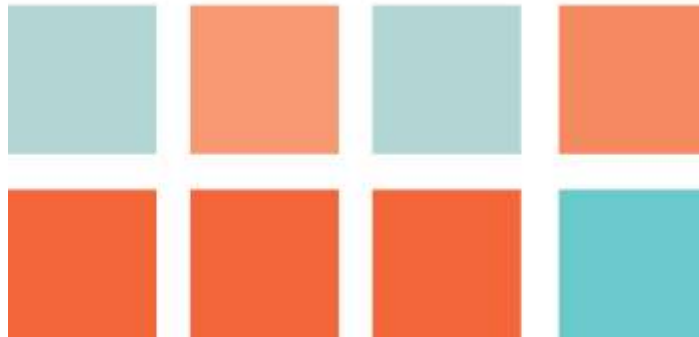


**Submission to the Standing
Committee on Social Policy by the
Registered Nurses' Association of
Ontario**

**Bill 13, Accepting Schools Act, 2012
and Bill 14, Anti-Bullying Act, 2012**

May 22, 2012



The Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO) is the professional association for registered nurses who practise in all roles and sectors across the province. We work to improve health and strengthen our health-care system. Nurses believe that health is a resource for everyday living and that access to the conditions that permit health is a universal human right.¹

RNAO appreciates the opportunity to present this submission on Bill 13, An Act to amend the Educational Act with respect to bullying and other matters (or Accepting Schools Act, 2012) and Bill 14, An Act to designate Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week in Schools and to provide for bullying prevention curricula, policies and administrative accountability in schools (or Anti-Bullying Act, 2012) to the Standing Committee on Social Policy.

Bills 13 and 14 are About Saving Lives and Improving Well-Being

At second reading of her Private Member's Bill, Elizabeth Witmer² set the context for Bill 14, Anti-Bullying Act, 2012 with a reminder of the devastating impact of bullying:

This bill is the result of advice and stories that I have received from people during the past three years. It includes people like Mike Neuts of Chatham, whose 10-year-old son Myles was found hanging on a coat hook in the washroom of his school and never came home. It includes Katie Neu of Listowel, who was bullied from the time she was in kindergarten, and when she couldn't take it any longer in grade 9, left school and got her certificate online. She is now doing all she can to support other young people who have been bullied. It includes the Hubleys of Ottawa, whose son Jamie took his own life after he was subjected to homophobic bullying. It includes 11-year-old Mitchell Wilson, a Pickering boy, who committed suicide as a result of bullying because of his muscular dystrophy.

Elizabeth Witmer, MPP for Kitchener-Waterloo

In 2009, 29 per cent of all students reported being bullied in the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey and 25 per cent reported bullying other students at school.³ Exposure to bullying by peers increases the risk of self-harm,⁴ depression,⁵ low-self esteem, anxiety, substance abuse,^{6 7 8} running away from home, absenteeism,⁹ lower school performance and school attachment,¹⁰ suicide ideation and behavior.^{11 12 13 14} Bullying in cyberspace has emerged as an additional risk factor for depression^{15 16} with the highest levels of distress among victims of both cyberbullying and traditional bullying.¹⁷ About 10 per cent of Grade 7 to 12 students in the previously mentioned 2009 survey reported that they had seriously considered suicide in the past year and about 3 per cent attempted suicide. This represents 99,000 students and 29,000 respectively during that time period.¹⁸

The School Community Safety Advisory Panel that was convened to report on school safety in the wake of death by shooting of 15-year-old Jordan Manners pleaded that his death “must serve as a wakeup call on the vulnerability of our youth to the evils of violence inside as well as outside of schools.”¹⁹ Among the issues identified was the pervasive problem that “all female students are at risk of gender-based violence” with race, disability, class, sexuality, immigration status, and other factors playing “a role in producing vulnerabilities to violence.”²⁰ For example, in a survey of 870 students at Westview Centennial Secondary School, 29 female students (7 per cent of female respondents) reported they were the victim of a major sexual assault at their school over the last two years.²¹ Twenty one per cent of respondents reported they knew of at least one student who was sexually assaulted at school over the past two years and seven per cent knew of three or more students sexually assaulted at school during that time period.²² The vast majority of student respondents (80 per cent) from Westview and C. W. Jeffreys revealed that they would not report their own victimization to school officials or the police.²³

The Panel concluded that “current anti-bullying programs have little effect in preventing violence against girls” as they are gender-neutral and tend to treat youth as a uniform group.²⁴ They recommended “developing effective initiatives, including gender-based peer education programs, that examine the roots of violence against girls, healthy relationships, and equality among marginalized groups, as well as the creation of ‘safe space’ programs that use peer facilitators to lead open discussions amongst girls and other vulnerable groups.”²⁵

