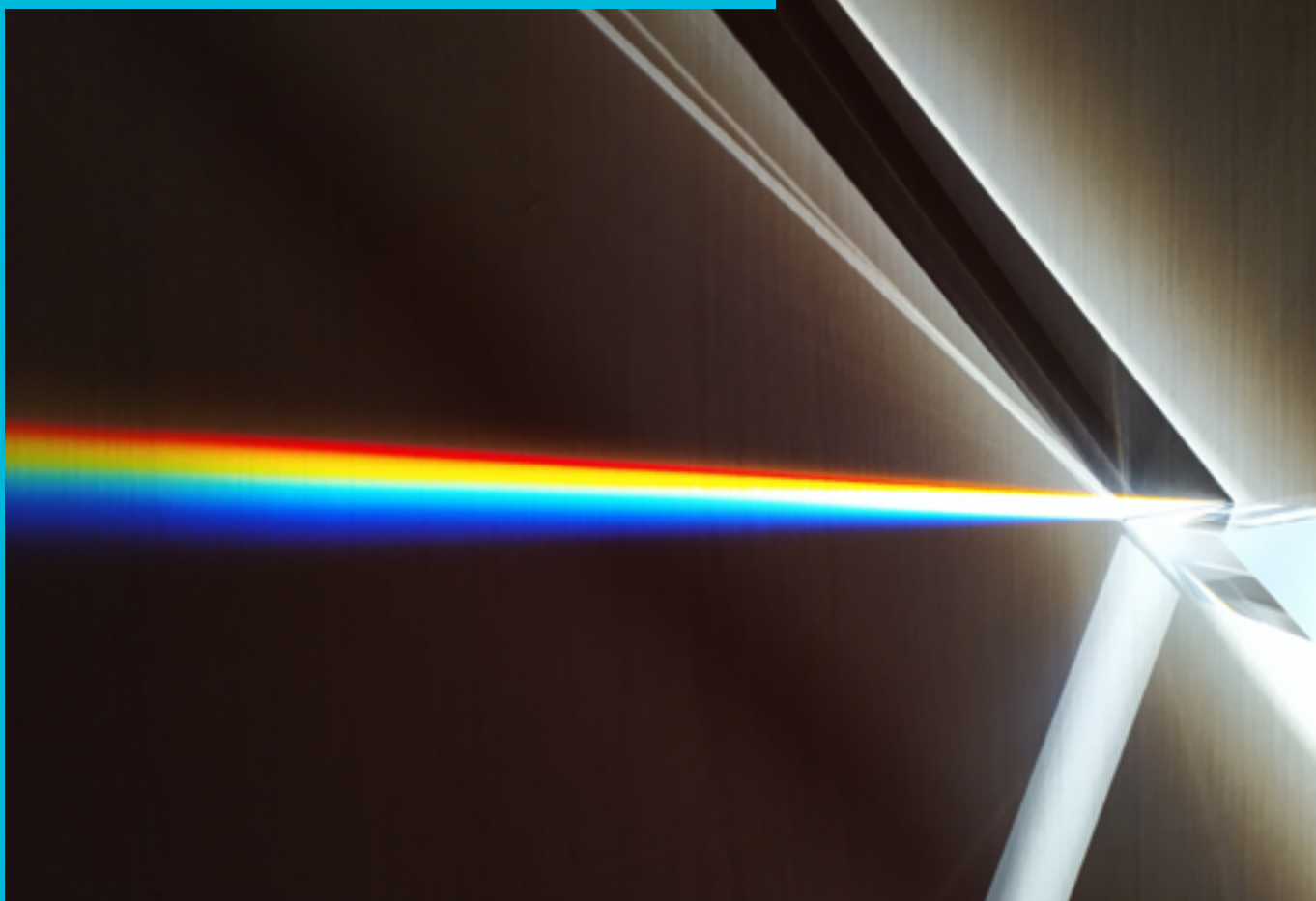


# THE VOLUME OF OUR VOICES

Volume Three: Prism





## ABOUT OSTA-AECO

The Ontario Student Trustees' Association- l'Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de l'Ontario (OSTA-AECO) is a registered non-profit, nonpartisan organization, and the largest student stakeholder group in Ontario, representing approximately 2 million students. The general assembly is comprised of student trustees from public and Catholic school boards across the province. Members of the organization work tirelessly throughout the year to advocate for student voice, and strive to work with provincial partners in the education sector. Ultimately, OSTA-AECO aims to improve Ontario's education system for its students.

