



## **Position Paper #39**

### **Sex Education in Canada**

#### **Overview**

Sex education in Canada varies greatly by province, and the discussion of when children need to learn about sexual health is always a controversial topic in the media. In 2010, the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada released a document that delves deeply into the statistics and reasons for comprehensive sex education, but not specifics per province.<sup>1</sup> To clarify the lack of consistency across the country, examples are listed below (from 2015), highlighting the two ends of the spectrum regarding age (other provinces fall between the two extremes).<sup>2</sup>

- British Columbia and Manitoba require children to know the proper name for body parts in kindergarten, while PEI and New Brunswick wait until Grade 6.
- Sexual orientation is taught in Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Nova Scotia in Grade 3, but Newfoundland only teaches LGBT awareness in grade 9 (Manitoba has no clear agenda.)
- Information about STIs and prevention are taught in Nova Scotia starting in Grade 5 but New Brunswick avoids the topic until Grade 10.
- Birth Control is taught in Grade 6 in BC and in Grade 9 in Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan.

Nova Scotia teaches STI prevention in Grade 5 but waits until high school for birth control, and some provinces refuse to discuss gender identity and LGBT concerns at all. Even if the topic is mandated for the province, no studies have looked at what teachers are actually telling their students in class. Overall, sex education in Canada is very inconsistent, similar to the lack of consistency to women's reproductive rights in the country, which is likely a reflection of stigma and sexual taboos. Even though the question of abortion would undoubtedly arise in school classrooms, provincial websites often do not indicate whether it is included in birth control discussions, but if so, we don't know whether it is vilified or discussed as a viable option.

This paper provides an overview of each province and territory, with links to their school board policies where applicable. There is no central repository for sexual health curriculums and not all provinces provide a provincial website with their curriculum. The provinces and territories also have differences in how school boards are funded and monitored and how curriculums are mandated.

Most sexual education curriculums in Canada gloss over or avoid abortion entirely. Even those that discuss abortion as an option for unplanned pregnancy do not appear to provide any suggestions of where or how abortions can be obtained, or the different options for abortion. While teachers may

choose to provide more information (e.g., if asked by students), there appears to be no mandate that they present abortion as a legal, safe, and reasonable option for unplanned pregnancy. Nor does there appear to be any objective information provided to schools/teachers that can be passed onto students.

## **Alberta**

Taking a cue from Ontario (see below), Alberta recently updated their sex-ed curriculum to include topics such as consent, sexual orientation, and bullying.<sup>3</sup> Parents will also not be allowed to exempt their children from these teachings.<sup>4</sup> Abortion does not appear to be an explicit part of the discussions. Likewise, in early 2017 it was revealed that anti-choice presentations were being made to high school students, only brought to light when a student posted online an anti-Semitic video they filmed secretly during the presentation,<sup>5</sup> which compared abortion to the Holocaust.

## **British Columbia**

BC's sex education dates to 2008, but is very comprehensive in terms of units and topics covered<sup>6</sup>, though it is lacking regarding LGBT, consent, and "new" topics such as bullying (in the pre-high school outline). There is no province-wide direction for high school sex-ed, so the extent to which abortion is discussed is not known. For younger grades, lessons on anatomy still refer to reproduction as the "miracle of childbirth"<sup>7</sup>, which is hardly scientific or objective.

## **Manitoba**

The Manitoba sex-ed curriculum provides a thorough overview on reproductive body parts and touches somewhat on gender before high school. However, in terms of abortion and sexual agency<sup>8</sup>, their stance is fairly anti-choice. For example, children are taught to "recognize the importance of sexual abstinence as a responsible decision for the adolescent ... (e.g., ... teenage pregnancy puts the *baby* at risk)".<sup>9</sup> The high school curriculum is based around archaic morality, focusing on "the consequences" of sex. It provides only one class on contraception, and does not include a discussion about emergency contraception or abortion.<sup>10</sup>

## **New Brunswick**

The New Brunswick Anglophone sex-ed curriculum, specifically for Grade 8, appears to be more focused on discussions between students than proscriptive education. Concepts like consent, gender, and reproductive health are covered. Despite having limited access to abortion services, New Brunswick is one of the only provinces whose curriculum suggests abortion as an option. Whether teachers are advocating fairly for the procedure is unknown, but abortion is listed in the Grade 8 "Teen Pregnancy Options" worksheet provided to teachers.<sup>11</sup>

## **Newfoundland and Labrador**

In Newfoundland and Labrador, mandatory sex-ed stops in Grade 9 and is focused mainly on anatomy, puberty, and pregnancy prevention (with no mention of abortion). There is also no discussion of consent or LGBT concerns.<sup>12</sup> Their curriculum is not available online.

