

PRISM FAQ: More than Comrades, Purple Unicorns and Drag Queens

Considerable public attention, driven by sensationalistic reporting and the active intervention of special interest groups, is being paid to some of the content of the secondary edition of the *PRISM* toolkit which was recently released and will be distributed to schools in November, 2016 (the elementary edition of *PRISM* was previously distributed to schools in 2013).

Many of the relevant issues and concerns around *PRISM* are addressed directly in the *PRISM* document. This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document is intended primarily to assist teachers, principals and central office administrators to respond to inquiries they may receive from parents and community members. It should be noted that while some have criticized *PRISM*, usually on the basis of secondary reports, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) has received many accolades on the document from teachers, students, academics and members of the public from Alberta and across Canada.

Where can I find the *PRISM* documents?

Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) members can order complimentary copies of *PRISM Secondary Edition* by emailing distribution@ata.ab.ca. Administrators can order full sets of printed copies for staff. Both the elementary and secondary *PRISM* documents are available online in PDF format on the teachers.ab.ca website for viewing or downloading.

PRISM Secondary Edition (152 pages) can be found at <https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Research/PD-80-15e%20PRISM.pdf>.

PRISM Elementary Edition (96 pages) can be found at https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/For-Members/Professional%20Development/Diversity,%20Equity%20and%20Human%20Rights/PD-80-15cPrismToolkitBooklet_Web.pdf.

Complimentary print copies of *PRISM Elementary Edition* can also be ordered by contacting distribution@ata.ab.ca.

Many concerns about these documents will be addressed if people take time to actually review them rather than depending upon unreliable second-hand reports of their content.

What is *PRISM Secondary Edition*?

PRISM is an acronym for Professionals Respecting and supporting Individual Sexual Minorities. The *PRISM Secondary Edition* toolkit was created by practicing Alberta teachers to help secondary schools promote safe and supportive spaces for sexual and gender minorities. This teacher resource has been developed in collaboration with Alberta Education in response to the popularity of the *PRISM Elementary Edition* toolkit for elementary students, originally published in 2013. The *PRISM Secondary Edition* toolkit includes some model lesson plans for teachers of all core subjects and some suggestions for instruction and activities that tie directly to curricular outcomes in the Alberta program of studies for Grades 7–12. Both editions of *PRISM* have been reviewed by Alberta Education.

How is *PRISM Secondary Edition* supposed to be used?

PRISM is an optional resource provided to teachers. *PRISM* is not a textbook for classroom use, nor is it a program of studies (curriculum), nor is it a set of mandatory guidelines or regulations. In the document, teachers will find that some sections are intended solely for their information and background regarding sexual and gender minority issues. Other sections set the legislative and regulatory context for dealing with sexual and gender minority issues and creating welcoming spaces for all students, parents and staff.

A portion of the resource contains lesson plans that are intended to provide teachers with models that they might choose to adapt for use in their classrooms. Nine sample lesson plans are provided covering all core and some elective subjects from grades 7 through 12. Additional activities and links are also included to assist teachers in developing and extending their own lessons.

Will teachers be using the *PRISM Secondary* toolkit lesson plans in my child's class?

Teachers will exercise their professional judgement in determining whether and how to implement suggestions and models set out in the document. Teachers would naturally be expected to factor in the context of their students, class, school and community when deciding how they are going to proceed: what might be appropriate in a drama or cosmetology class in a high school dedicated to the fine arts might not be appropriate in a school offering a “back to the basics” alternative program to junior high students.

People who aren't teachers might fail to realize that teachers make these sorts of decisions all the time. The provincial program of studies (curriculum) and approved resources allow broad latitude for teachers to determine specifically how mandated learning outcomes are to be achieved and which resources are best suited to the purpose. Making such choices is fundamental to the job of being a teacher.

Why now? Why should teachers be concerned with sexual and gender minority issues at all?

Part of the answer is that relatively recent changes to legislated requirements in the *Alberta Human Rights Act*, the *School Act* and related regulations explicitly require schools to promote and support environments that contribute positively to students' physical, psychological, social and emotional development. This responsibility extends to all students regardless of race, ethnicity, ability, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. Separate, but related, is the requirement that schools establish Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) when requested by students to do so. Much of the demand for *PRISM* has come from teachers who want to know more about sexual and gender identity and related issues and who want to meet the requirements set out in law.

