

# CHANGING THE RULES



**ONTARIO TEACHER REFLECTIONS  
ON IMPLEMENTING SHIFTING HEALTH  
AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION CURRICULA**

## RECOMMENDED CITATION:

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## BACKGROUND

In the span of four years, Ontario teachers have been tasked with teaching four different Health & Physical Education curricula in a context of intense social and political scrutiny. Charged with implementing a revolving door of 'new' curricula, on sensitive subject matters, amidst a very public controversy, teachers were at the front lines of the controversy. During this period, we spoke to experienced health and physical education teachers across Ontario to ask them about teaching sex education, gather their feedback on curricular changes, and make recommendations for improving the roll-out of future updates. We interviewed 34 experienced teachers from 17 different school boards across the province.

## RESULTS

The teachers we interviewed:

- enjoy teaching sex-ed – they appreciate the opportunity to teach subject matter that is perceived to be meaningful, engaging and important for students;
- feel that the 1998 curriculum was in desperate need of update; and are generally supportive of changes made in 2015 and 2019 (especially with regards to 'consent' content);
- experience elevated and unnecessary stress teaching in highly surveilled and politically charged environments;
- have been frustrated with roll-out processes (including late timing, lack of support/resources and poor public communication), and;
- want more resources to accommodate, support and create culturally safe classrooms for the diverse student body.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE CURRICULAR REVISIONS AND ROLL OUTS



Foster a culture of learning and support for teachers and students.



Provide teachers with adequate time, training and resources (especially audiovisual media) to deliver sex education effectively.



Incrementally modify the curriculum on a regular basis to ensure that it is relevant and responsive to the changing realities of Ontario students.



Include diverse stakeholders in future consultations to ensure that new curriculum meets the needs of all students and their communities.



Improve communication and public relations.



Create policies, templates and strategies for accommodating students who are not participating in sex education classes.

## SEX EDUCATION IN ONTARIO

Ontario is Canada's largest and most diverse province. In the fall of 2019, the Ontario Ministry of Education once again released a 'new' health and physical education curriculum. This was the fourth time in four years that Ontario teachers have been asked to teach a different Health & Physical Education curriculum. In this context of intense social and political scrutiny, this study explores how teachers have navigated this shifting terrain.

In 2015, under a Liberal government, the Ontario Ministry of Education launched a new kindergarten through grade 8 Health & Physical Education curriculum. This was the first update since 1998 (an era before smart phones existed, ubiquitous pornography access, and same-sex marriage was legalized). The old curriculum was clearly outdated and misaligned with the needs of today's youth (OPHEA, 2013). The Ministry consulted hundreds of experts and educators and took an evidence-based approach to curriculum development that privileged human rights and the individual and social benefits of providing a comprehensive approach to sexual health education. The revised curriculum addressed a wide range of topics, including: reproductive anatomy and physiology, consent, healthy interpersonal relationships, online safety and sexting, sexual orientation, and gender roles and identity (MOE, 2015).

According to OPHEA (2015) this was "the most significant health promotion intervention the province of Ontario has ever seen. It has the potential to directly reach 2.1 million students attending Ontario's 5,000 publicly funded schools" (p.1). The curricular revisions brought Ontario more in line with sex education in the rest of Canada (OPHEA, 2013), and existing gender and sexual equity policies (Rayside, 2014). The Sex Information and Education Council of Canada hailed it as the most "up-to-date curriculum" in the country (Do, 2015).

However, the revisions rekindled debate on the appropriateness of sexual health education in schools. Opposing parents questioned whether content was 'age-appropriate' and contested instruction that normalized same-sex relationships and diverse gender identities. Other concerns were based on misinformation and rumors about the content (Segan, 2015). Despite over 90% of parents in Ontario being supportive of an update, loud protests from a vocal minority were persistent and garnered considerable media attention (Editor, 2015; McKay et al., 2014). The curriculum became an election issue. When a Conservative government was elected in late spring of 2018, one of its first objectives was to recall the 2015 curriculum and implement an interim one (that largely reverted back to the 1998 version). To admonish and control teachers who opposed this policy, Premier Doug Ford created a provincial "snitch line" that parents could call to complain about any teacher who did not follow his government's directive (see, for example, Teotonio 2018; 2019).

