

Groups call for updated health, sex-ed curriculum

By Matthew Pearson
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Advocates hope incoming premier Kathleen Wynne will keep her promise to implement an updated health and physical education curriculum, parts of which were scrapped amid controversy three years ago.

Speaking to reporters the morning after becoming Ontario's new Liberal leader, Wynne - a former education minister - said the outdated curriculum must be replaced.

"We are going to evolve the physical education and health curriculum. That is what we have done for decades in the province, and we will continue to do that," she said.

Wynne said the provincial government would consult parents and education stakeholders on the revised curriculum to ease the concerns some parents raised in 2010, when a small number of outspoken critics and sensationalized media coverage prompted McGuinty to park a curriculum that took two years to develop.

The outgoing premier and two consecutive education ministers have made the same pledge to consult parents in a timely manner to address concerns that have apparently stood in the way of releasing the revised curriculum, but no such meetings have been held.

The ministry of education said this week that none is scheduled.

"Three years afterwards is not a timely process," said Chris Markham, the executive director of the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (OPHEA).

According to Markham, 10 per cent of the revised elementary school curriculum - the components that address human development and sexual health - are gathering dust on a shelf at Queen's Park.

In their place, teachers use the 1998 curriculum.

Meanwhile, the revised curriculum for high school students has never seen the light of day, so students are taught material introduced in 1999 - years before cyber-bullying, sexting and Facebook were part of high school life.

OPHEA's push to implement the revised curriculum is backed by dozens of education and health organizations, including teachers' unions, children's hospitals, Public Health Ontario, the Council of Directors of Education and the Ontario Public School Boards' Association.

But Markham says advocates are treading carefully because of what happened in 2010.

He thinks it will be different this time because "of the type of person (Wynne) is," he said, taking pains to not make this about her sexuality.

"I think it has nothing to do with the fact that she's a lesbian," he said.

But the website of a Toronto-based anti-abortion news site already has a blaring headline that reads, "Ontario's new lesbian Premier promises to bring back explicit lower grades sex-ed curriculum."

Markham says students will be the ultimate losers if the revised curriculum continues to gather dust.

OPHEA says the lack of up-to-date material forces children to find the information they need elsewhere and often forces school boards to turn to resources developed in other provinces to augment what's included in Ontario's outdated curriculum.

"How embarrassing is it for Ontario as a leading province that teachers need to go outside of the province to get up-to-date resources?," he asked.

To fill the void created by outdated material, numerous school boards, including Ottawa's Catholic board, uses a mental health curriculum developed in Nova Scotia.

It includes units on stigma, seeking help and finding support, and focuses on the importance of positive mental health, explained Denise Andre, the board's deputy director of education.

The Catholic board has also partnered with Crime Prevention Ottawa to train teachers to deliver the Fourth R program, which focuses on healthy relationships and includes information about personal safety, substance use, and growth and sexuality.

The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board has also worked with community partners to provide teachers with updated material about mental health and anxiety issues.

Progressive Conservative education critic Lisa MacLeod said the revised curriculum was "deemed controversial by moms and dads" and suggested there are other education issues Wynne should be more focused on, such as the return of extracurricular activities to English public schools.

"I haven't heard an outcry that that needs to be updated," she said.

Peter Jon Mitchell, a senior researcher at the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, said he's not surprised the revised curriculum might resurface under a new premier. But, he said, he still hopes government will consult with parents.

"No parent wants their kid to be ignorant about sex, but some are concerned about when material about love, sex and relationships is presented," he said.

A number of Canadian studies have found the vast majority of parents believe sexual health education should be taught in school.

Studies have also found such programs don't increase the frequency of sexual behaviour and, in fact, often delay or decrease sexual activity.