More fundamentally, however, is the reality that teachers are likely to have in their classes some sexual and gender minority students. Teachers have a professional obligation and deep personal commitment to do what they can to reach out to and support every student. This is particularly

important for sexual and gender minority youth who are often the targets of discrimination and who are at disproportionate risk of self-harm, suicide, violence and homelessness.

What about other groups? Why does the ATA care only about sexual and gender minorities?

In fact, the Alberta Teachers' Association takes a comprehensive approach to issues relating to diversity, equity and human rights and produces a wide variety of resources, most of which are available at no charge to members and, in electronic form, to the public.

Some examples of ATA documents that parallel *PRISM*'s design and purpose but relate to multiculturalism and specific minority groups are

- *Education is Our Buffalo: A Teachers' Resource for First Nations, Metis and Inuit Education in Alberta*
- *Here comes everyone: Teaching in the intercultural classroom*
- *Promoting Success with Arab Immigrant Students: Teacher Resources*
- *Teaching Somali Immigrant Children: Resources for Student Success*
- *Working with Karen Immigrant Students—Teacher Resources*
- *Working with South Sudanese Immigrant Students—Teacher Resources*

And this work is ongoing. Recently the Association, responding to the calls to action of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and with support from the Alberta government, embarked on Walking Together, a three year project to develop resources and professional development resources and workshops to improve teacher awareness of Indigenous peoples' history and the legacy of residential schools.

In addition to creating resources for teachers, the Association also provides information about navigating Alberta's education system for immigrant and minority parents and has produced the pamphlet *Learning Together: Public Education in Alberta* in 14 languages.

Finally, the Association is also working to assist teachers to respond to issues relating to the mental health and well-being of students. *Creating a Compassionate Classroom* is a reference booklet for teachers about the mental health needs of their students, recognizing that teachers are an important part of their students' support system. The Can We Talk media campaign is a related and complementary initiative intended to reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues.

Can *PRISM* be used in Catholic Schools?

In Alberta, public education includes the separate Catholic school systems and also religiously oriented alternative programs offered by some public school authorities. One third of the members of the Alberta Teachers' Association teach in Catholic separate school systems. It should come as no surprise that Catholic teachers (some credited, others not) were among those who participated in writing and reviewing *PRISM*, and there is nothing in the resource that would preclude it being used by teachers in Catholic schools to expand their understanding of sexual and gender minority issues.

The resource itself is focussed on creating a safe and welcoming environment for all students, including students of all faiths. The *PRISM Secondary Edition* refers teachers in Catholic schools to the Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association (ACSTA) document *Safe and Caring Learning Environments for Students*, the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta (CCSSA)'s *Commitment to Inclusive Communities*, and the Calgary School District's (CSSD) *Supporting Inclusive Communities* for additional guidance. Please note that although the materials referenced will provide a useful guide for Catholic teachers, the organizations that authored them have not reviewed or endorsed the *PRISM* documents themselves.

Teachers should be aware that some Catholic and private school authorities have not been supportive of government or Association initiatives and resources relating to inclusion of sexual and gender minorities. Teachers should consider the position of their employer when considering how to employ the *PRISM* resource and abide by lawful orders of the board on the matter. Teachers who require further advice or assistance should contact the Association's Member Services Program Area (780-447-9400 or 1-800-232-7208).

Catholic teachers will be pleased to note that a model lesson plan for use in secondary religion classes is included in the toolkit. Consistent with Catholic beliefs that emphasize the sacredness of the individual and that all children are loved by God, the lesson highlights how homophobia (hatred of and discrimination against sexual and gender minority persons) is contrary to Christ's teaching. Contrary to some outlandish claims being made in social media, the inclusion of this content is not suggesting that Catholics (and by extension Christians) are homophobic. Quite the opposite; the assertion is that whatever personal or faith-based beliefs a person may harbour about sexual and gender diversity, hatred of and discrimination against sexual and gender minority persons is sinful and unsupported by scripture or the magister of the Church.

It should be noted that the legal requirement to create a welcoming and safe environment for all students, including sexual and gender minorities, and the related but separate requirements concerning the establishment of GSAs apply to all schools, including separate and private schools. *PRISM* can help teachers and school leaders in these settings to more effectively meet their obligations.

Will parents be notified when issues of religion or sexuality may arise in classrooms?