## **Northwest Territories**

Information about sexual health curriculum in the Northwest Territories is restricted to one government webpage, but it provides a thorough overview of what is taught.<sup>13</sup> It appears to stop in Grade 9, but LGBT rights are included, as is a special focus on drug and tobacco use. Grade 9 has a

thorough class on reproductive systems and the birth process, including options for abortion.<sup>14</sup> Despite this inclusion, the curriculum clearly does not advocate for abortion, highlighting the “importance” that abortion is not used for “birth control” and that “abortion is the ending of a pregnancy before the fetus is ready to be born”, which is an inappropriate description. There is no mention of where a woman or transgender person can obtain an abortion.

Yet, the Northwest Territories also purportedly relies on Alberta’s sex-ed program, so perhaps they will update their policies when the Alberta curriculum is released to schools.

## **Nova Scotia**

Nova Scotia’s sex-ed curriculum was updated in 2011 to include LGBT issues and topics such as cyberbullying and consent.<sup>15</sup> It also includes options for emergency contraception (including where teens can obtain it) as well as other methods of birth control. As usual, abstinence is encouraged above all else. When it comes to abortion, the word is mentioned once on page 61 of the “Sex? – A Healthy Sexuality Resource” guide for teenagers 12+, but there is no further description of abortion or where a teenager can obtain one.<sup>16</sup>

## **Nunavut**

Nunavut uses Alberta’s sex-ed program, although not much data is online regarding whether they follow it entirely or pick and choose topics.<sup>17</sup> A five-year plan was implemented from 2010-2015 to include sexual health in schools for the Inuit population. No mention of abortion was reported, as the focus was mainly on STIs.<sup>18</sup>

## **Ontario**

Ontario has recently been through some controversy over sex education. Not only is there a publicly-funded Catholic school board, but in 2015 a new sex-ed program was mandated for all Ontario schools, updating the curriculum for the first time since 1999 (including the Catholic board, though they will continue to teach their religious opinions regarding sexuality<sup>19</sup>).

Despite the myriad protests and other complaints by religious parents<sup>20</sup>, the new and improved sex-ed program in Ontario has persisted, teaching children not only the proper names for body parts, but about gender identity, consent, LGBT rights, and contraception. Unfortunately, abortion is not explicitly mentioned.

## **Prince Edward Island**

PEI has comprehensive sex-ed guides available online for Grades 6 to 9. The Grade 8 guide has a very intensive overview of the reproductive systems and the birth process, as well as birth control methods, but abortion is not listed as an option. The Grade 9 guide features a large “scare tactic” section about teen pregnancy (including complications, birth, and parenting). Surprisingly, even there were no abortion services in PEI prior to January 2017, the guide has an objective page about what abortion is and stating it is legal in Canada.<sup>21</sup>

## **Quebec**

Quebec is the only province that specifically teaches about love, attraction, and intimacy as opposed to merely the “physical” aspects of puberty and reproduction. Quebec also deals with gender identity, LGBT concerns, and consent. Regarding abortion, there is only a bullet point regarding “going

through an unplanned pregnancy”, but nothing specific regarding abortion itself or where to obtain one.<sup>22</sup>

## Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan sex-ed focuses on the anatomy aspects as well as STIs, abuse, and sexual violence. There is no mention of gender identities or LGBT concerns. Abortion is also not considered as an option, with the curriculum instead focused on parenting and the birth process.<sup>23</sup>

## Yukon

In 2016, the Yukon Territory added consent as well as a focus on teaching sexual health to people with intellectual disabilities to their curriculum. They have had gender identity and LGBT topics since 2012. While there is no curriculum available online, the Yukon Health and Social Services website provides that “the Comprehensive Sexual Health Education model provides non-judgmental, age-appropriate, and medically accurate information on a broad set of topics related to sexuality including human development, relationships, decision making, abstinence, contraception, and infection prevention”.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Sexual health education in the schools: Questions & Answers 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition”. SIECCAN. 2010.  
[http://www.sieccan.org/pdf/she\\_q&a\\_3rd.pdf](http://www.sieccan.org/pdf/she_q&a_3rd.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://globalnews.ca/news/1847912/sexual-education-compared-across-canada/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://teachingsexualhealth.ca/teachers/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.t8nmagazine.com/sex-education-alberta/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-sex-education-abortion-holocaust-1.4065411>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.northernhealth.ca/Portals/0/Your\\_Health/Public%20Health/SchoolYouthHealth/10-405-6133%20Elementary%20School%20Sexual%20Health%20Manual%20-%20A%20Guide%20for%20Teachers\\_WEB%20VERSION.pdf](https://www.northernhealth.ca/Portals/0/Your_Health/Public%20Health/SchoolYouthHealth/10-405-6133%20Elementary%20School%20Sexual%20Health%20Manual%20-%20A%20Guide%20for%20Teachers_WEB%20VERSION.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.northernhealth.ca/Portals/0/Your\\_Health/Public%20Health/SchoolYouthHealth/10-405-6133%20Elementary%20School%20Sexual%20Health%20Manual%20-%20A%20Guide%20for%20Teachers\\_WEB%20VERSION.pdf](https://www.northernhealth.ca/Portals/0/Your_Health/Public%20Health/SchoolYouthHealth/10-405-6133%20Elementary%20School%20Sexual%20Health%20Manual%20-%20A%20Guide%20for%20Teachers_WEB%20VERSION.pdf) Page 77.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/physhlth/hs\\_k-8/](http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/physhlth/hs_k-8/)

