



Submission to the Standing Committee on Social Policy for Bill 13, Accepting Schools Act, 2012

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) welcomes the opportunity to provide our own comment on Bill 13, Accepting Schools Act, 2012.

OSSTF/FEESO is a diverse union representing 60,000 educational workers from across the Province of Ontario. OSSTF/FEESO's 140 bargaining units represent both English and French members in elementary and secondary school workplaces, private schools, consortia offering support services to school boards and universities.

Our diversity as an organization extends beyond our job classes. We are representative of the overall population with respect to race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status and disability.

Given our own diverse realities, we are extremely supportive of any legislation which moves the bar further in respecting safe learning environments for our members or the students we serve.

OSSTF/FEESO welcomes the intent of the legislation in Bill 13, Accepting Schools Act, 2012. We echo the belief in the bill's preamble that "all students should feel safe at school and deserve a positive school climate that is inclusive and accepting, regardless of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status or disability." Study upon study has indicated that when a student learns in a safe and welcoming environment, success will follow.

OSSTF/FEESO is cognizant of the debate surrounding the nomenclature used for Gay Straight Alliance groups (GSA's). However, it is our belief that schools should have the ability to use the language used within the community they represent.

In this respect OSSTF/FEESO believes that;

- GSAs provide a safe place for students to discuss issues of sexual orientation;
- GSAs should be free to use terminology that appropriately reflects the societal norms of the present day;
- Any changes to the proposed legislation that further restricts the parameters of operation of any school GSA or similar group will have a negative effect on vulnerable students and could create an unsafe environment for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer and two-spirited students.

We also believe it is essential that good professional development for educators as well as strong curriculum is a critical part of a successful implementation program for this legislation.

OSSTF/FEESO has designed and developed workshops and resource materials to address homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in Ontario schools. Our *From Pain to Pride* workshop informs educational workers about homophobia and gender-based violence. *Creating Spaces: Embedding Equity in Education*, one of the many resources we have produced, provides educators with tools that can be utilized within the Ontario Curriculum.

Policy Program Memoranda requires that every education worker be provided with comprehensive professional development that outlines their roles in reporting as well as discussions surrounding the issues facing students. In the past, specifically with the implementation of Bill 157, the Education Amendment Act (Keeping our Kids Safe at School) 2009, inadequate professional development resulted in gaps with the full implementation and the effectiveness of the act. Similar challenges have been experienced with requirements as outlined in P/PM 119, P/PM 144 and P/PM145.

In our opinion it is not essential that there be stand alone curriculum addressing the issue. Rather it should be an essential part of the existing curriculum within the existing pertinent subject areas. The establishment of GSA groups in schools alone will not fully address the significant concerns that exist for individuals who experience bullying or harassment because of sexual identity or perceived sexual identity.

It is also important that if passed, the legislation include requirements that school and board administration will take appropriate action, as clearly defined and outlined in the legislation, when incidents of bullying are reported. Bill 13 is an opportunity to address and resolve this concern.

OSSTF/FEESO and other education stakeholders should have a role in the development of policy surrounding the legislation. Along with many of these organizations, OSSTF/FEESO has created materials that could be of great benefit in the development of provincial policies as well as local school board policies. Working together and sharing collective knowledge and resources will result in policies that are relevant and practical.

Many of the points made in this submission are echoed in the one OSSTF/FEESO made regarding Bill 14, Anti-Bullying Act, 2012. Both bills will potentially have an important impact on our schools and on our students. Combining these bills would bring together the best ideas, making the intent of each of them stronger and resulting in better advocacy and protection for all students.

In conclusion, if negative, harmful behaviours such as bullying continue to go unaddressed, students will continue to feel undervalued by their education system. The Safe Schools Action Team Report confirmed that students need to know the adults in their educational lives will address bullying and harassment in all its variant forms. Without meaningful intervention, we will see marginalized students withdraw from both the academic environment and the social environment of the school community. This legislation will be especially critical to those victims of the most serious bullying behaviour that unfortunately, can result in self-harm or suicide. It is vital that this legislation be enacted.

SC/LF/js

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Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation
Fédération des enseignantes-enseignants
des écoles secondaires de l'Ontario
60 Mobile Drive, Toronto, Ontario M4A 2P3

TEL 416.751.8300
TEL 1.800.267.7867
FAX 416.751.3394
www.osstf.on.ca