Section 50.1(1) of the *School Act* provides that "a board shall provide notice to a parent of a student where courses of study, educational programs or instructional materials or instruction or exercises, include subject-matter that deals *primarily and explicitly with religion or human sexuality* [emphasis added]." Having received such notice a parent may then make a written request to exclude their child consistent with section 50.1(2). Section 50(3) states, however, that "This section *does not apply to incidental or indirect references to religion, religious themes or human sexuality* in the course of study, educational program, instruction, or exercises or in the use of instructional materials [emphasis added]."

It is important to note that this provision refers to "human sexuality" not sexual or gender identity. Sexual and gender identity is a much broader concept of which sexual expression is only one aspect. Also, the prior notification requirement is not triggered unless the teacher is

going beyond incidental and indirect references to “dealing explicitly and primarily” with human sexuality. A teacher using the *PRISM Secondary Edition* toolkit as intended is unlikely to undertake classroom activities that would trigger the legislated requirement for notification.

That said, the Association encourages teachers to engage with parents about their children’s education. If a parent has concerns about *PRISM* or any other issue for that matter, he or she should contact the teacher(s) concerned and engage in a respectful and constructive conversation. Often times, good communication will address any issues that might exist.

Are teachers trying to supplant parents and family? What if my son or daughter says to a teacher that they identify as belonging to a sexual or gender minority?

Teachers are not attempting to take over the role of the parent. They are required, however, to create a welcoming, caring, respectful, safe and inclusive environment for every student in their classrooms and “outing” a student against their will would be incompatible with this obligation. In some unfortunate cases, such action might expose the student to significant risk of harm or displacement (LGBTQ youth who have been rejected by their families attempt suicide at a much higher rate than those from supportive families, and gender and sexual minority youth are significantly over-represented in the homeless population).

When students enjoy positive, supportive relationship and good communication with their parents, it is likely that their first disclosures as they come to terms with their sexual or gender identity would be to their parents. The *PRISM Secondary Edition* toolkit advises teachers that when a student makes such a disclosure to a teacher, the teacher should listen respectfully with no judgement and ask if the student wants or needs any support or resources, providing them as necessary. As part of this conversation, it would be appropriate for the teacher to ask the student if they have discussed the matter with their parents and encourage the student to do so if they feel safe and comfortable engaging in that conversation. In all but the most exceptional circumstances it is essential to respect the student’s privacy and confidentiality and support them in making their own decisions. See page 56 of the toolkit for more on this topic.

Will the union punish teachers who do not implement *PRISM*?

As indicated earlier, use of the *PRISM* toolkit is entirely optional and voluntary for teachers. The Association has no desire or mechanism to force teachers to use it. However, the Alberta Teachers’ Association’s Code of Professional Conduct does require that

- (1) The teacher teaches in a manner that respects the dignity and rights of all persons without prejudice as to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical characteristics, disability, marital status, family status, age, ancestry, place of origin, place of residence, socioeconomic background or linguistic background. And,
- (4) The teacher treats pupils with dignity and respect and is considerate of their circumstances.

A teacher who failed to create a welcoming, caring, respectful, safe and inclusive environment for students would be also failing to meet the requirements of legislation and may, in some cases, be in violation of the Code and potentially subject to the Association's disciplinary process.

So what's with the "purple unicorn"?

The purple unicorn is featured in a graphic that appears in section of the document primarily intended for use by teachers (see page 21 of *PRISM Secondary Edition*). It is an illustration to communicate that there are (at least) 5 dimensions of gender: identity, expression, sex assigned at birth, physical attraction and emotional attraction that can be expressed on a spectrum

While we're at it, the word *comrade* appears in the same section (page 22) in a chart listing 20 gender-neutral terms and phrases that might be substituted for gender-specific expressions in spoken or written communication. The point being made is that often we will casually use gender specific terms when other, more inclusive, options are available. Incidentally, because it has become so distracting, *comrade* has been removed from the online version although it will appear in the current print version being sent to schools.

Other issues relating to language, including a list of pronouns being used by some gender minority individuals and advice on how to respond to expressions that create a hostile environment (eg, "that's so gay") are covered in the resource.

Will my child be forced to participate in or view a "drag show"?