In the fall of 2019, after another round of consultations, a "new" curriculum was released—despite a year of protest, lawsuits, and more consultation, this updated curriculum is very similar to the 2015 curriculum the Conservative government had promised to replace. What is new in this iteration is a requirement that all school boards have a policy in place detailing how parents could exempt their children from various aspects of the curriculum.

Teachers are at the front lines of sexual health education. In the midst of these public controversies, they are charged with implementing a revolving door of 'new' curricula. It was during this period, and on this shifting terrain, that we reached out to 34 experienced health and physical education teachers across Ontario. We asked them to reflect on teaching sexual health education and make recommendations for improving the roll-out of future updates.



We invited Health and Physical Education teachers who had taught both the pre-2015 curriculum and the 2015-2017 curriculum to reflect on their experiences teaching SHE as a “sensitive subject” in the context of their schools and communities. Eligibility criteria for participation included at least five years of experience teaching health and physical education in K-12 Ontario schools.

Each co-investigator took the lead on data collection and analysis efforts in his/her own region: Gilbert (Toronto), Guta (Windsor), Oliver (Kitchener/Waterloo), Gagnon (Ottawa), Sanders (Thunder Bay), and MacEntee (Rural and Remote). A variety of recruitment efforts were employed to reach a broad cross-section of teachers including advertising the study on social media and targeted regional teacher listservs, sending e-mails to health teachers with public email addresses, dropping off hardcopy letters of invitations at schools, calling school offices and principals, and snowball sampling.

Teachers were offered a modest honorarium (\$50 gift certificate). All interviewees were informed of their rights as research participants and asked to review and sign informed consent forms. Confidential interviews lasted between 30-120 minutes. In total, we interviewed 34 teachers from 17 different school boards - including public school boards, independent First Nations boards, Catholic boards, and French boards. They came from small (18%), medium (32%), large (26%) and metro urban areas (24%). Teachers who participated in our study ranged in age from 31-55, with an average age of 40. Nearly half (43%) of the sample had been teaching between 5-10 years; 39% for 10-19 years and 18% for 20+ years. Across the sample, teachers had experience teaching all grades from Kindergarten to 12th grade. Most of our sample (70%) identified as female, 97% as heterosexual and 88% identified as white. The majority (70%) of the interviews were conducted in person; 30% were over the phone. All names attributed to quotations in this report are pseudonyms.

**TABLE 1: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

		n (avg)	Percent
<b>Age</b>	Average, Range	40 (31-55)	
<b>Gender</b>	Male	10	30
	Female	24	70
<b>Sexuality</b>	Heterosexual	33	97
	2SLGTBQ+*	1	3
<b>Race</b>	White	30	88
	Racialized or Indigenous	3	9
	Did not reply	1	3
<b>School Boards</b>	English Public	24	71
	English Catholic	6	18
	Independent/ First Nation	3	9
	French Catholic	1	3
<b>Years teaching</b>	5-10	14	43
	10-19	13	39
	20+	6	18
<b>Grades taught**</b>	Kindergarten-3	11	12
	Grades 4-5	15	26
	Grades 6-8	20	24
	Grades 9-12	8	26
<b>Region</b>	Metro (500 plus)	8	24
	Large (200-500+ K)	9	26
	Medium 100-200K	11	32
	Small (less than 100K)	6	18
<b>Interview Method</b>	In person	24	70
	Over phone	10	30

\* 2SLGTBQ+ is an acronym that stands for 2-spirited, lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, queer and questioning. 2-spirited is an identity marker adopted by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender or spiritual identity as encompassing both a masculine and a feminine spirit.

