARIO
SCHOOLS

Dear Minister Lecce,

According to the 2013 provincial document, *Promoting a Positive School Climate: A Resource for Schools*, “Students are more motivated to do well and to realize their full potential in schools that have a positive school climate, where they feel safe, included and supported.” However, many students do not have this support, and as a result, many of them are unable to achieve their full potential. Recently, 2SLGBTQ+¹ students have come forward about their experiences of bullying and harassment in their classroom environments. As a result, many of them do not feel safe or supported and are thereby unable to reach their full potential. This lack of acceptance can lead to greater declines in mental health for 2SLGBTQ+ youth. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a total of 63% of Trans and Gender Diverse Youth reported unmet needs for mental health and substance use services, which is 125.806% more than their cisgender ² counterparts (Hawke et al., 2021, p. 5). Additionally, lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are at a higher risk for suicide than their heterosexual peers in which they are 500% more likely to consider suicide, and 700% more likely to attempt suicide (Centre for Suicide Prevention, 2020). One must also consider the current factors of COVID-19, where youth in Canada have suffered a greater decline in mental health (Government of Canada, 2021). This is because marginalized groups, such as 2SLGBTQ+ students, are at a greater risk of decline in mental health and wellbeing, especially noting the additional struggle of those with

¹ 2SLGBTQ+ is an acronym that stands for Two-Spirited, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and more

² Cisgender is a term used to describe people who are not transgender, as they identify as the sex they were assigned with at birth

intersectional identities (Hawke et al., 2021, p. 5). As a result, these challenges heavily impact and interfere with the attainment of educational milestones in the learning environments of 2SLGBTQ+ students.

The 2012 Bill 13, *Accepting Schools Act* encourages all boards to promote safe and inclusive learning environments that nurture and support all students and prohibits all boards and principals from refusing students the right to create a 2SLGBTQ+ student-led group within schools. Moreover, the Ontario Human Rights Code prohibits the discrimination of people in a marginalized social group, and yet, many 2SLGBTQ+ students continue to face hatred and bigotry in their learning environment.

All students should feel safe, without fear of debate, harassment, or discrimination around their identity. Thus, the signatories of this joint letter are calling upon the ministry to better address transphobia and homophobia in all publicly-funded boards throughout Ontario with the following measures:

- Training staff on a PD Day to continue the vital work of creating safe and inclusive environments for equity-seeking youth, including 2SLGBTQ+ students, and centering *Promoting a Positive School Climate: A Resource for Schools*.
- Regularly consulting local 2SLGBTQ+ community organizations to ensure that they are consistent in their support of their 2SLGBTQ+ students.
- Having community and mental health resources specific to 2SLGBTQ+ youth in schools and on websites, without refusal in the case it is requested by stakeholders of the Board.
- Including 2SLGBTQ+ identities on Board Surveys to learn about how many students are being impacted in their communities and learn to better support them.
- Having Safe Space posters and stickers available outside of School Board classrooms, without refusal in the case it is requested by stakeholders of the Board.
- Having all of the school boards recognize Pride Month and fly the traditional Pride Flag, without refusal in the case it is requested by stakeholders of the Board.

Having these measures implemented throughout our Boards can lower the odds of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and self-harm for 2SLGBTQ+ youth (Corliss et al., 2020). With staff training and community consultations, students can feel safer and better supported at school; with community and mental health resources available, it creates an accessible

environment to cater to students in need of them during crises; with increased visibility through board data, safe space posters, and the raising of the Pride flag, students will be reminded of their board's public acknowledgement of the 2SLGBTQ+ community through supportive symbolic visuals.

We hope to see these policies and procedures implemented this year, as change needs to happen now in light of all the discrimination 2SLGBTQ+ students face. We believe that these measures are a start in making sure that no students are subject to becoming targets of discrimination. We hope that you join us in creating an equitable and inclusive learning environment where all students can realize their full potential.

CC:

Premier of Ontario Doug Ford

Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education Sam Oosterhoff

Solicitor General Sylvia Jones

Leader, Official Opposition, Andrea Horwath

Education Critic, Marit Stiles

LGBTQ Critic, Terence Kernaghan

Sincerely,

1. Ontario Student Trustees' Association (OSTA-AECO)
 2. Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF)
 3. Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity (CCGSD)
 4. LGBT Youthline
 5. Egale Canada
 6. Positive Space Network (PSN)
 7. The Roman Catholic Women Priests of Canada (Ontario)
 8. Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto (MCC Toronto)
 9. Toronto Youth Cabinet (TYC)
 10. Rideau Students' Union (RSU)
 11. The Reach Out Centre for Kids (ROCK)
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References

Centre for Suicide Prevention. (2020, March 2). Sexual minorities and suicide prevention.

Centre for Suicide Prevention.

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Government of Canada. (2021, March 4). Impacts on Youth. *Statistics Canada.*

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Hawke, L. D., Hayes, E., Darnay, K., & Henderson, J. (2021, February 4). Mental Health Among Transgender and Gender Diverse Youth: An Exploration of Effects During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity.* 5-6.

<https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2021-12684-001.pdf>