More information about OSTA-AECO's work can be found at [www.osta-aeco.org](http://www.osta-aeco.org)

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## ABOUT

# THE VOLUME OF OUR VOICES

*The Volume of Our Voices* is a three-part series by OSTA-AECO highlighting student stories. *Volume One* focuses on the impact that COVID-19 has had on public education; *Volume Two* centers on how students' race, ethnicity, nationality, or cultural identity have shaped their school experience; and *Volume Three* features how students' gender identity or sexual orientation have shaped their school experience.

Students in grades 7 to 12 across Ontario were invited to write and submit to *The Volume of Our Voices* from January to May of 2021; the submissions you read were submitted at varying times in this months-long period. The online submission form was provided in English, and students could request to have their submission transcribed over a call or otherwise submitted through an alternate means to ensure accessibility in submission methods. We provided student respondents with the option of anonymity and students were encouraged to freely share whatever they wished on the theme of each volume.

We want to feature student voices discussing complex issues and their personal experiences within the Ontario public education system. Student voice will always be essential to decision-making and we hope these stories shift provincial and local discussions and decisions surrounding topics such as racism and homophobia in schools or learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The stories featured in each volume are followed by our policy recommendations for a variety of stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education, school boards, schools, and teachers. Each volume also contains recommendations from previous OSTA-AECO publications, such as *Affording Our Students' Success: 2020-21 Pre-Budget/Grants for Student Needs Submission*, *The Students' Vision for Education: OSTA-AECO Vision Document*, and *eLearning: the Students' Perspective*.

Above all, we owe a debt of gratitude to all the students who courageously submitted to *The Volume of Our Voices* and shared their experiences. These stories and their openness and vulnerability are truly at the heart of this project. We hope that the people and stakeholders reading these volumes do their stories justice by critically examining our public education system and continuously working to serve the students of Ontario.

The ethos of this project simply comes down to this: Our voices matter. Our stories matter.

Welcome to *The Volume of Our Voices*.

# INTRODUCTION

*Volume Three: Prism* is the final installment of *The Volume of Our Voices* series.

This volume invited students to reflect on how their gender identity or sexual orientation have affected their school experience and primarily features the stories of 2SLGBTQ+ students and girls.