\*\* Several teachers taught multiple grades.

## EDUCATORS ENJOY TEACHING SEX-ED

*“It’s one of my favourite things to teach just because they genuinely want to know.” (MONICA)*


For the most part, the educators in our sample enjoyed teaching the sexual health and development curriculum (both pre and post the 2015 updates). Teachers recognized some of their students’ discomfort with the topics of sex and gender, but they also observed their students as engaged and motivated to learn in the sex education classroom. Justin shared: “it’s like once the doors open, it’s actually great conversations.”


Participants particularly enjoyed covering topics such as: healthy relationships, sexually transmitted infections (STI), and consent. They talked enthusiastically, and at length, about the types of questions and comments that their students regularly asked them. They shared their excitement around having meaningful conversations with students. As Heather noted: “The kids love it. I think the kids just love learning it all.”

Participants enjoyed providing students with important information that is relevant to their lives. They understood sex education as a time to unpack and discuss the different and sometimes conflicting information that students receive from peers, family, and the media about sex, sexuality, and gender. Sex education, they note, helps ensure that all students have access to vital information about their bodies. This information is necessary for students to safely navigate their everyday lives. Moreover, the information that the curriculum provides can be immediately applied. Many felt that sharing information about substance use, STIs, pregnancy, hygiene, and healthy relationships would support young people in making decisions that would help them grow up to live happier or healthier lives. Most participants reported working hard to have schools be a safe and inclusive space to ensure that students have access to reliable information.

### Reasons Sex-Ed is Fun to Teach

 **Sharing “the right” information**

 **Students are excited to learn about the topic**

 **The topics are relevant to students’ lives**

### Sample Quotes from Health Educators

*I want them to be well informed. I don’t want them to hear it from their peers first, I want them to have the right information. (CECILE)*

*The kids want to know stuff. They’re really, really curious, obviously. And they’re embarrassed by stuff. They’re awkward, but they’re all ears, right? You know, they’re like now we get to do some real stuff! (CRYSTAL)*

*It kind of ties in with a lot of what these guys are going through and developing a sense of self and how does my sense of self relate to other people. (LUKE)*

## REFLECTIONS ON THE CURRICULUM CONTENT

*"I think the [old] sex ed curriculum is ... just outdated. It's not relevant to today's teenager."* (SCOTT REFLECTING ON THE PRE-2015 CURRICULUM)

The teachers who participated in our study were overwhelmingly in favour of the 2015 curriculum update. Most felt that the old curriculum was outdated and complained that it did not cover many topics they felt were important to talk about in modern classroom contexts. Some had already been delivering content about inclusion and sexual diversity, sexting and cyberbullying for years. However,

many felt the 2015 curriculum empowered and supported their ability to cover this material with greater depth and confidence. When asked about how they felt about particular topics in the 2015 curriculum—including sexuality and gender identities and consent—most participants were extremely positive about having the freedom and support to talk about 'the real' issues facing their students. Several gave concrete examples of the topics they appreciated.

### New Topics



#### Masturbation

### Reflections on teaching this material

*We also talk about it for when puberty happens, it's something where, you know, it's a way of exploring your body. How does it work? What do I like? How does it make me feel? ... there's nothing wrong with doing it if you choose to do it. And there's nothing wrong if you don't choose to do it.* (DANIEL)



#### Sexting

*We talk about sexting and you know, why in a relationship where two people maybe trust each other and they find that sexually stimulating or arousing, whatever it is, why that might occur... But the reality of it is, you need to have consent attached to each and every single interaction.* (AMIRA)



#### Bullying

*I think bullying has always been there, but I think we just have more avenues to speak of it in the current curriculum. Whether that be bullying of people for their mental health or wellness, or bullying for people because of how they identify as a person. So I mean, I think the changes to the current [curriculum] have, in my opinion, only been positive, and I think validates for a lot of students what they're feeling.* (DANIEL)



