

February 7, 2020

TO: Thunder Bay Boards of Education, School Principals & Student Councils

FROM: Aarianna Roberts & Harasees Singh, Co-Presidents

STUDENTS WORKING GROUP MEETING RECOMMENDATIONS

The Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC) Student Working Group is comprised of Thunder Bay high school student representatives interested to work in their schools to promote Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting Schools Act. The aim is to engage their peers in creating a more welcoming, accepting, healthy, and safer school climate for all students to realize their full potential to learn.

At the "*Coming Together To Talk with Youth*" forum attended by 250 Thunder Bay high school students last April at Lakehead University, the need for safe spaces was identified as a priority. With this in mind, the Students Working Group met on January 18th, 2020 to strategize on "*Making our Schools Safer – Dealing with Homophobia*".

To break the ice and introduce the topic, we watched a video documentary: "*COURAGE IN THE FACE OF HATE - Let's stand together in the fight against homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and bullying*". This was followed by sharing stories, observations and discussing the experiences of 2-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersexual, Queer (2SLGBTIQ+) students in Thunder Bay schools.

It was acknowledged that progress is being made to accommodate 2SLGBTIQ+ students in our schools, but more can be done to raise awareness, reduce stigma, bullying and discrimination. During a brainstorming session to address problems, close gaps and make improvements, we came up with eight (8) actionable suggestions (enclosed). Participants are recommending that our boards of education and schools work on these initiatives -- If they are not already doing so.

We are therefore, appealing to you to support this cause and act accordingly.

EIGHT (8) ACTIONABLE SUGGESTIONS TO MAKE OUR SCHOOLS MORE ACCEPTING AND INCLUSIVE FOR 2SLGBTIQ+ STUDENTS

1. Anonymous Rainbow Boxes

Rainbow Boxes provided by school boards and painted 'rainbow' colours -- will allow students to drop in suggestions for making the school more inclusive and accepting of everyone, as well as send positive messages to those with different sexual orientation. The boxes can also be used to report hate crimes students see or have experienced directed at 2-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer (2SLGBTIQ+).

The participants mentioned that some teachers have a sexual orientation bias and have bullying tendencies that make students uncomfortable to report incidents of homophobia to them directly. They suggested that the Rainbow Boxes should be located in areas that allow students to maintain their anonymity while submitting their concerns such as bath-rooms, the library, guidance office and so forth. The number of boxes can be determined by the size of the school. They should be well advertised and the contents routinely checked. Ideas and suggestions submitted can be worked on by the school's groups such as the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), sometimes referred to as Gender & Sexuality Alliance, Student Council or the Social Justice Students Club. Incidents of bullying, harassment, taunting and put-downs should be reported to assigned staff and dealt with by the appropriate school administrator/ authority with input from the GSA group(s).

2. Safe Spaces / Groups

2SLGBTIQ+ students should have a safe space to host meetings (about school initiatives). The safe space should be available for students to hang out and support each other during leisure time (e.g. lunch break). Suggestions placed in the **Rainbow Box** can be monitored, reviewed, discussed and implemented by 2SLGBTIQ+ members who should be encouraged and supported to form a group for a collective voice. The 2SLGBTIQ+ group and the space provided by the school should be advertised and promoted as safe, welcoming, positive and open to other non-2SLGBTIQ+ students.

2

3. Designated Staff Member and/or Student Representatives

A teacher or staff member who is open-minded, sociable and approachable should be assigned to serve as a chaperone and resource for 2SLGBTIQ+ students seeking information, support or references on sexual orientation. There should also be student representatives selected as peer leaders to be the voice speaking out on the issues students want to raise. Together, staff and peer leaders can organize meetings, invite speakers, and host events for

students interested in learning more about gender issues, sexual orientation, 2SLGBTIQ+ initiatives and so forth.

4. All-gender Bathrooms ± Locks

Some schools already have all-gender bathrooms, but others do not -- which is a major concern for 2SLGBTIQ+ students. In some of the schools with designated all-gender washrooms, the space is too small to accommodate more than one user at a time. The usage of such washrooms would increase if there was a lock on the door for privacy, because there are students who feel uncomfortable or are too shy to share bathroom space with strangers.

5. Surveys and Tests with Non-Binary Gender IDs

Surveys, tests and school documents requiring gender identification should include non-binary labels in addition to the traditional designation of male or female. Adding the option for students who fall outside the two standard labels recognizes them, and acknowledges their different sexual orientation status.

6. School Visits from LGBTQ Role Models and Two-Spirit Indigenous Elders

Students feel that inviting 2SLGBTIQ+ role models and Two-Spirit Indigenous Elders/ Knowledge Keepers for presentations, discussions and teachings benefits everyone. Exposure to diverse individuals youths can identify with will help to build self confidence, self esteem and improve the perspective LGBTQ2 students have about themselves and who they are. Visits from respectable individuals who have “come out” will provide students with lived-in experiences, guidance, self-understanding and the skills they need to deal with the challenges they face or encounter as 2SLGBTIQ+ individuals.

7. Educational Discipline Strategies:

Teachers and staff need to be educated and made aware of proper discipline strategies for homophobic actions and anti-2SLGBTIQ+ taunting, teasing, hate speech and so forth. They should learn about the impacts of homophobia and the potential consequences of bullying on the victims. For example, instead of suspension or expulsion from school, perpetrators harassing other students for their sexual orientation can be sent for detention and have to watch videos and/or read stories about the lethal results of their actions. They should know that their actions can result in mental breakdown, addictions, suicide and other negative outcomes.

Peer Mediation or supervised Sharing Circles with significant others in a safe space will enable willing victims to explain their pain, fear, anxiety, suffering, etc to the perpetrator. This can be

used as alternative strategies to engage and educate them about the harm and damage caused by their actions and behaviour. Restorative practices are also an effective way to improve interaction and repair relationships between individuals without the fear of revenge, retaliation, or being called a 'snitch'. Sitting down and listening to how insensitivity and bullying hurts, and the importance of apologies and remorse to healing and relieving mental and emotional stress goes a long way to making a safe and more accepting climate.

8. Activities during Pride Month (June)

Schools should support 2SLGBTIQ+ students in organizing activities during Pride Month (June) to engage students and raise awareness about sexual orientation. Students can host events that involve education on 2SLGBTIQ+ identification, ways to be inclusive by using neutral pronouns, publicize the resources available for youths struggling with their sexual identity, planning on coming out, and so forth. Such activities should be promoted by homeroom teachers, via morning announcements, posters, leaflets and so forth.

During Pride Month we celebrate **Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex and asexual (2SLGBTQQIA)** lifestyles without prejudice. It is also a time of reflection to acknowledge the accomplishments so far and review areas that require more work to overcome deep-seated prejudices, discrimination and exclusion so that we can achieve a more accepting, equitable and just society.