A survey of on-reserve First Nations students in Saskatchewan in grades 5 through 8 (age 10 to 16 years) found 35.8 per cent reported being physically bullied, 59.3 per cent verbally bullied, 47.5 per cent socially bullied, and 30.3 per cent electronically bullied at least once or twice in the previous four weeks.²⁶ The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth sponsored the Regional Multicultural Youth Council in Thunder Bay to engage in a project to engage youth and children in a dialogue on violence prevention in 2008. From more than 200 completed questionnaires, “every student surveyed had seen other students being bullied at school, and 69 per cent said they had personal experiences of being bullied.”²⁷ A majority of students (69 per cent) reporting feeling discriminated in their school based on: race/culture, clothes, disability, gender, family (i.e. traditional, single parent, gay parents, foster parents), economic status, sexuality, sexual orientation, accents (way of speaking/language), views and habits, hobbies, age, appearance, intelligence, mental health issues, and weight.²⁸

A systematic review and meta-analysis of the literature found a two-fold excess in suicide attempts and 1.5 times higher risk for depression, anxiety disorders, alcohol and other substance dependence for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people compared with heterosexual people.²⁹ In their discussion, the authors posit that

“it is likely that the social hostility, stigma and discrimination that most LGB people experience is at least part of the reason for the higher rates of psychological morbidity observed.”^{30 31} Among gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, it has been reported that approximately 32 per cent contemplate or attempt suicide compared to 7 per cent of all youth.³² Jamie Hubley’s experience of bullying started in Grade 7 when “teens tried to stuff batteries down his throat on the school bus because he was a figure skater” and ended when he took his own life at 15 years of age.³³ Shaquille Wisdom was a 13 year old who hung himself the day after he was stuffed into a garbage can at his Ajax high school.³⁴ Five teen suicides in the United States linked to bullying over a three-week period³⁵ inspired the “It Gets Better” video campaign.^{36 37 38} A study of 6,450 transgender and gender non-conforming participants in the United States showed “a staggering 41 per cent of respondents reporting attempting suicide compared to 1.6 per cent of the general population, with rates rising for those who lost a job due to bias (55 per cent), were harassed/bullied in school (51 per cent), had low household income, or were the victim of physical assault (61 per cent) or sexual assault (64 per cent).”^{39 40}

Although the above examples are particularly shocking, violence based on perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression is endemic. Egale Canada’s *First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools* revealed that more than one in five (21 per cent) LGBTQ students reported being physically assaulted or harassed due to their sexual orientation.⁴¹ Seventy per cent of all participating students, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ reported “hearing expressions such as ‘that’s so gay’ every day in school and almost half (48 per cent) reported hearing remarks such as ‘faggot,’ ‘lezbo,’ and ‘dyke’ every day in school.”⁴² Thirty seven per cent of trans students and ten per cent of non-LGBTQ students reported being physically harassed or assaulted because of gender expression.⁴³ Levels of sexual harassment are also high with the following groups reported having experienced sexual harassment in school in the last year: 49 per cent of trans students; 45 per cent of students with LGBTQ parents; 43 per cent of female bisexual students; 43 per cent of male bisexual students; 40 per cent of gay male students; and 33 per cent of lesbian students.⁴⁴ Almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of LGBTQ students and 61 per cent of students with LGBTQ parents reported feeling unsafe at school.⁴⁵

In 2010, hate crime rates in Canada are a “youth phenomenon,”⁴⁶ as both victims and those accused were concentrated between the ages of 12 to 24 years.⁴⁷ Race or ethnicity was the most common motivation for police-reported hate crime at 52 per cent, religion accounted for 29 per cent, and 16 per cent were motivated by sexual orientation.⁴⁸ Hate crimes targeting sexual orientation were more likely than other types of hate crime to be violent (65 per cent) and to result in physical injury to victims (59 per cent) compared with 40 per cent of racially motivated violent incidents and 14 per cent of religiously motivated violent incidents.⁴⁹

During the debate on the Accepting Schools Act, 2012 on March 29, 2012 Minister Glen Murray⁵⁰ generously gave a compelling illustration from his own experience of why students need the support of safe spaces at school as home may not always be a haven of unconditional love:

I always find these particular conversations in the House extraordinarily personally difficult. I find it very hard not to be emotional about them. Because I think through most of my life this issue has unwantedly and with great difficulty been at the centre of my life....