#### Sexual orientation and gender diversity

*The whole language around like, the LGBTQ ... So, that part is really important because then it becomes part of our normal everyday language. And I thought that was really important.* (CRYSTAL)



#### Consent

*A lot of curriculum in the sex-ed is about healthy relationships, it's not all about (laughs) just the physical part of it, right... In grade 1, it's about this is your body and no one has the right to touch it, and up until grade 6 where we're talking about same thing, you're in a relationship with a friend or whoever and they're not treating you well. ... It's so necessary. ...It's just so important...* (LILA)

There was unanimous and strong support around the inclusion of more explicit discussions of consent. Given our current social and political climate, teachers felt that these conversations needed to start early and be reinforced through each grade. Several also commented that they appreciated the curricular scaffolding and how the topic of consent was threaded throughout:

*“I think the biggest thing that I’m pleased about, that I like ...is consistency through consent...So the idea of consent starting from early years, kindergarten ...So just being able to express and understand feelings that say I like this, I don’t like that. ... And then grade 1 it kind of morphs into the idea of saying no, right? And then it begins into the idea of play and how do you negotiate play and what you’re comfortable with? And just, it builds and builds and builds as it goes through each grade and personally I think that’s fantastic because you are helping kids to assert themselves. But also, you’re constantly having that conversation so that as they get older, the message really doesn’t change, it’s just the context within which it is that changes. So, yay for that.” (ADRIAN)*

Some of the changes that teachers really appreciated included the detailed prompts. At the end of each topic in the 2015 curriculum, teachers were provided with sample prompts that could be used to answer student questions or initiate conversations about sexual health topics. These prompts were felt to be very helpful. As Alex noted: “I think the biggest help is it’s very specific compared to the old curriculum, which did leave a lot of room for interpretation. So the new [2015] curriculum is very helpful because these are the exact learning goals we want the students to really walk away with instead of just the very broad idea of it.” Likewise, Margot underscored: “the teacher prompts are good at being general but focused. So I really like them.” For many, this specificity felt supportive and gave them greater latitude to be direct in their classroom. The prompts provide detail around “sensitive” topics that they may have feared broaching in the past.

Teachers also highlighted the focus on equity, skill-building, and decision-making as strengths of the 2015 curriculum. In addition, many teachers appreciated moving content to younger ages: “And as practitioners we thought that that was beneficial because we believed that kids were accessing information and just having questions at an earlier age. Physiologically they’re going through changes, some of them it’s happening earlier as well.” (Adrian)

One area that several teachers identified was missing from the 2015 update was an explicit conversation about pornography. Given the near ubiquity of access through digital technology (Steeves, 2014a) and high rates of teen pornography use (Steeves, 2014b), many teachers

questioned why critical discussions around pornography use were not included in the curriculum:

*“They’re going to be accessing pornography so why not give them the information that they need to make the best choices for them as possible? The same as we would with drugs and alcohol. Why wouldn’t we do it with pornography?” (AMIRA)*

This gap appears to have been addressed somewhat in the 2019 revisions.

## DISSATISFACTION WITH ROLL OUT

*“They did a very poor job in rolling it out. I think they did an excellent job in what we have to teach and what we should be teaching, I’m not questioning that. I am questioning how they did it.” (NOAH)*

While teachers were pleased with the content of the curriculum, they were largely disappointed with the way the Ministry rolled out the 2015 curriculum (and subsequent iterations). There was a general sense that the curriculum document was released without explanation or a clear communications strategy. Teachers talked about how the media contributed to misinformation circulating in communities and were disappointed that the Ministry didn’t seem to clarify its objectives in a more public and transparent manner. Several teachers suggested that a series of Town Halls across the province would have helped to alleviate parents’ and communities’ concerns about the curriculum’s content. Likewise, some teachers questioned the utility of calling the curriculum “sex ed” rather than healthy living. They underscored that a comprehensive curriculum goes beyond the discussion of sex or reproduction to teach students about, for example, the importance of good communication and respect for self and others.