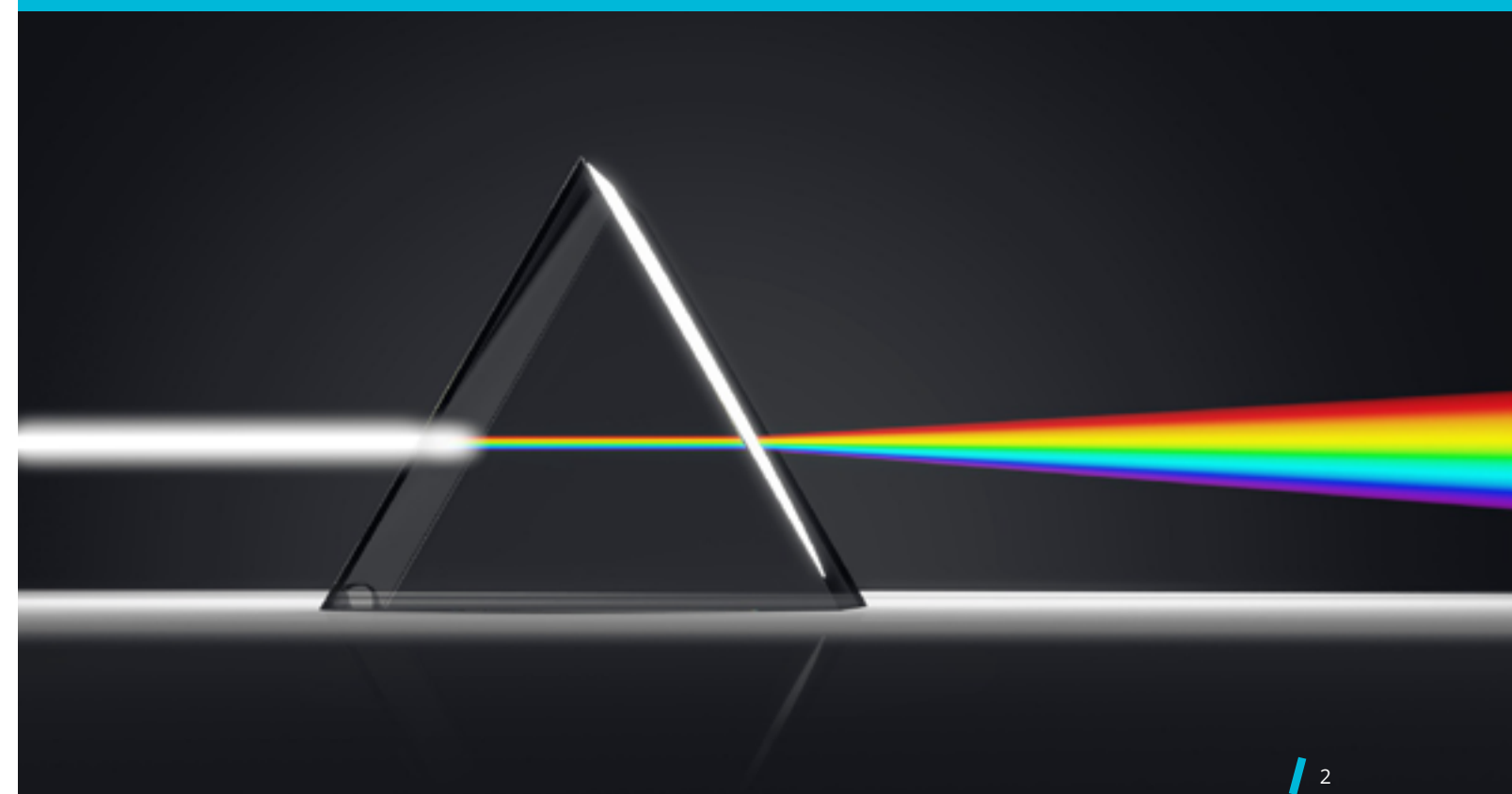
The title of *Volume Three* draws upon the idea of a prism. Prisms are mediums that colour, refract, or slant whatever is viewed through it. Dispersive prisms are used to break white light into its constituent rainbow colours. Though the student body is oftentimes treated as a monolith, we hope that this volume sheds light on the diversity and breadth of student experiences. Furthermore, we use this concept of a prism to highlight how students' identities distinctly colour and affect their experiences.

Similar to *Volume Two: Negative Space*, students' stories have been arranged together at the beginning of the volume. Individually, the student stories highlight how their gender identity or sexual orientation also intersect with their other identities. Collectively, the stories feature both common and

contrasting themes. We encourage readers to think critically about what the similarities and differences between the stories reveal about our education system.

Although Ontario upholds cisnormative, heteronormative, and patriarchal values culturally and institutionally, the province's schools should strive to be spaces that empower students of all gender identities and sexual orientations to thrive. The purpose of elementary and secondary education is to instill a love of learning, prepare children for life, and create access to post-secondary opportunities, but students are only able to fulfill such goals if they feel safe, welcome, and empowered at school. We should feel accepted, not alienated, by peers and staff. We should feel represented, not demeaned or rendered invisible, in their lesson materials.

Though Ontario has made progress in equity work, these student stories make it plainly clear that there is still a long way to go. We urge all stakeholders reading *Volume Three: Prism* to act urgently and work to provide students with the education that they deserve.





# STUDENT STORIES

"I am cis het female and I think we receive representation and are more welcomed at my school as opposed to LGBT individuals. However, one issue at my school specifically is that we have 3 male bathrooms as opposed 2 female bathrooms (I believe we have a gender-neutral bathroom as well). An important thing to note here is that the extra male bathroom is in the tech hallway. Tech classes tend to be male dominated and I think the lack of a closer female bathroom further discourages girls from taking tech classes. Another thing I've noticed is that social sciences and the humanities tend to be female dominated. I think that all courses should be encouraged for all genders." —Grade 11 Student

"I never really knew what my sexuality was, or what it is to be honest, so I never spoke about it. When I decided to tell a small group of my friends, they really helped me become comfortable with not using a label to describe myself." —Grade 12 Student

"I identify as bisexual and my pronouns are she/they. I am not out to the public, but people close to me like friends and trusted teachers know. One thing I noticed when I came out to a teacher whom I no longer speak to, is that my privacy was violated and I noticed a shift in attitudes from the entire staff the next day. This wasn't necessarily bad, because they suddenly became much more pleasant and kind, and stopped making such rude remarks in the hallways. What upset me was that my private information, which I trusted one of my favourite teachers with, was shared with the staff without my consent. I fear that this information will come back to my family, and I am just not comfortable sharing this part of me with them yet. The school itself is a very accepting community, it just hurt me to have my privacy violated in such a personal way." —Grade 10 Student

