

# Creating Safe, Caring, and Inclusive Schools for LGBTQ Students: A Guide for School District Leaders



In keeping with law and educational policy, administrators, teachers, counsellors, students and district-level personnel have legal, ethical, and professional responsibilities to ensure that all students, including those who are or are perceived as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified and queer (LGBTQ) are provided with safe, caring and inclusive learning environments that respect and affirm their individual identities and experiences.

## A suggested process

**Create and specify clear policies and rules of conduct** that expressly protect students and teachers on the basis of their actual or perceived sexual orientation<sup>i</sup> and/or gender identity<sup>ii</sup>. These policies should include specific language that explicitly prohibits homophobic<sup>iii</sup> language and behaviour. Specify these policies and codes of conduct in documents, speeches, and at orientation sessions that are held with students and school and district level personnel. Include mention of the activities that are considered to violate these policies and constitute unacceptable behaviour (e.g., using the words *fag*, *gay*, or *dyke* in a negative and demeaning way). Outline the procedures for reporting inappropriate behaviour and the consequences for those who commit homophobic verbal, physical or emotional assaults.

**Assess the existing school climate** by performing a school climate survey<sup>iv</sup> about LGBTQ issues. Use the information gathered from surveys to develop strategies to reduce homophobic and heterosexist<sup>v</sup> behaviours within your school.

**Adapt curriculum** by using educational materials that enhance the visibility and understanding of different cultural, ethnic and sexual minorities. Use teachable moments as they arise to discuss stereotypes, discrimination and prejudice towards visible and invisible (e.g., LGBTQ) minorities.

**Provide staff training** to give educators the knowledge and skills to respond immediately and appropriately to homophobic language and behaviour. Training should model age-appropriate ways to intervene in harassment and ought to clearly outline how to accurately report and address homophobic incidents in ways that provide appropriate assistance to the victim and the offender.

**Provide workshops** and information sessions for school administrators, teachers, counsellors, parents and community members that teach the importance of using inclusive language and the value of setting positive examples that affirm and embrace differing sexual orientations and gender identities within the school, home and community. Safe, caring and inclusive environments that are designed to embrace, affirm and protect *all* students and *all* teachers are the responsibility of everyone.

***Involve community partners***, such as local LGBTQ youth and community agencies, school resource officers and health care professionals as important educational resources. These community partnerships can help develop knowledgeable, respectful and inclusive school climates in which diversity and difference are affirmed.

***Support student human rights groups*** and peer education projects that promote appreciation and respect for LGBTQ persons. Become a faculty advisor for the creation of a gay–straight student alliance<sup>vi</sup> (GSA) in your school. Celebrate National Coming Out Day on October 11. Organize information bulletin boards or displays that raise the visibility and awareness of LGBTQ students and their issues. Network with existing student groups and programs to include the voices and experiences of LGBTQ youth.

## **Important Policies and Legislation**

The *Alberta School Act*, the *ATA Professional Code of Conduct*, the *Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities for Teachers*, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Criminal Code of Canada* and the *Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act* all serve as important policies and legislation that reflect the need for Alberta teachers to teach in a manner that is inclusive and respectful of students' and teachers' differing sexual orientations and gender identities. These documents serve as important guidelines that reflect the legal, professional and ethical responsibilities of teachers to create safe, caring and inclusive school environments for LGBTQ students and staff.

### **1. The Alberta School Act Section 45(8)**

[www.qp.gov.ab.ca/catalogue](http://www.qp.gov.ab.ca/catalogue)

A board shall ensure that each student enrolled in a school operated by the board is provided with a safe and caring environment that fosters and maintains respectful and responsible behaviors.

In the context of education, courts have held that publicly funded schools, school boards and the actions/non-actions of school officials are subject to *Charter* scrutiny. As a result, *all* students have the right not to be discriminated against in school settings; this right is often violated with respect to LGBTQ students. Teachers, administrators and school boards have a mandated responsibility to ensure that LGBTQ youth and their families are treated with respect and integrity. Addressing homophobia and heterosexism is vital to the health and safety needs of all students and teachers.

### **2. The ATA Code of Professional Conduct**

[www.teachers.ab.ca/Click on Professional Conduct under Teaching in Alberta](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/Click%20on%20Professional%20Conduct%20under%20Teaching%20in%20Alberta)

(1) The teacher teaches in a manner that respects the dignity and rights of all persons without prejudice as to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, **sexual orientation, gender identity**, physical characteristics, disability, marital status, family status, age, ancestry, place of origin, place of residence, socio-economic background or linguistic background.