In terms of training, some teachers felt that they were unprepared to teach the new elements of the curriculum. The timing of the roll out meant that teachers had very little time to review the curriculum before they were expected to teach it. They discussed the lack of coordination between the Ministry, school boards, and individual schools. Teachers felt that the responsibility for training often fell to individual teachers. They stressed the importance of the Ministry providing adequate training and professional development, especially when rolling out an updated curriculum. Teachers sensed that there was confusion around who should fund and deliver training, which led to uneven access to training sessions across school boards in Ontario. Similarly, they wished that there had been more training and preparation for teachers before the curriculum was released or before they were expected to implement it in their classrooms.



## Roll out issues



**Lack of clear communications strategy at the Ministry level**



**Responsibility for training and resourcing**



**Need for advance preparation**

## Reflections on the roll out

*This curriculum should have been rolled out better from a communications perspective because people decided what it was about without ever having read it. (MARGOT)*

*But there should have been more training on the ministry level and not leaving it up to the school boards or the schools themselves to take on the training. That budgeting should have come from the ministry so at least the first round of teachers were comfortable or knowledgeable as possible. (MELISSA)*

*I don't know if the roll out was intended this way, but it seems almost like the roll out came and it was like, "Ok we're doing this now." There wasn't a build-up. It was just like, "Boom! Ok you do this now." ... there wasn't enough preparedness. (ADAM)*

## A LACK OF RESOURCES

*"I just think they need a little bit more resources to help us as teachers, right? So we're not just searching it for ourselves." (NIKITA)*

While participants acknowledged that resources are always a problem for teachers and schools, they felt that when the curriculum was released it focused more on guidelines than on providing practical resources for teachers. According to teachers, this is particularly problematic considering the cultural diversity of Ontario. They identified two specific aspects where additional resources would be beneficial to their teaching: culturally sensitive content and material resources for class lessons.

Requests for culturally sensitive resources emphasized the need for content that would address the needs of the diverse student body. For instance, Heather was very concerned about her lack of expertise related to Indigenous teachings about sex and sexuality: "The other thing that I would like to see is some information about different cultures and religions ...And I find the same thing with Indigenous practice, too, right? ...What would the perspective be of First Nations? I'm not sure. In a lot of cases, again, I don't find that there's necessarily that many resources."

Regarding material resources, several teachers emphasized the importance of videos and websites as resources, many of which are accessible online at low or no cost. The problem for many teachers was that it takes time to locate and vet online materials, which is why having them provided would not only be helpful and time saving, but also standardize resources. Ideally, these materials would in-

clude a range of pedagogical activities including "teaching games for understanding." Developing original resources (and not simply relying on existing online content) specifically for teaching sex education was also noted:

*"I'm not talking about an hour-long video so some teachers can just mail it in by pressing play. Just give us like 15-20 minute snippets talking about certain things. Or even things that have questions that can follow along, things that can help us with the stuff we're doing." (JAY)*

Finally, some teachers cited a need for more resources in French and other languages. Interviewees noted that while many materials exist in English, and that access to French language materials was improving, that there was still need for materials in French. Teachers noted that they end up translating materials themselves, which can take away from the time they would otherwise spend on lesson planning. They further added that, French language materials, like other materials, need to be regularly reviewed and updated following initial development. Further to this point, resources for students who speak English as a second language, are sorely lacking:

*"So that's another thing is resources available in different languages... it's not a learning disability, it's a language barrier and that's an easy fix... Like, just because they don't speak English doesn't mean they don't have questions about drugs or their mental health or sex." (AMIRA)*

## ROLES OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS, COMMUNITY AND PARENTS

*“What if a student asks this? I say, and that is a fine question. I tell students that is a topic that if you do need an answer for, I think your parents are best to talk to about that. We are focusing on this right now.” (ALEX)*