"I identify as a Two-Spirited trans guy, I believe myself to be pansexual with a lean towards male identifying people. When I first came out as trans, I was in the 7th grade. No one understood entirely except for a couple of my close friends. Some people would tease me and ask uncomfortable questions that I simply didn't know how to answer. Eventually, I decided to put transitioning on hold. My family, schoolmates, and even school staff didn't understand and I felt like a burden. I became severely depressed and even suicidal. Throughout my 8th grade, I simply identified as genderfluid so I could make sure that those who preferred seeing me as a girl were happy. This continued all the way throughout most of the school year until April. I was ready to end everything. I felt as though I couldn't live in a world where no one accepts me. But someone in my class, truly someone very kind, had noticed how void of emotions I had become. He honestly saved my life. He told me "Keep your head up. Don't be sad, you're a happy person." That's when reality really sunk in. I knew he didn't quite understand what was going through my head but in a way, that comment helped. Because, growing up, despite tons of trauma that I won't mention, I had always been a happy kid. Even through the worst times. So, it became my goal to just keep living, no matter how much it felt like I was being crushed by the weight of my own problems. I realized no one will accept me if I can't even accept myself.

Eventually, I opened up to some of my friends and family about how serious this actually was. I told them how severely uncomfortable I felt to be living in a female body, how I planned to end it all. Finally, I was taken seriously. My grandmother even bought me a binder for my chest. Things were starting to get on track. My school has even designated one of the bathrooms to be gender neutral. Now, I'm in 11th grade. I have been going to the children's hospital in Ottawa for several appointments ever since the end of 8th grade. Because of that, I'm finally on testosterone. I'm proud of who I am, I gave up on trying to fit in. I'm genuinely myself. I have my own unique style now, I do whatever I want to do with my hair, I even wear makeup often times. Mostly gothic style makeup but makeup nonetheless. I show up to school feeling proud of myself, I show up with whatever crazy concoction of makeup I decided to put on, whatever clothing makes me feel the most like myself, and most importantly... I finally feel happy. I achieved my goal. I really am a happy person now, just as my classmate had said." —Grade 11 Student

"This is an especially harder topic to discuss. I'm an LGBT student, specifically transgender and bisexual. I also have been in a Catholic board for most of my life, and many times from staff and students, I have been told that I am going to burn in hell for eternity, or been told that under the Catholic religion, I have no right to marry someone of the same gender or be who I am in a Catholic board. I've been told that the way that I am, is secular and un-Catholic.

Many times, I have been told by staff and students that they will "pray for me" as if I have some sort of disease. I have felt objectified, demonized, and unsafe in my school environment for these reasons. My identity has been a subject of debate numerous times as if my existence is debatable. And I have had multiple people try to convince me or my relatives to go to conversion therapy, which is still legal through the use of loopholes.

Not once have I ever seen the LGBT community portrayed in a positive light in my board, and the only time I see its representation is in regards to how much of a sin it is. According to the Catholic board, I am a living and walking sin, who was born to burn in hell. Writing this right now hurts and saddens me because it is such a painful experience to write about. I am no longer Catholic for these reasons because I cannot identify myself with a group that preaches so much hate and disdain towards a person who loves and lives differently.

I have dated people of the same sex as me, where I was unable to be as open as my cisgender heterosexual peers in fear of being harassed by staff and/or students. I have had to force myself to be misgendered, because every time I corrected a person about my pronouns and my identity, I have been called slurs and been made fun of or targeted. I never felt comfortable talking to staff about these experiences in fear that they would side with the people who look down on me, all for the sake of 'religious values.'

My community has been compared to hate groups, pedophiles, zoophiles, and more; in which people totally ignore LGBT people who are victims of hate groups or who are child sexual assault victims. The LGBT community is one of love amongst consenting same-sex people or consenting gender change, and only preaches a message of being true to yourself and loving yourself.