In the section "Supplemental Lesson Plan Leads and Ideas," high school cosmetology and drama teachers are invited to consider whether "students may want to invite local drag queens to come to the school to teach make-up and hair techniques. Students may also want to organize a drag performance for the school." Again, there is no requirement that these activities be undertaken, and a teacher would exercise his or her professional judgement about the appropriateness of the activity within the instructional and class context when considering whether to undertake them. Should the teacher decide to proceed, student participation would be voluntary. Pressuring students to participate in or view a performance that causes them discomfort would be incompatible with the entire point of *PRISM*, which is to create a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment for all.

Incidentally, drama provides a good example of a course where a discussion relating to sexual and gender identity might naturally arise. Since Shakespeare's time, gender identity has been a common theme in English language theatre (eg, *Twelfth Night*, *Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*). Today, gender related themes feature in the latest hits on Broadway (eg, *Kinky Boots*, *Hair Spray* and *Fun Home*) and in the works of several of Alberta's most notable contemporary dramatists including Stewart Lemoine, Brad Fraser and Darrin Hagen.

Why not just talk about bullying? Why is it necessary to mention sexual or gender minorities at all?

The question comes close to answering itself. If belonging to a sexual or gender minority, or even the existence of sexual and gender minorities, is something that is literally unspeakable,

then that identity invites disapproval and even contempt, which, in turn, is an open invitation to bullying.

Also, research has consistently shown that generalized messages such as “We respect everyone” are not effective and may even be counter-productive. The basis for discrimination and bullying must be explicitly exposed and named if discrimination and bullying are to be stopped.

Of course, individuals of sexual and gender minorities are not the only people who are subject to bullying, and teachers are actively engaged in opposing and preventing all forms of bullying. In 1996 the Alberta Teachers’ Association together with several government and university partners established the Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities (<http://safeandcaring.ca/>). The Association continues to support and house the Society, which functions as a centre for knowledge that fosters effective networks and partnerships to improve the quality of life for all Alberta children. The vision of the Society, shared by teachers, is that “every school and community will be a safe, caring and inclusive environment for every child and youth in Alberta.”

I really don’t care about any of this—people are born male or female and that’s the way they are and should stay—and talking about sexual and gender diversity violates the rights of parents who reject this artificial agenda. Schools must respect all points of view, including mine.

Parents are free to impart whatever beliefs they want upon their children in their own homes and on their own time. When those children arrive in school, though, they will be learning in a diverse environment along with students of many different identities who hold many different beliefs. Included among these are sexual and gender minority students.

As noted above, the *School Act* states that students are entitled to a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and nurtures a sense of belonging and positive sense of self. Schools are required by law to provide such an environment to the sexual and gender minority students in attendance.

Furthermore, among the functions of public education is to prepare students to be active citizens in our democracy and to function in the economy. Expressions of intolerance and discrimination against sexual and gender minorities are not compatible with democratic principles, unacceptable in the workplace and, in many settings, simply illegal. Schools that fail to adequately prepare students to deal with these real-world realities are failing in their mission.

For these reasons, schools cannot accommodate or reflect the beliefs, however genuinely held, of those who deny the existence of sexual and gender minorities or who promote contempt for or harm toward or discrimination against them. Tolerance does not extend to the acceptance of intolerance.

So what’s really going on here?

Some people have genuine, heartfelt concerns about *PRISM*, which is entirely understandable particularly given sensationalistic coverage in the mainstream media and online. Hopefully, this FAQ will address their concerns.

Some people choose to deny entirely the existence of sexual and gender minorities. This is at odds with research, teachers' classroom experiences and the lived realities of thousands of Albertans. Unfortunately, those adopting this position tend not to be open to entertaining arguments and evidence to the contrary.

Finally, though, there are other individuals and groups, including Parents for Choice, who are leading the charge against *PRISM* quite possibly for ulterior motives: they are supporters of private schooling and are concerned that government may limit funding to private schools or even discontinue funding to private schools that fail to meet their legislated obligations. Unfortunately, it appears that these individuals and groups have determined that the best way to support private schooling is to denigrate and undermine confidence the public school system. And so they and their sympathizers are attempting to create a moral panic about education in public schools by misrepresenting the content and intent of *PRISM*.

Of course, the parents who send their children to schools in the public system know better. They appreciate the efforts of teachers and other staff to help students achieve their potential and welcome schools' efforts to provide a safe and caring environment for all.