

Recommendations to Charter for Public Education

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It is hard to imagine a more critical role than that of public education in the shaping of our Canadian society. From its inception, the public education system has been the site of contested struggles based on competing socio-political ideologies. Goals have been as vastly disparate as ensuring dependable products; that is, skilled and compliant workers¹, to ensuring free, equal, cultured, and thinking citizens, ready and willing to take part in a liberal participatory democracy². While many Canadians take great pride in our noted reputation for social justice concerns, and for our striving to create what former Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau coined a “Just Society”, there are yet still others who have noted the limitations of the liberal equality paradigm. These citizens, academics and activists alike, question many of the fundamental “common-sense” assumptions (hegemony) of the existing social order, and advocate for even more visionary and transformative educational, and thus, societal possibilities.³

Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) social justice movements have been active in Canada for years. The struggle for justice, equality and dignity has been long and hard, the gains uneven and incomplete. It is fair to say that of all the sites of struggle, nowhere have they been more monumental than they have within the public school system. Briefs, court challenges and presentations alike have underscored the blatant and serious safety, learning and working concerns faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered students, staff and families. Yet safe inclusion, never mind full curricular justice, or dignity and equality, remains elusive. While the BCTF has responded to calls for action, other educational partner groups have been remiss or reluctant to act. Successive governments have failed in offering leadership and have instead systematically abdicated their responsibilities when opportunities for change were presented. This is especially unfortunate when one considers, as stated above, the importance of education in contributing to the development of citizenry that will fulfill a Canadian vision of justice and equality.

In this regard, this taskforce on developing a Charter for Public Education is to be commended. It is our sincere hope that our accompanying recommendations will find their way into, and become an integral part of the development of the charter. Thank you for this opportunity to present these recommendations and to engage in dialogue with all of you.

¹ Sutherland, N. (1986) The Triumph of Formalism: Elementary Schooling in Vancouver from the 1920's to the 1960's. B.C. Studies, 69/70, p. 175-210.

² Howe, K. (1997) “A Radical Liberal Framework” in Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity: Social Justice, Democracy and Schooling. Teachers College Press, New York.

³ Sumara, D. (1996) Private Readings in Public: Schooling the Literary Imagination. Counterpoints: Studies in the Postmodern Theory of Education: Vol. 26. Peter Lang, New York.

Pinar, W. (Ed). (1998) Queer Theory in Education. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey.

This is our vision of the ideal learning and working environment for LGBT & Questioning youth, families and educators. The following recommendations are the result of numerous written submissions and collaborations involving LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) education and community organizations including: GALE, YouthQuest, GAB, XtraWest newspaper, PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), and ASIA (Asian Society for the Intervention on AIDS).

PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

An ideal Ministry of Education would:

1. mandate policies and strategies to eliminate homophobia for all school districts and independent school systems.
2. work with the BC College of Teachers and all teacher training institutions to make sure that all newly certified teachers have received instruction about the effects of homophobia and heterosexism, and strategies to combat these and other forms of discrimination / oppression.
3. have a functioning provincial advisory committee that includes LGBT persons, to examine existing curricula for homophobic / heterosexist bias or other deficiencies, and to suggest other provincial LGBT education initiatives.
4. require and approve queer-friendly resources and instructional units to all grade levels to ensure safe and inclusive educational environments. Queer issues would be considered a cross-curricular issue.
5. provide ongoing, sustainable funding, to ensure that programs such as BC Safe Schools and Focus on Bullying continue and expand, with the specific inclusion of anti-homophobia content in the materials and training.
6. provide an avenue to collect statistics about homophobic incidents/complaints, and also to provide advocates and appeals that are separate from school administration (e.g. an ombudsperson).

CURRICULUM and RESOURCES

The ideal school curriculum would:

7. include a broad representation of queer persons and issues throughout the grades, with age-appropriate (and provincially approved) materials and teaching units. Queer issues would be considered a cross-curricular issue.
8. require age-appropriate queer fiction and non-fiction resources in all libraries and classrooms, and would properly fund such resources.
9. actively try to include LGB and transgender issues in all sex education and CAPP classes relating to sexual or social development (and not on an optional basis).
10. represent queers in literature, art, music, film, religious and political history, and law.
11. include representations of same-sex families in elementary social studies, and family management and CAPP classes.
12. include mandated courses on different and related forms of oppression, including (but not limited to) sexism, racism, and homophobia. This anti-discrimination education should connect the various forms and causes of discrimination, but still address each area separately and sensitively, because of its unique aspects.
13. include many transgender images and diverse gender representations from different cultures.
14. include studies of media stereotypes and corporate advertising as they influence our culture.
15. promote gender-inclusive and gender-neutral language.

16. routinely revisit LGBT issues and homophobic attitudes and language, so as to foster mutual acceptance, and to prevent anti-LGBT bigotry from being perpetuated by older students.

SCHOOL DISTRICT

The ideal school district would:

17. include specific anti-discrimination clauses in all district policies to prohibit discrimination based upon one's real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.
18. clearly articulate these policies to all students, staff and families, and mandate concrete actions against any perpetrators of anti-LGBT harassment in schools.
19. have a functioning district advisory committee that includes LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) persons to carry out curriculum review and development, in-service programs and other initiatives to ensure safe, caring and inclusive educational environments for LGBT students, families and staff.
20. regularly re-examine its policies to ensure that they are inclusive of groups that have been marginalized because of sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
21. ensure non-disclosure of a student's sexual orientation or gender identity to other students, teachers, parents, guardians or other persons, unless expressly consented to by that student.
22. staff schools with sufficient counselors who are trained and interested in LGBT issues.
23. publicly condemn anti-queer attacks or harassment of any students, families or staff and take all complaints of bullying or discrimination seriously.
24. have district staff trained to provide expertise in anti-homophobia education and LGBT educational issues.
25. mandate and provide in-service training on LGBT issues to all teachers, school and board administrators, and other staff. It would also offer similar workshops for Parent Advisory Councils.
26. take steps to recruit and retain members of diverse and underrepresented communities of LGBT persons in teaching, administrative and non-instructional staff positions.
27. change forms to be non-gender specific (non- exclusionary) by including 'co-parent' and 'care-giver', as well as 'mother, father or legal guardian' and by removing 'male' or 'female' boxes from forms.
28. encourage teachers, administrators, district officials and Parent Advisory Councils to use the resources and speakers available from various queer and queer-friendly organizations.
29. encourage all secondary schools to develop and sustain Gay/Straight Alliances, along with any other school clubs that promote understanding and acceptance of diversity.