My school has had to fight for our right to a GSA because the staff was more scared about parent backlash rather than the safety of students. I hope in the future that my LGBT peers are able to feel safer in their school community because we are no less human and no less deserving of respect and dignity. I hope that the province addresses this, because I have been hurt and I don't EVER want another student to go through what I have." —Grade 11 Student

"I have been fairly closeted at school. Not due to fear of safety or rejection, but fear of looking like an attention seeker. I have heard people in the LGBT community at my school bash others for saying they are LGBT 'for the trend.' The thought of being rejected by your own community is scary. Not only that, but I have yet to discover a solid label for myself. While I know that is okay in the greater scheme of the community, in a small school, constantly changing your label can seem like an attention stunt. Due to all of this, I have never tried joining the GSA at my school. I had planned to try this year, but due to COVID-19 this was unable to happen. I am lucky enough to have an accepting home and outside-of-school friends, so overall this hasn't been a big issue." —Grade 12 Student

"In my school community, there has been much debate on including 2SLGBTQ+ students. Many have hidden behind the bible to excuse their bigotry, homophobia, and transphobia when the teachings of our Catholic religious has been one of love and acceptance. Qualitative data can be found in the 'Reasons for Signing' section of provincial petitions regarding better supporting 2SLGBTQ+ students; in this section students, staff, teachers, and parents have expressed experiences of transphobic and homophobic behaviours within their Catholic school community. Examples can include being subjected to bullying and harassment, their way of living being a topic of debate in classroom discussions, and the teachers expressing bigotry by telling students that being 2SLGBTQ+ is sinful and that they will go to hell for their identity. As a result, many members of the 2SLGBTQ+ in the Catholic school community do not feel safe or supported. This lack of acceptance can lead to greater declines in mental health of the 2SLGBTQ+ youth.

Currently, there are many ways that the educational system can help to ensure the safety of 2SLGBTQ+ students. For starters, we could change our religious textbooks, as in them are the only mentions of members/experiences of the 2SLGBTQ+ community; and all of these mentions are discriminatory in saying that this group is 'sinful' or 'unable to consensually or truly join in marriage.' Additionally, all students/staff should be made aware of the 2012 Bill 13, Accepting Schools Act, which prevents school staff from allowing students to create GSAs or change the groups name. Many students that I know have mentioned that they have been denied or delayed their creation of a GSA group, and are unaware of their rights.

In regards to anti-bullying and bullying prevention measures, I think it would be especially important to mention 2SLGBTQ+ identities to recognize if there is any data that touches upon harassment or bullying that targets them. As of right now, the community is not mentioned in any sort of data-taking measures, and it would be especially important to shine light upon their specific experiences, especially in a Catholic school community that may use un-righteous 'religious-values' to justify their bigotry.

Many students have faced bullying, harassment, or scenarios where their experiences get debated upon by students, staff, and even School Resource Officers, where these officers have made same-sex couples in my school feel uncomfortable by giving them glares, or forcibly separating them by claiming that they are 'too close' and that they are not acting 'right' or 'normal' in that proximity.

Also, many students I have talked to have had to be deadnamed or misgendered because of people not respecting pronouns nor name changes; having some sort of way for documents to redact deadnames would better accommodate transgender students from being outed or felt unsafe. Some friends I know have been unwillingly outed for example by a supply teacher, due to attendance showing their birthname / deadname which is different to the name they now go by. This can lead to bathroom inaccessibility and lack of inclusivity on sports teams or gym classes due to being transgender and/or being forced into different classes due to their assigned gender at birth. This takes a toll on transgender students as they are being told that they are not the gender that they identify as.

To continue on my point; this is only touching upon homophobia and transphobia in schools. In the educational system, there have also been many cases of sex-based discrimination, specifically, sexism and misogyny. Many female students have undergone lots of sexism, especially in regards to their bodies. Many times, female students have felt uncomfortable by sexist or sexualized comments about their bodies. This is especially in reference to dress codes, in which many times girls have had to change their clothes for wearing mundane clothes that would only show their shoulders for example, whereas their male peers have been able to walk around the schools shirtless without staff turning an eye simply because it is 'sports season.'

Many times, girls felt unsafe or uncomfortable by certain male staff, or male School Resource Officers, as they make suggestive comments towards girls' bodies, or stare intensively at their bodies. Additionally, there has been a case in my board, where a friend of a friend told me how she was going through a hard time because she had gotten sexually assaulted by a popular high school student, and due to his popularity, she ended up being cut off from her friends and peers at school as nobody had taken her experience seriously. This is horrendous, as she should have had support during this time of trauma.

