

December 12, 2017

RE: Support for health benefits of Ministry of Education SOGI 123 Initiative

Dear Head of Schools,

Upon thorough review of the evidence and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) issues in BC schools, the Fraser Health Medical Health Officers endorse Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) education. In September 2016, the Ministry of Education required all school districts in BC to update their anti-bullying policies to include protections on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The Ministry of Education collaborated on the creation of the SOGI 123 website which connects educators to proven tools and resources in the areas of policy and procedures, offers guidance on creating inclusive environments so that schools can align with provincial discrimination policies that protect people of all sexual orientations and gender identities (SOGI).

We believe SOGI inclusive education, policies and procedures will serve to improve student health outcomes. The literature clearly demonstrates that a healthy, supportive school environment is critical to a young person's healthy development which includes mental wellbeing. In this regard, schools represent a key setting where public health professionals can partner with schools to support effective strategies that promote the health and wellbeing of children and youth. SOGI 123 is an example of a very important health promotion initiative.

Health concerns for youth in schools arise from victimization and discrimination due to sexual identity and/or gender orientation. Research has demonstrated that school victimization based on real or perceived SOGI significantly predicts increased anxiety and depression, personal distress, and a lower sense of school belonging¹. It has also been linked to compromised academic achievement and school absenteeism, aggressive behavior, compromised emotional health, and suicidal ideation². The 2013 Adolescent Health Survey³, administered in English to youth in BC public schools, has shown 64% of lesbian students, 47% of gay males and 37% of bisexual students have been discriminated against because of their sexual orientation.

Interventions and policies that promote safe environments and inclusivity, such as SOGI 123, are linked to better health outcomes for sexual minority and heterosexual youth alike. For example, gay-straight alliances (GSAs) and LGBTQ-inclusive school policies improve school climate and are linked to better mental health and decreased substance use for *all* students^{4,5}. SOGI interventions may reduce suicide attempts, saving the health care system significant costs, and may reduce problem drinking and substance abuse⁴. Supportive policies could contribute to 4 fewer suicide attempts, 37 fewer monthly binge drinking episodes and 21 fewer students with problem substance use in a typical BC school⁴.

The school environment has a significant impact on student health. SOGI inclusive education, policies and procedures serve to foster a health promoting climate in our schools. The SOGI 123

website is a key resource to support schools to address LGBTQ issues and improve the health and wellbeing of all students.

We encourage your schools to implement SOGI inclusive education, policies and procedures. For more information on SOGI please visit www.sogieducation.org

Sincerely,



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Fraser Health – Abbotsford, Chilliwack,
Mission, Agassiz, Harrison, Hope

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3. Smith, A., Stewart, D., Poon, C., Peled, M., Saewyc, E., & McCreary Centre Society (2014). From Hastings Street to Haida Gwaii: Provincial results of the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey. Vancouver, BC: McCreary Centre Society.
4. Saewyc E., Poon C., Kovaleva K., Tourand J., & Smith A. (2016). School-based interventions to reduce health disparities among LGBTQ youth: Considering the evidence. Vancouver: McCreary Centre Society & Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre. (Binfet, Gadermann & Schonert-Reichl, 2016)
5. Marx, R. & Kettrey, H. (2016). Gay-Straight Alliances are Associated with Lower Levels of School-Based Victimization of LGBTQ+ Youth: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*. 45, 1269-1282