ADMINISTRATION

The ideal school administration would:

30. take a public stand against any acts of harassment or intimidation against LGBT students, and take all complaints of bullying or discrimination seriously.
31. deal forcefully with students who harass others, but not by forcing queer kids out of the school or into the closet.

32. promote democratic decision-making, with student and staff input being valued.
33. be very accessible to staff, students and their parents.
34. lead the school in practicing a cooperative model instead of competitive model.
35. act as a protector and advocate for the students' safety and learning needs.
36. support student/staff-led initiatives that combat homophobia and promote awareness of diversity issues.

CLASSROOMS/TEACHERS

The ideal classroom/teacher would:

37. include equitable visual and text representations of LGBT persons, including queer-friendly posters, queer cultural symbols, and diverse 'family' configurations, along with multicultural and multi-ethnic representations.
38. create an atmosphere that promotes open and safe discussions, values all opinions, and demonstrates mutual respect. Agreeing to disagree on some issues is a normal event.
39. not presume heterosexuality and/or conventional gender roles in any curriculum materials, or drama/choir/dance content or choreography. It would regularly represent and validate same-sex attraction or gender variance.
40. encourage students to properly address any expressions of homophobia and bullying.
41. enthusiastically include students in non-traditional courses (i.e. girls in shop classes, boys in foods and textile classes), without negative repercussions or assumptions about students.
42. not include any gender segregation (i.e. no separate lineups for girls and boys).
43. feel free to discuss homophobia, homosexuality, discrimination and the realities of LGBT people and same-sex families in classrooms at all grade levels.
44. be trusted and encouraged to use his/her professional judgment in deciding the most age-appropriate instruction materials and methods for the students.
45. feel safe to come out, talk about partners, and wear queer cultural symbols.
46. use inclusive language (e.g. 'partner' instead of 'husband or wife').
47. include multi-age groupings, so that older students could be positive role models and protectors of potential victims of bullying.
48. promote the involvement of students in setting behavioural guidelines in Student Codes of Conduct, thus allowing for student ownership and self-policing.

SCHOOL COMMUNITY (includes: staff, parents, community groups, educational partners, etc.)

The ideal school staff and parents would:

49. invite LGBT cultural/arts groups, speakers to give presentations, performances and workshops.
50. strive to work with all allies and partners to make the school safer and more welcoming (e.g. PAC, Students' Council, staff, PFLAG, school trustees, BCTF, etc.).
51. encourage student field trips to queer community events and neighbourhood projects.
52. welcome youth-centred community groups.
53. invite representation on a wide range of community issues (eg. poverty, violence, various abuses).
54. facilitate annual peer-run youth conferences.
55. work together (and with groups like PFLAG) in workshops and information sessions.
56. operate on-line, interactive communications for all voices (e.g. listserves).
57. seek to create community projects and scholarship funds by working with the queer communities.
58. provide information to students and families about human rights legislation and processes.
59. encourage LGBT parents to become active on Parent Advisory Committees.

STUDENT SERVICES and OPPORTUNITIES

In an ideal school system, all students would:

60. have access to a GSA, with the same funding allotment as other clubs. These GSAs could help the entire school by offering sensitivity training for staff, parents and students.
61. have student representation on PAC, and a GSA rep on student council.
62. have access to confidential peer support programs and peer mediators trained in sexual orientation and gender identity issues.
63. be able to participate in clubs focused on issues common to queer and non-queer persons (i.e. drugs, alcohol, violence, career preparation, relationships).
64. participate in joint diversity projects among school clubs, to the mutual benefit of those clubs.
65. take responsibility for monitoring abuse and naming homophobia when they see it.
66. enjoy violence-prevention services, not just interventions after the fact.
67. participate in events like Diversity Week and Queer Awareness Forums.
68. feel free to dance with a same-sex partner at school dances, or hold hands with a same-sex partner in the hallways, without fear of violence or labeling.
69. feel free to dress in ways that may be seen as 'gender-bending' or 'cross-dressing'.

70. feel absolutely free to come out, or not come out, as LGBT.
71. receive sensitivity training and discussion of LGTB culture and issues (e.g. PrideSpeaks).
72. feel free to talk about queer issues in classrooms, school newspapers, or zines.
73. participate in student leadership programs that address homophobia and heterosexism, such as GSAs.

BUILDING and SCHOOLYARD DESIGN

The ideal school facility would:

74. be of a manageable size, with reasonable student : teacher ratios.
75. be designed for community participation (open, well-lit, and non-angular walls; wheelchair accessible, with a speaker's corner, lounge and student message board).
76. be open to the outside community, to encourage community / school integration.
77. include programs and faculties dispersed throughout, rather than isolated in special “wings”.
78. include visual displays of diversity (i.e. flags, posters, theme displays, book exhibits).
79. not include any enclosed or hidden areas where bullying can occur, indoors or out.
80. include private showers and changing areas in all locker rooms.
81. include some washrooms that are not gender-specific (e.g. single cubicle washrooms).