We asked the teachers to comment on what they felt were the appropriate roles and responsibilities of teachers and schools with regard to the sex education curriculum. We asked them to speak to roles and responsibilities in educating students, as well as in educating parents and families of students. Overall, teachers felt that schools play a key role in teaching sexual health, as laid out in the curriculum. They saw this not only as their specific job, but also their role as educators of society. For example:

*“We are professionals and I think that at the end of the day we have to realize that ... these are what some might consider tough conversations but they still have to be had and, if they’re not going to be had at home, then that’s our responsibility to pull that forward.” (LILA)*

Teachers felt that in addition to educating students, schools also had a role to play in sharing sex education with parents and the broader community. They also felt that they could access support from their local communities. For example, one respondent reached out to a local religious figure:

*“The Imam and I have spoken, I’ve presented all of my, you know, ideas, thoughts, lessons, resources that I use. He’s been very open with me about here’s what people are going to be concerned about, but please know that we support what you’re doing in the classroom. And he’ll even tie that into some of his own services that he does, which is fantastic.” (AMIRA)*



Some teachers noted that schools are responsible for sticking to the curriculum, teaching what is required and not going beyond what is required. Doing so, according to some participants, would help provide some consistency throughout the province. It would also alleviate some parental concerns that teachers are teaching extreme content to their children.

Parents were key figures in participants’ experiences of teaching sexual health. Most teachers felt that schools have a responsibility to keep parents informed about the sex education curriculum and, when appropriate, involve parents in the process; this included respecting parents’ rights to opt out of sex education on behalf of their child. Keeping parents informed was framed as a communication strategy as much as an educational responsibility. Communications with parents may involve sending home letters notifying parents about the schedule and content of sex education or preparing follow-up questions that parents can ask their children about what they learned in sex-ed, or providing information about how to clarify any misunderstandings. For example, teachers noted that this strategy was effective in cases when a child “thought that the penis diagram was pornography” and reported this misunderstanding back to their parents. Further, regular communications enable teachers/schools to justify the content and to reassure parents about the specific topics covered for each grade.

## THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING IN A HIGHLY SURVEILLED ENVIRONMENT

*“It’s knowing how far to go... in a way that’s age-appropriate, developmentally appropriate... and sometimes it’s hard using your professional discretion to decide OK, is this something that is worth talking about.” (ADRIAN)*

Many teachers felt some trepidation about delivering this curriculum. They described teaching—with a pervasive sense of being surveilled by students, parents, and administrators. They expressed concerns about delivering the curriculum in an effective manner while balancing the educational needs of diverse students (e.g., cultural, developmental, and experiential), recognizing some students might be uncomfortable discussing these issues in a mixed or group setting, and feared offending students:

*“So you have to be careful when we’re teaching some of that stuff because it’s ... you don’t want to say “oh my god, don’t have a baby when you’re a teenager. It’s more like, if you have a baby when you’re a teenager, things are going to be very difficult.” (JUSTIN)*

Teachers strived to meet the needs of diverse students while not “overstepping” (e.g., sharing too much personal information) or deviating from the curriculum. One teacher described wanting to be open and flexible but also setting ground rules with their class:

*“I tell them that cause I don’t have a lot of boundaries in terms of these things, that’s why nothing you’re going to say is going to shock me. But I do want to make sure that we’re clear that, you know, there’s certain things that professionally, I should not be talking to you because that’s what the Board says, that’s what the, you know, Ontario curriculum says.”* (SARAH)

Teachers were sympathetic to parents’ concerns about the appropriateness of what their children were learning, but felt these fears were generally unfounded:

*“The things they were saying we were going to do, I’m like, um, no. Definitely not happening in a classroom setting. Let’s all give our heads a shake. But that’s the thing about fear, right? That as soon as you plant that seed, people will buy into that. And especially if they’re already a little bit fearful, they don’t necessarily understand.”* (HEATHER)

