

Health and Wellness Enhancements in Schools

Mr. Speaker, a high-quality education system is one that ensures that student wellness and the development of a positive sense of identity are promoted and embedded in school experiences, programming and environment.

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment values diversity in our school communities. We recognize the unique challenges experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and two-spirited or LGBTQ2S+ people – including being possible targets for discrimination and bullying.

In support of these students, staff, and families, the Department, as part of its Safe and Caring Schools model, has developed *Guidelines for Ensuring LGBTQ2S+ Safety and Inclusion* in Northwest Territories schools.

Mr. Speaker, according to studies from Canada, the United States and New Zealand, LGBTQ2S+ youth are three to four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. Those who have been rejected by their families are more than eight times more likely. The rates of LGBTQ2S+ youth reporting harassment, in general, ranges between 57 and 92 per cent.

These rates are unacceptable. We have a duty to do everything we can to provide a safe environment and defend the well-being of these students, so that experiences during their formative years help them develop a positive sense of identity.

The new *Guidelines* provide educators in the NWT with 13 promising practices that can be incorporated into school environments of every size. These practices are evidence-based, tangible calls to action developed in collaboration with members of the Rainbow Coalition of Yellowknife and the youth sexual health programs, Fostering Open eXpression among Youth and Strength, Masculinities, and Sexual Health, better known as FOXY and SMASH. The work was also guided by feedback from youth who attended the inaugural NWT Youth Rainbow Conference held in March 2017 and feedback from Board and Education Council

superintendents. All agree these are necessary guidelines that will be welcome when they are introduced in schools in September 2019.

In addition to the guidelines, planning is underway for the second NWT Youth Rainbow Conference in the upcoming school year. We will also be supporting NWT participation in Canada's second annual survey to measure discrimination toward LGBTQ2S+ students. These statistics will inform future development in this area.

Mr. Speaker, the LGBTQ2S+ *Guidelines* are a part of the Education Renewal initiative and the Safe Schools Regulations that require every school to have a Safe School Plan. Safe school planning is more than having procedures for emergency evacuations and lockdowns; it includes protecting our school communities with policies in place on bullying and discrimination.

We have also developed a new Health and Wellness curriculum that is being integrated into Grades 4 to 9. We are changing our focus from simply delivering health information to providing students with the tools, knowledge and ability to gather and evaluate health information themselves. In that way, we are contributing to their well-being, and we are equipping them to contribute to the well-being of their community throughout their lives.

The new curriculum is flexible and gives teachers the opportunity to engage with crucial topics immediately, as they arise, while engaging local expertise and knowledge.

Mr. Speaker, the new LGBTQ2S+ *Guidelines* and the new Health and Wellness curriculum are some of the building blocks of the high-quality education system we all want. They will help ensure our schools are safe places for all students, places where all students can develop a positive sense of identity and skills to improve their physical and mental wellness, today and in the future.

Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.