



CODE OP ED

Upholding Human Rights and Restoring Civility in Public Discourse

In recent months, in board rooms across Ontario, Directors of Education and school board staff have been targets of verbal and emotional abuse, threats of violence and other forms of hate resulting from their work in support of the rights and freedoms of all students and staff who identify as 2SLGBTQ+. These expressions of intolerance are often made by adults, including some who are elected officials, while students are advocating for their 2SLGBTQ+ friends, teachers, and family members. The hate and racism displayed in some board rooms come from those who see efforts to protect human rights as 'woke culture.'

In a recent statement published by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE), Directors from the 72 publicly funded school districts across the province and from the Consortium du Centre Jules-Léger stated that they, “endorse and fully commit to advancing the human rights of students and staff within all boards and publicly funded schools as set out in the *Ontario Human Rights Code*.” This statement was in response to a statement issued by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) on February 16, 2023: “The OHRC is aware and concerned about the increasing violence targeted at education officials for doing human rights work, adhering to the obligations set under the *Ontario Human Rights Code (Code)* and implementing government policy.” In supporting the OHRC statement, CODE also asserted that all Directors and senior staff who continue to perform this work should do so without fear of reprisal, discrimination and/or harassment.

Rarely in the history of public education has there been a need for security guards and police officers to be in attendance at public board meetings to ensure peace and civility during the proceedings. Threats of physical violence have become the norm in some board rooms with groups of protesters who disrupt, threaten and verbally harass Directors, Trustees, staff and community members. During some board meetings, staff and board members have had to recuse themselves in the course of these meetings, as their personal safety was compromised. In other situations, board meetings were outright cancelled and shifted to virtual formats to ensure the safety of meeting participants and observers. We should all be able to participate in the democratic process without fear for our safety.

In a recent memo to Chairs of District School Boards and Directors of Education, Ontario Minister of Education Stephen Lecce noted that “many 2SLGBTQ+ students face increasing levels of bullying, harassment and mental health issues” and it was the Minister’s expectation that school boards will “redouble their efforts to protect those students and ensure their inclusion within Ontario schools.”

The memo also noted that celebrating Pride (month) in constructive, positive, and meaningful ways reassures 2SLGBTQ+ students that their educators, staff, school board administrators and government stand with them.

Public displays of hate within board rooms and at flag-raising events will come at a high cost to the often fragile emotional and mental well-being of those for whom they are meant to validate, affirm and protect. Within our democratic society, there is always room for sharing perspectives and engaging in healthy debate, but there is no room for hate speech, violence or the denigration of the human rights of others. We must return to safe and respectful public discourse in our board rooms and schools.

The Directors of Education in Ontario are firm in their resolve to support, protect and validate the human rights and dignities of all students and staff. This includes all marginalized communities – Indigenous, Black, racialized, those with special learning requirements and disabilities, those who live in poverty and those who identify as 2SLGBTQ+. This is not a political agenda, this is government bodies protecting the Charter rights of all people.

June is a month of Pride celebration, and you will see school boards raising flags, encouraging celebratory activities in schools, and marching in parades as they demonstrate their commitment to the acceptance, belonging, personal well-being and achievement of 2SLGBTQ+ students and staff.

Directors of Education are *required* to uphold the Ontario Human Rights Code to address inequitable outcomes in publicly funded education. A return to civility within board rooms and digital forums will allow school boards to engage safely with the public and model democracy by debating ideas respectfully to provide a sense of security for our students in their schools and classrooms. They are entering a world of divergent perspectives and observing with great interest the interactions of adults within public settings. We owe it to our students to model the positive behaviour we expect of them, and we need to model that behaviour now.