...I remember going for a walk with my father, who I admired, and he told me that he'd beat queers up. He made some of the most homophobic remarks I'd ever heard. And here, the safe place I thought I had in my house was to go home to my dad and my mom. Those were the people I loved, who I thought loved me.

The reason the GSAs, and not organizations for disabilities or black kids or aboriginal kids, are at the centre of this is because of our social discomfort with sexual orientation....

....Understanding that my father couldn't get the fact that his son was gay—and a few years later, sadly, he came down with cancer and died. It was only in the last years of his life that we really reconciled. He couldn't speak to me for three years. He said to me—the last time I saw him, we sat in bed. He was very ill with cancer; you couldn't even touch him. He held my hand, which I knew was very hard for him, and said, "Glen, you know, I fear for you, and for all of the kids like you who are gay. I hated gay people. I thought they were sick and perverse. I didn't even want to imagine that. When I realized my son was gay, I was embarrassed and I was humiliated. And if I thought that way, and you're my son and I couldn't reconcile it, how were all of the other people in power—when you go to get a job, when you try to find a life or have a child or do anything like that, how are people who don't love you, who are not your father, going to treat you? I don't see how you can have a future." I told him I admired him. He said, "I admire you, because"—now I was in my early 30s, and I had just gotten elected for the first time to city council in Winnipeg. He said, "I'm not sure I would have the courage to live and walk in your shoes, knowing how people like me actually feel about you."

Glen R. Murray, Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are school-based, student-led clubs that aim to provide a safe space for LGBT students. Currently there are over 4,000 GSAs registered in the United States⁵¹ and more than 150 LGBTQ-inclusive student groups registered on Egale Canada's safer schools website.⁵² In a study of over 7,000 LGBT students, the presence of a GSA was associated with less victimization related to sexual orientation and gender expression, fewer

homophobic comments from peers, more instances of teacher intervention in homophobic harassment, and greater sense of belonging in the school community.⁵³ The presence of a GSA has also been associated with greater levels of school safety, fewer reports of missing school due to fear, and greater awareness of a safe adult in the school environment even for students who are not actually a member of the GSA group.⁵⁴ The presence of a GSA has also been associated with having a protective effect of reduced suicide risk for sexual minority youth.^{55 56 57} Students who were in schools with a high school GSA were more likely to obtain a college education and had better young adult well-being such as fewer problems related to substance abuse and depression.⁵⁸ Egale Canada found that students from schools with GSAs are more likely to agree that their school communities are supportive of LGBTQ people (53.1 per cent) compared to participants from schools without GSAs (26.4 per cent).⁵⁹

RNAO's Recommendations:

Consistent with the *Ontario Human Rights Code*,⁶⁰ RNAO's Organizational Statement on Diversity and Inclusivity,⁶¹ and RNAO's Position Statement on Respecting Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity,⁶² RNAO is proud to be a member of the Ontario GSA Coalition.

1. As a member of the Ontario GSA Coalition, RNAO supports the recommendations of the Ontario GSA Coalition on Bills 13 and 14 to the Standing Committee on Social Policy.⁶³
2. RNAO supports the recommended changes to Bill 13 outlined by Egale Canada that will strengthen: a) inclusion and reference to trans communities; b) addressing transphobia and biphobia; c) cyber-bullying; d) supporting educators; e) accountability structures; and f) Board support for pupil activities and organizations. RNAO endorses the Amendment to Section 303.1 (d) of the Education Act to read as follows:

“activities or organizations that promote the awareness and understanding of, and respect for, people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, including organizations with the name gay-straight alliance, or another name chosen by the pupils involved in the organization.”⁶⁴

As the most contentious part of Bill 13 and Bill 14 involves the formation of gay-straight alliances in the schools, our closing quotation reiterates Peter Tabuns'⁶⁵ reflections on culture change and building support networks:

Culture change—because when authorities recognize and respect groups that are under attack, that are subjected to abusive action, it changes the dynamics of power. When authorities show respect for girls, when authorities show respect for those who have different skin colour, show respect for those who are disabled, show respect for our gay youth, that helps to shift the culture as much as the principal of my school coming to talk to my class when I was in grade 3. It says the ground has to move. Allowing students in schools, under the sanction of the administration, to set up clubs says to all students that those students deserve respect; that the authorities in charge of the schools and the education system believe that those students deserve respect. Allowing students in schools to set up support networks gives them the security of being together and reduces the isolation that we all know can be, literally, deadly.

Peter Tabuns, MPP for Toronto Danforth

Thank you for allowing Ontario's nurses to be part of this vital conversation that will build more equitable, healthy, and vibrant communities through the opportunity to present this submission to the Standing Committee on Social Policy.

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