CONVERSATION GUIDE

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Canadian Schools
Part 1: Introduction
(with Dr. Kristopher Wells, Faculty Director, University of Alberta)

Anticipating and embracing diversity in the learning environment is key to ensuring LGBTQ students feel safe, cared for and valued and makes it less likely that they will experience bullying and discrimination.

Key understandings*:*

- Diverse sexual orientations and gender identities may include lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans-gender, two-spirit, intersex, queer, questioning, asexual, ally, or pan-sexual.
- The acronym LGBTQ (or a variant of this) represents all sexual and gender minorities.
- Members of this sexual and gender minority community disproportionately experience bullying, ridicule, rejection and discrimination.
- Individuals typically have an awareness of their gender identity around the age of five and the first awareness of their own sexual orientation around the age of ten.
- Youth are 'coming out' (self-disclosing their sexual orientation) at a younger age, often around 15 or 16—making this an important issue in schools.
- Research identifies that individuals can experience a number of negative mental health effects from hiding their identity and not having supportive social networks.
- This is the first generation of LGBTQ students who are 'out' at school, often have the support of their families, and are more likely to advocate for themselves.
- A national survey of 3,700 students (average age: 17) in 2009 showed that:
  - 73 per cent identified as heterosexual
  - 26 per cent identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning
  - 3 per cent identified as trans-gender
  - over 60 per cent of students with LGBTQ parents reported feeling unsafe at school
- Research also tells us that homophobic language is the most prevalent form of derogatory language in the school environment, and is the least responded to.
- A 2014 Toronto District School Board student census showed that:
  - 10 per cent fewer LGBTQ students completed high school
  - 54 per cent of LGBTQ students applied to a post-secondary institution, compared to 68 per cent of heterosexual students
  - 27 per cent of LGBTQ students were threatened with violence, compared to 13 per cent of heterosexual students

Key understandings (cont.):

- o 19 per cent of LGBTQ students experienced cyberbullying compared to 8 per cent of heterosexual students
- o 41 per cent of LGBTQ students did not feel supported by teachers compared to 31 per cent of heterosexual students
- o 34 per cent of LGBTQ students did not feel safe at school, compared to 22 per cent of heterosexual students
- A 2015 UBC survey of over 500 transgender youth showed that:
  - o two-thirds experienced incidents of discrimination because of their gender identity
  - o more than 70 per cent experienced sexual harassment
  - o nearly half of older trans youth reported cyber bullying
  - o nearly two thirds engaged in self-harming
  - o more than 30 per cent attempted suicide
  - o 70 per cent reported their families did not understand them.
- The number one thing school leaders can do to address these issues is to think about ways to bring difference and diversity into schools and classrooms.
- The more students are comfortable with difference and diversity, the less likely they are to ridicule, reject or attack it.
- The four key factors that make a positive difference in schools include:
  - o an inclusive curriculum
  - o supportive teachers
  - o comprehensive policies that support welcoming, caring and inclusive learning environment
  - o visibility and inclusion.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

- Are staff at your school aware of key issues facing LGBTQ students? If not, how might this awareness be improved?
- What is currently being done to ensure LGBTQ students and staff at your school feel safe and are treated with dignity and respect? What more needs to be done?
- How can schools bring diversity and difference into schools and classrooms?

For more information:

- The Alberta Government infographic on supporting the LGBTQ community.
- Alberta Human Services' information on LGBTQ supports.
- Alberta Education's Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions.