

Pink Shirt Day

Mr. Speaker, no one in the Northwest Territories, especially our children and youth, should ever have to endure bullying. Our schools and communities must be safe spaces for all students and the responsibility to ensure this happens is one we all share. I am pleased to announce today, on Pink Shirt Day, the formal release of the Guidelines for Ensuring LGBTQ2S+ Equity, Safety and Inclusion in Northwest Territories Schools.

In 2007, Nova Scotia teenagers David Shepherd and Travis Price organized a protest after a male grade 9 student in their school was harassed for wearing a pink shirt. The next morning, these two youth brought pink shirts to hand out to all the male students. Their school was full of kids in pink that day. Thirteen years later, Pink Shirt Day has become a global call to action as schools and workplaces around the world are flooded with pink in solidarity against bullying. The national theme for 2020 is Lift Each Other Up, and I am happy to see so much pink around the House today, as we stand together on Pink Shirt Day.

Across the Northwest Territories, we have worked with our education and community partners to combat bullying. As I am sure all Members of this House are aware, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, and Two-Spirit youth, or LGBTQ2S+, experience greater discrimination compared to their heterosexual and cis-gender peers. They have higher instances of mental health issues, substance abuse, lack of school attendance, violence, and suicide.

The Department of Education, Culture, and Employment is aware of the unique challenges that LGBTQ2S+ students face in school, at home, and in their community. Research shows that having strong anti-bullying policies and guidelines result in lower levels of bullying victimization, greater school safety, and less social aggression. As well, students in schools that run Genders and Sexualities Alliances, or GSAs, are at a lower threat for risky behaviours, like alcohol and substance use. They also report increased psychological well-

being and function.

Mr. Speaker, the department is committed to supporting diversity among school staff, students and families. As a part of Education Renewal and Innovation, the Guidelines for Ensuring LGBTQ2S+ Equity, Safety and Inclusion align with the Safe Schools Regulations, the Territorial Schools Code of Conduct, the Northwest Territories Human Rights Act and the Government of the Northwest Territories Harassment Free and Respectful Workplace Policy. There are 13 promising practices that can be integrated into any school.

These practices are evidence-based, tangible calls to action, through collaboration with the Rainbow Coalition of Yellowknife, FOXY, and SMASH, and with feedback from our education partners.

Some of the most valuable insight in the Guidelines came from youth who attended the first Rainbow Youth Conference in 2017. LGBTQ2S+ and ally students across the North developed music, visual art, spoken word poetry, and videos featuring messages of inclusion and support. The students shared their ideas on what needs to happen to ensure their schools are respectful, caring and safe for everyone.

We will be hosting the second Rainbow Youth Conference this spring, and sharing the new Guidelines with the students. Community and Territorial leaders will also have the opportunity to hear their stories at the Lunch with Leaders; I hope you all attend. I truly hope the students see themselves in the work and know that their input has helped break down barriers to understanding.

Mr. Speaker, Northwest Territories schools should be safe and caring environments for the entire school community. With the release of the Guidelines, the continued education and wellness partnerships, and most of all, the individuals and groups paving the way for inclusion and equity, I believe our schools can be the places of change where we respect each other's differences, and recognize our similarities.

Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.