



February 2016

Frequently asked questions for parents/guardians: practices for LGBTQ students, parents/guardians and staff

Introduction

At Elk Island Public Schools, we are committed to ensuring that each student enrolled in a school operated by the Board and each staff member employed by the Board is provided with a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning and working environment that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging. All individuals within the Division have the right to learn and work in settings that promote equality of opportunity, dignity, and respect regardless of race, age, ancestry, place of origin, colour, religious beliefs, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical or mental disability, marital status, family status, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation.

Our Division values all members of our educational community where everyone is treated with dignity and respect. We value and respect diversity and strive to treat others with kindness, caring, and tolerance by appreciating and accepting all those we encounter in our school community. This includes ensuring we create safe, caring environments for gender and sexual minority youth. This responsibility is expressed in law, the [School Act](#) and the [Alberta Human Rights Act](#).

What are the new Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions?

In January, 2016, Alberta Education released new guidelines for school boards to use in creating their own policies/guidelines to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) students, families and staff. All school boards in Alberta are to use these guidelines to inform their own policies/guidelines by March 31, 2016. The guidelines can be found here:

[Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions](#)

If you have specific questions/concerns about the provincial guidelines, please contact Alberta Education directly. If you have questions about how these will impact your school and your child, we hope this FAQ will help. If you have follow up questions, they are best directed to your school principal.



Why are there special guidelines for this one particular group?

Sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are protected rights under the Alberta Human Rights Act. Additionally, Bill 10 and these new guidelines direct school boards to have policies and practices in place to protect the rights of LGBTQ students, families and staff.

The guidelines are important to enhance the safety of and learning conditions for LGBTQ students. As a whole, this is a vulnerable group that is often marginalized in our society. Those who self-identify as LGBTQ (particularly transgender individuals) typically experience much higher rates of harassment, discrimination, assaults, suicide rates, homelessness, poor health outcomes, and so on. We know that discrimination and violence have strong adverse impacts on mental health and that interventions to improve the social and human rights situation of LGBTQ individuals have the potential to mitigate these negative impacts.

While many individuals identify as LGBTQ, approximately only 0.3% of the population identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. This is a relatively small group, but one that requires and deserves support and protection.

What will these new guidelines mean for my school and my child?

The provincial guidelines are very much in line with our current EIPS practices. Very little will change as a result of these guidelines – we are already supporting students, families and staff in a manner consistent with the guidelines.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY

What information will be shared when a student makes a disclosure?

Our school staff are always encouraged to be in open communication with parents/guardians about the learning and well-being of their children. We believe that learning and development is enhanced by parents/guardians and school staff communicating and working together.

Students are entitled to the protection of their personal information, including their gender identity and sexual orientation. Some LGBTQ students are not open about their sexual or gender identity. Given the sensitivity related to one's gender identity and sexual orientation, if a student discloses that they are LGBTQ to a staff member, that information will be held in confidence and not shared without the student's permission.

By far the majority of EIPS students who have made a disclosure related to LGBTQ status to school staff have already had conversations with their parents/guardians. Most students, particularly if they are seeking accommodations such as name/pronoun changes, are approaching the school *with* their families to have these conversations.

NAME AND PRONOUN USAGE

What names can students use?

Honouring student requests regarding their preferred name is an important part of helping them feel supported and accepted. Typically students and their parents/guardians approach school staff to discuss the student's gender identity and to request an Also Known As (AKA) name change. Entering this name into our computer system results in the preferred name being used on most school documentation.



The legal name cannot be changed in the official student record unless the parent/guardian legally changes their child's name with Alberta Vital Statistics.

What gender and pronouns are used?

When students and parents/guardians meet with school staff they also discuss what gender the student identifies with and what pronouns they would like to use. Some students may use *gender-specific* pronouns (she/her and he/him) and others may use gender-neutral pronouns such as they/them). These *gender-neutral* pronouns have been in use for many years and are very familiar to many of our students, families and staff.

WASHROOMS AND CHANGE ROOMS

Which students will have access to which washrooms and change rooms?

Transgender students can access the washroom and change room that corresponds with their gender identity. However, the decision to do so takes place in the context of a very thoughtful and thorough process that includes meetings with the school staff, parents/guardians, the student and usually a consultant from our system.

It is important to note that we have not had any instances of students “faking” a different gender identity in an attempt to access washrooms or change rooms with ill intentions. Our experience, and the experiences of other school boards, has shown that students simply do not do this.

Additionally, when offered an option, many transgender students choose to access an individual washroom to use the facilities and to change for physical education classes. It is the transgender individuals who are most at risk of harassment or harm when utilizing either the boys or girls washrooms, not the other students.

What about adult access to washrooms?

All adults in schools are asked to use the adult washrooms, not student washrooms.

Parents/guardians, staff and other adults in our schools can access the adult washrooms that correspond with their gender identity.

OVERNIGHT TRIPS

How are overnight trips handled?

EIPS students participate in a variety of overnight trips for students (e.g., outdoor school camps, band trips, cultural traveling experiences, etc.). The overnight sleeping accommodations for these trips vary greatly (e.g., dorms, hotel rooms, camps, etc.). When a transgender or gender non-conforming student is participating in an overnight trip, consideration is given to the safety and privacy of all students involved. There is no “one way” in which students are accommodated. Many factors are considered including the needs and wishes of the student and their guardians, the facilities where students will be sleeping, the supervision provided, etc.



ACCESS TO PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORTS

How will access to physical education and sports be handled?

Students are currently permitted to participate in sex-segregated recreational or competitive athletic activities in accordance with their self-declared gender identity. This is fully supported by the Alberta Schools' Athletic Association in their [2015 - 2016 Policy Handbook](#).

As noted previously, changing one's gender identity at school is a thorough process. Transgender and gender non-conforming students and their parents/guardians are typically involved in conversations with school staff about access to physical education classes and sports teams. Very careful consideration is given to what team the student plays on, and what information is shared with the coach, other team members, etc. This is a thoughtful process. For example, a male student cannot simply "declare" he is female and sign up for a girls' sports team, and vice versa.

STUDENT ATTIRE

What impact do these guidelines have on student attire?

Students are currently free to dress and present themselves in a manner that reflects their gender identity, personal taste and comfort. Expectations related to student dress will not be gender specific (e.g., girls must wear skirts for a formal performance while boys are allowed to wear dress pants). All students are still expected to maintain standards related to appropriate attire (e.g., no offensive words or visuals on clothing, clothing that appropriately covers the body, etc.).

USE OF GENDER SPECIFIC TERMS

Can we still use "mother/father" and gender specific pronouns?

Yes. School staff can still use the words "mother" or "father" or refer to people using the pronouns he/him and she/her. The guidelines suggest that staff be thoughtful when using terms like mother and father. For example, instead of saying to a class, "Boys and girls please take your pictures home to your mom and dad", teachers can say, "Everyone please take your pictures home to your family" or "Everyone please take your pictures home to your parents or guardians". This is inclusive language that reflects the diversity of family life we know our students to have. For example, many of our students live with only one parent, with grandparents, other family members, have foster parents, etc. Likewise, if a person identifies as male or female we will still use he/him and she/her pronouns.

We would like to acknowledge the Calgary Board of Education for allowing us to reproduce some of their material in this document.