Teachers had their own fears about parents’ potential reactions to their delivery of the curriculum based on how students were relating to the curriculum and what was said in the classroom:

*“[T]here’s so many like, horror stories of teachers that have taught things and then the kids go home and say this, and their parents are like, well, you shouldn’t have talked about that.”* (CANDICE)

*“[Y]ou’re always kind of questioning and always worrying about how to convey it properly, and if the kids are going to go home and be like oh, the teacher said this today and she said that you could do this or do that kind of thing.”* (KATIE)

Teachers described “walking the line” and “treading carefully” when discussing sensitive topics out of fear of being characterized as “inappropriate,” and potential backlash from parents and administrators. Teachers were concerned about how teaching sex education could affect their employment prospects and future careers:

*“There are certain things where like around certain topics, where I know...just to tread very carefully ... [Teachers] really need to know what they can and cannot answer and what they should and should not answer and how they should answer.”* (MICHAEL)

*“I have to be very careful about what I say. But the curriculum, I pretty much follow those guidelines so that if I ever get reprimanded...I’m following exactly what they’ve given me.”* (CECILE)

Although participants shared stories about their colleagues receiving complaints from parents and challenges with administrators, it is notable that none that participated in our study had experienced this for themselves. A small handful of such interactions has contributed to a climate in which sex-ed teachers feel they are being surveilled.

## TEACHING THE DIVERSE STUDENT BODY

*“We talk about Judaism and we talk about Muslim people, we talk about First Nations people. It’s not isolated, it’s much more diverse and inclusive. Because we are, because it’s just not Jack and Mary anymore.”* (MARGOT)

One of the challenges that teachers frequently raised was their ability to attend to diversity and inclusion in meaningful ways. At times, teachers struggled with how to navigate supporting 2SLGTBQ+ students, while at the same time attending to students’ religious and cultural beliefs. Some of those beliefs aligned well with the curriculum, while others seemed at odds with it. For instance, Nikita talked about how difficult it was to navigate these different belief systems:

*“Cause we have kids of all different nationalities and all different religions and all different cultural backgrounds that, you know, certain things are not acceptable. Like, talking about gender identity is not a topic, right? Like, it doesn’t come up.”* (NIKITA)

Many teachers were appreciative of the inclusion 2SLGTBQ+ content when they were supporting trans and non-binary students in their schools. The curriculum provided them with space and language to discuss the importance of inclusion and diversity across the spectrum of gender and sexuality:

*“I don’t think even a few years ago, without a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) and without links to transgender, I don’t think this same kind of story would’ve worked out. And I think this kid, because we are now talking about all these things and we’re on board with everything, I think this student has had quite a turning point or a very supportive atmosphere here.”* (LUKE)

Several participants were especially concerned with accommodating the needs of Muslim students and their families, and balancing parents' decisions to withdraw their children from sexuality education while also having to evaluate students on their participation in the health curriculum.

*"I've got a couple of Muslim students in my class and they are not to be in the classroom during the times that we talk about sexual health and relationships due to religious reasons. So, that's often a struggle and because you have to report on it for their report card, you have to report incomplete because of those reasons".* (DONNA)

Importantly, teachers also questioned why they were left to make these often-sensitive decisions about how to adapt the curriculum for particular communities. One teacher talked about how the curriculum document fails to offer any guidance in terms of teaching in culturally and sexually diverse classrooms. Anticipating this challenge before the curriculum was launched and providing teacher training would have assisted them in navigating classroom diversity:

*"For our school we have a very high immigrant population. [...] Yes, they're in Canada but they also have specific values that they feel strongly about. How are we going to make them feel welcome and accepted but also teach what our Ontario curriculum is asking us to teach and what we feel that we should be teaching? [...] That was a disconnect [in the curriculum], and not thought about enough. [...] I feel like that is a gap that could have been closed earlier without the teachers needing to close it."* (CAROL)

