



in the **LOOP**

February 4, 2016

Minister's Message



Hello friends,

I'm excited for this chance to connect with people who share my commitment to providing Alberta students the best education we can deliver. Through *In The Loop*, Alberta Education will be communicating updates that I hope you'll find interesting and informative. This is just one way that we will continue to reach out to you, our partners in education.

An important initiative we are involved in is supporting our students, staff and families by respecting diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions. Last June, the *Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children* received Royal Assent. The Act enshrined sexual orientation, gender expression and gender identity as prohibited grounds from

discrimination in the *Alberta Bill of Rights*. It also amended the *School Act* to add requirements around establishing welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments and supporting students who wish to establish gay-straight or queer-straight alliances.

The legislation required school authorities to draft policies to address their responsibilities under the *School Act*. During meetings last fall, many school officials asked for assistance in this area. In response, Alberta Education developed a number of tools, including a best practices guidelines document to provide boards with examples which demonstrate what an environment respectful of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions can look like. These tools, including the guidelines, can be found at education.alberta.ca/safe-and-caring-schools/legislation.

The guidelines are designed to assist school authorities in developing their policies. Perhaps more importantly, they contain constructive suggestions for teachers and schools on respecting and accommodating LGBTQ+ students.

The policies do not impact Alberta curriculum or the *Alberta Bill of Rights*, which gives parents the ability to withdraw their children from instruction about human sexuality or from instruction or exercises that are primarily and explicitly religious or patriotic in nature. Parents will also continue to receive advance notice when religious and human

sexuality topics are going to be part of a class discussion or lesson, and there will continue to be no academic penalty for a student who is absent from that discussion or lesson.

As well, students and schools still have the flexibility to call parents by their chosen title — mother, father or something else if they choose.

The guidelines also outline that students should be able to access washrooms that correspond with their gender identity. In addition, non-gendered, individual washrooms should be available. Schools are advised to have strategies to ensure all areas of the school are safe for students and privacy is maintained for all.

What I have learned is that so many positive steps have already been made to address the needs of students.

I want to thank everyone for continued collaboration and hard work on this important matter. Schools must be a place where students can feel safe. It's our legal and moral obligation to support them as best we can.

David Eggen

Minister of Education

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