### **3. The Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities for Teachers**

[www.teachers.ab.ca/Click on Rights and Responsibilities under Teaching in Alberta](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/Click%20on%20Rights%20and%20Responsibilities%20under%20Teaching%20in%20Alberta)

- (9) Teachers have the right to be protected against discrimination on the basis of prejudice as to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, **sexual orientation, gender identity**, physical characteristics, disability, marital status, family status, age, ancestry, place of origin, place of residence, socioeconomic background or linguistic background and have the responsibility to refrain from practising these forms of discrimination in their professional duties.

#### **4. Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms**

<http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/charter>

Section 15 (1) of the *Charter* states that:

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Although Section 15(1) of the *Charter* does not explicitly make reference to sexual orientation in its equality provisions, the courts have regarded sexual orientation as analogous to the other personal characteristics listed. The inclusion and the accommodation of difference are the spirit of Section 15.

#### **5. Bill C-250 – An Act to amend the Criminal Code (Hate Propaganda)**

<http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/C-46>

*Bill C-250* was passed in the House of Commons in February 2004, amending Section 318 (Hate Propaganda) and Section 319 (Incitement of Hatred) of the *Criminal Code of Canada* to include **sexual orientation** within the listing of identifiable groups against which hate propaganda is deemed a criminal offence.

#### **6. Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act**

[www.albertahumanrights.ab.ca](http://www.albertahumanrights.ab.ca)

Although not expressly stated in the *Act*, as of April 2, 1998, **sexual orientation** is read in to the *Act* by the Supreme Court of Canada as a protected ground of discrimination in Alberta.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is prohibited in areas including publications (s. 3); goods, services, accommodation or facilities customarily available to the public (s. 4); employment (s. 7); or employment applications or advertisements (s. 8).

While s. 11 of the *HRCMA* provides that there is no contravention of the *Act* if the conduct was reasonable or justifiable in the circumstances, where the inherent dignity of all persons in the context of public education is at issue, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation should not be viewed as justifiable.

Teachers, administrators, and school boards have a mandated professional responsibility to ensure that LGBTQ youth are treated with respect and integrity within their classroom and school communities.

## Resources for further inquiry

### Websites

The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities:  
[www.sacsc.ca](http://www.sacsc.ca)

ATA Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity Educational Page on the ATA Website:  
[www.teachers.ab.ca/Click on Diversity, Equity and Human Rights under Issues in Education and Follow the Links](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/Click%20on%20Diversity,%20Equity%20and%20Human%20Rights%20under%20Issues%20in%20Education%20and%20Follow%20the%20Links)

Gay and Lesbian Educators of B.C.:  
[www.galebc.org](http://www.galebc.org)

Equality for Gays & Lesbians Everywhere (EGALE) Canada:  
[www.egale.ca](http://www.egale.ca)

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network  
[www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)

Safe Schools Coalition  
[www.safeschoolscoalition.org](http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org)

### Books

Heron, A., ed., 1993. *Two Teenagers in Twenty: Writings by Gay and Lesbian Youth*. Boston: Alyson Publications.

Jennings, K. 1994. *One Teacher in Ten: Gay and Lesbian Educators Tell their Stories*. Boston: Alyson Publications.

Lipkin, A., 1999. *Understanding Homosexuality, Changing Schools: A Text for Teachers, Counselors and Administrators*. Colorado: Westview Press.

Ryan, C., and D. Futterman, 1998. *Lesbian & Gay Youth: Care & Counselling*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Schneider, M. S., ed., 1997. *Pride & Prejudice: Working with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth*. Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services.

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<sup>i</sup> Sexual orientation is defined as “the fact of being [emotionally and physically] attracted to people of the opposite sex, of one’s own sex, or both sexes” (Canadian Oxford Dictionary, 2000).

<sup>ii</sup> Gender identity is defined as one’s “personal sense of being male or female” (Ryan and Futterman, 1998).

<sup>iii</sup> Homophobia/homophobic behaviour can be defined as the “irrational prejudice, fear, hatred, or negative attitudes towards homosexuals or homosexuality” (Ryan and Futterman, 1998).

<sup>iv</sup> For more information on assessing school climates with regard to LGBTQ issues visit the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network’s (GLSEN) website ([www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)) or obtain a copy of GLSEN’s booklet [A Developmental Model for Assessing, Describing and Improving Schools for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People](#) (2001).

<sup>v</sup> Heterosexism : “Denial, denigration and stigmatization of non-heterosexual identity, behaviour, relationships or community; often expressed in subtler forms than homophobia (i.e. absence of support and neglect rather than overt prejudice)” (Ryan and Futterman, 1998).

<sup>vi</sup> For more information on GSA’s visit the Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia’s (GALE-BC) website [www.galebc.org](http://www.galebc.org).