

WHAT SCHOOL LEADERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE REVISED HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

INTRODUCTION

On February 23, 2015, the Ministry of Education released the revised curriculum for Health and Physical Education for Grades 1 to 12. The purpose of the revised curriculum is to give students accurate information that will keep them safe and healthy. The Province is also providing parents with resources to help them understand what will be taught to their children. It is important for principals and vice-principals to have the information that they need to effectively respond to parent and community questions and concerns and to support school personnel in understanding how the curriculum will be taught in the classroom.

93 percent of Ontario parents called for an updated sexual health component to the Health and Physical Education curriculum.

Ontario schools are committed to the success and safety of every student. Student achievement and well-being are at the core of the school's vision for education. In this regard, it is important that the Health and Physical Education curriculum is current, relevant and age-appropriate to support students in having the best information possible to make an informed decision about their health and well-being.

This revised curriculum has attracted a great deal of attention. Between May 4 to May 11, 2015, 35,000 Toronto-area elementary students were kept home by parents as a protest against the curriculum, while thousands more were absent from schools in the surrounding suburbs. A Facebook group called "Parents & Students on strike: one week no school", has been sharing flyers online inviting people in Ontario to help stop implementation of the curriculum.

When the revised curriculum was originally released in 2010, certain parent groups protested so noisily that former premier, Dalton McGuinty, backed off and withdrew the changes. Premier

Kathleen Wynne has confirmed that the revised curriculum will be introduced in all Ontario school boards in September 2015.

In an Environics Research Group survey conducted in May 2013, 93 percent of Ontario parents called for an updated sexual health component to the Health and Physical Education curriculum. The survey indicated that 9 in 10 parents are comfortable with their child receiving information about sexual health from a school curriculum.

In meeting with concerned parents, school leaders should confirm that the majority of the Health and Physical Education curriculum has been taught in Ontario schools since 1998. Some of the updates address current issues relevant to student health and well-being and better reflect Ontario's growing and diverse population. These updates include topics concerning healthy relationships, consent, mental health and online safety. The curriculum recognizes that living skills, such as problem solving, critical and creative thinking, communication, self-awareness and adaptive skills, resilience and collaboration,

must be developed and practiced by young people and applied in increasingly complex situations.

THE ROLE OF THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Principals and Vice-Principals should confirm to parents that it is the role of the Ministry of Education to develop curriculum and it is the role of the school board to implement it. School leaders should also confirm that the school has no control over the content of the curriculum. For any questions about the revised curriculum and its contents, parents should contact the Ministry of Education.

It is important to have a discussion with a parent who has questions or concerns about the revised curriculum. The school leader should be respectful and thoughtful in these discussions and attempt to understand the parent's concerns.

If a parent has a question or concern about the learning in their child's classroom, they should raise the concern directly with the teacher or principal so that a discussion can take place to clarify the concern and receive information about the curriculum content.

The school should encourage parents to read the Ministry's parent resource documents. They provide an overview of the curriculum by grade level, quick facts and tips for parents to support their child's learning at home. The Ministry resources and full curriculum can be accessed on their website at <http://bit.ly/HPEparentresources>.

CONSULTATION IN DEVELOPING THE REVISED CURRICULUM

Parents may also ask whether parent groups were consulted on the development of the revised curriculum. The revision of the Health and Physical Education curriculum is the result of work done by the Ministry through broad

curriculum consultation, which began in 2007. The review was the most extensive curriculum consultation process ever undertaken by the Ministry and involved parents, students, teachers, faculties of education, universities, colleges and numerous stakeholder groups, including the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, the Ontario Public Health Association and the Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition. More than 70 health-related organizations submitted reports for consideration and thousands of people provided feedback. In 2014, the Ministry also provided an opportunity for 4,000 parents from every elementary school in Ontario and from all four publicly-funded school systems to provide their input.

Parents may also ask whether teachers are prepared to teach the revised curriculum. School leaders should confirm that teachers are committed to teaching the curriculum in a professional and respectful manner that is both developmentally and age-appropriate. They are well-trained professionals who are already teaching human development and sexual health in an appropriate and responsible manner. In May 2015, the Ministry started providing professional development and training for specialized school board staff throughout the Province. Classroom teachers will have professional learning opportunities to support their teaching of the revised curriculum. The Ministry will be developing additional resources to assist them in teaching topics effectively in the classroom.

POSSIBLE ACCOMMODATIONS

The question arises with respect to possible accommodations relating to the revised curriculum. Can parents or students make a request for an exemption? How and when should this request be made? Can a group of students be exempted from the curriculum?

In a memorandum to School Board Chairs, dated May 11, 2015, the Minister of Education indicated

The majority of the Health and Physical Education curriculum has been taught in Ontario schools since 1998.

It is the Minister's expectation that requests for accommodation will be considered on a case-by-case basis within the board's existing policies.

that should parents wish to discuss possible accommodation, including exemptions, it is her expectation that these requests will be considered on a case-by-case basis within the board's existing policies and that reasonable alternative activities be offered. The Minister stated that she expects that boards should be able to handle these requests for accommodation with their existing resources.

The Minister said "if a board is encountering an unexpected high volume of accommodation requests, the Ministry is available to work with the board to find an effective way forward."

"My expectation continues to be that boards will respectfully and sensitively address parents' questions and concerns about the learning outlined in the curriculum and the instructional practices or resources that will be used".

There is no doubt that with the rollout of the revised curriculum in September 2015, there will be certain parents or students who will request accommodation on religious grounds. Every request for accommodation under the Ontario *Human Rights Code* (the "Code") should be considered on an individual basis.

The school board should take all reasonable steps to provide accommodation to individual members of a religious group to facilitate their religious beliefs and practices. All accommodation requests should be taken seriously. No person should be penalized for making an accommodation request.

The school board should take reasonable steps to provide accommodation to individuals who state that a specific part or parts of the revised curriculum limits and/or prevents their ability

to exercise their sincerely held religious beliefs and practices. The school board will balance its decision to accommodate on several factors, such as undue hardship, including the effect of the accommodation on the board's ability to fulfill its duties regarding Ministry curriculum requirements, board policies and the *Education Act*.

A parent or student requesting religious accommodation should advise school administration at the beginning of the school year, to the extent possible. The parent or student should make the request in writing to the school principal. The principal will discuss the request with the parents, student, teacher and/or other relevant board staff and, possibly, public health and/or a faith leader. School administration will endeavour to develop a suitable solution to ensure that curriculum expectations are demonstrated.

Schools in Ontario communicate with parents through a variety of means about what students are learning. This communication and open dialogue builds stronger connections between the home and school, which support student learning, achievement and well-being. In this regard, as the revised curriculum is introduced in the new school year, school leaders should continue to build and maintain open lines of communication with families and their local communities.

Eric M. Roher
416.367.6004
eroher@blg.com