<sup>9</sup> Grade 7 Lesson. [http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/physhlth/hs\\_k-8/gr7less1.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/physhlth/hs_k-8/gr7less1.pdf) K.5.7.E.3a. Page 105

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/physhlth/hs\\_s1-2/index.html](http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/physhlth/hs_s1-2/index.html)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/ed/pdf/K12/curric/Health-PhysicalEducation/Health-Grade8.pdf> Page 76.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/sex-ed-curriculum-needs-major-update-planned-parenthood-1.3320053>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/en/services/nwt-curriculum-and-school-list/health-studies>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/www.ece.gov.nt.ca/files/resources/health\\_studies\\_grade\\_9.pdf](https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/www.ece.gov.nt.ca/files/resources/health_studies_grade_9.pdf) Page 163.

<sup>15</sup> <http://peninsulanews.kingsjournalism.com/nova-scotias-sexual-education-updated-before-ontario/>

<sup>16</sup> [https://novascotia.ca/dhw/healthy-development/documents/11032\\_SexBook\\_En.pdf](https://novascotia.ca/dhw/healthy-development/documents/11032_SexBook_En.pdf)

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- <sup>17</sup> <http://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/northwest-territories-nunavut-to-have-input-in-albertas-k-12-curriculum-redesign>
- <sup>18</sup> [http://pauktuutit.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/assets/45-Inuit-Five-Year-Strategic-Plan-on-Sexual-Health\\_EN.pdf](http://pauktuutit.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/assets/45-Inuit-Five-Year-Strategic-Plan-on-Sexual-Health_EN.pdf)
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.tcdsb.org/programsservices/schoolprogramsk12/healthoutdoorphysed/pages/ontario-health-and-physed-curriculum.aspx>. “Catholic schools have a responsibility to teach all curriculum set out by the Ministry of Education in education policy, including the revised Health and Physical Education curriculum, but have always done so in a manner that conveys, respects and models our Catholic values to our students.”
- <sup>20</sup> <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/canadian-politics/one-in-six-ontario-parents-considered-pulling-kids-from-school-over-new-sex-ed-curriculum-poll> An example of one of the many articles about this topic when the new sex education was initially released and then implemented.
- <sup>21</sup> [http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/ed\\_heas\\_0708.pdf](http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/ed_heas_0708.pdf)
- <sup>22</sup> [http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site\\_web/documents/dpse/adaptation\\_serv\\_compl/Apprentissages\\_sec\\_ondaire\\_EN.pdf](http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/dpse/adaptation_serv_compl/Apprentissages_sec_ondaire_EN.pdf)
- <sup>23</sup> [https://www.google.ca/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjL6\\_jx97DUAhWM6oMKHY0nCZYQFggrMAE&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nlsd113.com%2Fckfinder%2Fuserfiles%2Ffiles%2FSexual\\_Health%2FTSH%2520curriculum%2520outcomes%25206789.doc&usg=AFQjCNESv1Z\\_Aj8iLaeiTX7guw9F\\_BHJJhg&sig2=F4UY10ktdth1Ir-pF5uGKQ](https://www.google.ca/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjL6_jx97DUAhWM6oMKHY0nCZYQFggrMAE&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nlsd113.com%2Fckfinder%2Fuserfiles%2Ffiles%2FSexual_Health%2FTSH%2520curriculum%2520outcomes%25206789.doc&usg=AFQjCNESv1Z_Aj8iLaeiTX7guw9F_BHJJhg&sig2=F4UY10ktdth1Ir-pF5uGKQ)
- <sup>24</sup> <http://www.hss.gov.yk.ca/sexualhealth.php>