Some teachers also questioned how their own positions of privilege might impact on their students' learning. Being attentive to their own social locations and remaining self-reflexive was one strategy for trying to mediate their own potential assumptions and biases:

*"Sometimes I find it hard just to balance the different— just to make sure that my own biases are not coming across. And my own set of cultural beliefs. Like, I'm white, heterosexual female, and so sometimes I'm like, am I being fair and true to people that are not white, heterosexual? I try to be."* (HEATHER)



## CAVEATS AND LIMITATIONS

This was a small qualitative study meant to gather a diversity of teacher experiences. Results may not be generalizable to the entire teacher population of Ontario, however they do echo results of other similar studies (see: Bialystok, 2019). It is possible that those who volunteered to participate may enjoy teaching sex education more than those who declined. It is also possible that in climates where teachers are even more highly regulated and surveilled, some may not have felt safe participating. Teachers' perceptions and experiences teaching sexual health education are also shaped as much by their contexts (classrooms and communities) as by the curriculum they are tasked with teaching. Nevertheless, we heard from a broad range of teachers about their experiences.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE CURRICULAR REVISIONS AND ROLL OUT

The current status of Ontario's sex education curriculum has shifted once again. On August 21, 2019 - less than two weeks before the start of the new school year - the Progressive Conservative Government released yet another version of the sex education curriculum. This curriculum comes from another round of community consultation with parents and other community stakeholders. With this (and future) roll outs expected, the reflections and responses of the teachers who participated in this study lead to several key recommendations about how best to revise and roll out future curricular updates. These recommendations are both practical and achievable.

**Foster a culture of learning and support for teachers and students.** Open, trusting lines of communication are necessary for ongoing conversations between teachers, parents, administrators and school boards to be constructive. The punitive surveillance culture (as epitomized by the recent "snitch line") perpetuates a culture of fear and retribution that does little to improve the mental health and well-being of teachers, morale or educational outcomes for learners.

**Provide teachers with adequate time, training and resources (especially audiovisual media) to properly implement curriculum.** Teachers require training in order to become familiar and adept at navigating curricular changes. This includes making pedagogical content and resources (especially audiovisual media) available that reflects the diversity of the Ontario student body. These resources should be made available in English, French and Indigenous languages.

**Incrementally modify the curriculum on a regular basis to ensure that it is relevant and responsive to the changing realities of Ontario students.** Predictable updates, for example at five-year intervals, would prevent the curriculum from being drastically out of date. Regular revisions would focus on ensuring the curriculum documents reflect current trends and demographics across the province; more-over annual changes present their own set of challenges. Updates should be released no later than May for September implementation. Teachers need time to familiarize themselves with curricular revision. When rolling out new curriculum, some participants suggested staggering the rollout. Starting with enacting revisions in the early grades and then moving forward, year-by-year, with updates will ensure that no child misses crucial information entirely.

**Include diverse stakeholders in future consultations to ensure that the curriculum meets the various needs of students and their communities.** The Ontario population is heterogeneous. Consultations in curricular revisions are key to ensuring that updates and changes can accommodate diverse communities. Consultation processes should be transparent and involve parents and community stakeholders, teachers, and school administration. Consultation should also include experts in the fields of education, sexual and reproductive health, curriculum development and pedagogy, as well as representatives from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health. Diverse youth constituents should also be central to this process.

**Get ahead of backlash with good public relations.** After the 2015 revisions, teachers were left to deal with parent and community backlash. Clear communication about what is contained within curricular revisions, as well as support and funding for town halls and other community outreach strategies will also likely aid in ensuring that parents are informed about what their children will be learning.

**Create policies, templates and strategies for accommodating students who are not participating in sex education classes.** When parents do not want their children to receive the sexual health education curriculum, it often falls on the teacher to develop an alternative educational plan for these students. The Ministry should clarify which parts of the curriculum parents should be allowed to opt their children out of. Further, alternative accommodations for those students should be articulated clearly.

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