The double standards do not stop there. Many times, girls are told that they should be wearing makeup or shaving daily by other peers when their male peers are not told to do the same. Unfortunately, it is not only the female students, as many times, but male students are also felt uncomfortable in their expression due to toxic masculinity and sexism. A specific example would be how the School Resource Officer in my school made fun of the boys who went to Claire's to get their ears pierced or had clip-on earrings. Another incident would be how male students are still using slurs or making fun of other boys for being feminine, in which multiple times male LGBT students felt the need to remain closeted to ensure that they won't be harassed.

The schools need to better address the sex-based discrimination, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in schools to make sure that marginalized students feel welcomed." —Grade 12 Student

"That brings me to the homophobia in schools, although my school is actually quite accepting and encouraging of the LGBTQ+ community, there are still things they let slide like blatant homophobia between students or even teachers saying the F slur in classes. I understand that teachers can't be everywhere at once but they should at least try to help when we say we need help and they definitely shouldn't be saying slurs at all, it's not 'educational' it's called being an a\*\*hole.

Frankly, I feel the education system all around sucks and it wasn't beneficial to me, I don't know anything about the real world or how to be an adult, which is what you claimed I was going for. The only thing I do know is  $y=mx+b$ . The education system failed us, but you don't care as long as you get paid, right? Things need to change, starting with teaching or at least allowing courses that will help in the real world such as an ASL course as well as a self-defense course for girls. In addition to this, sex education should be mandatory throughout all four years of high school teaching about safe sex between people of the same gender, places you can go for contraceptives, female and male anatomy and how to insert a tampon (you'd be surprised how many girls don't know), etc. Also learning about what you can do at Planned Parenthood besides abortions. Additionally, classes such as personal life management should be mandatory and perhaps you should do a survey on how many students found school useless to daily life." —Grade 12 Student

"My school is in the process of course selections and this is the first year that poster advertisements have gone up to encourage enrolment of specific electives. One of these classes is business. The posters all follow the same theme more or less: 'John had \$100 in stocks and now he's a millionaire,' 'John started a business with \$10 and now he's rich,' etc. Except every poster has a 'John.' There isn't a single poster with a woman on it (there's pictures and names of only guys). But then one day I noticed one by my class. The catch? 'Juliet and Jill are learning financial planning.'" —Grade 11 Student

"I'm cisgender female, and sexual harassment in schools is one of those social issues that doesn't seem to receive much public attention or political will in comparison to various social 'isms' and 'phobias' like racism or homophobia. Which isn't to say that those issues don't deserve attention or that they deserve more or less attention than sexual harassment; it's just hitting me now that sexual harassment is so pervasive in all schools yet, in my experience, has never received been the subject of targeted efforts the way other problems have. And I now really strongly believe that it should.

I'll speak from my own experience first. It's funny that I've never experienced sexual harassment in the ways I conventionally think of it, for example being groped at a party or being catcalled in the street. Actually, I realize now that all the instances in which I've been sexually harassed have actually been in school, or in a school related environment.

When I was in grade six (I was 11 at the time), a boy grabbed another boy's hand and slapped my butt with it. This was in the classroom, during the class time. I don't remember exactly how I reacted (I think I just expressed shock, but I didn't actually say anything), except a couple minutes later feeling that I should've reacted more strongly. It also never occurred to me that I should tell the teacher, so I didn't. I didn't understand back then, at that age, that what the boy did to me constituted sexual harassment. I knew what he did wasn't right, but I didn't think it was a problem serious enough to tell the teacher about. Thinking back, this experience solidifies my belief that children need to be taught about consent starting young, in elementary school. I've heard that this is in the health curriculum now, though I'm not 100% sure; if it isn't then we really ought to begin teaching kids at a young age to keep their hands to themselves. I wish that my 11 year old self had the knowledge and understanding to articulate that what he did was wrong. It's also incredibly important that young kids are taught about the importance of consent so that they can recognize abuse from older people like family.

In grade 9, I was taking a different yellow bus leaving school (not my usual yellow bus home) in order to meet up with friends in a different neighborhood. This one other grade 9 guy who had a reputation for harassing girls incessantly pulled his same tricks on me. In the middle of the bus ride, he made his way over to my seat (I was sitting alone) and told me to 'move in,' as in slide sideways on my seat so that he could sit next to me. I'd heard from my friends before that he did this incredibly often to girls on this bus. I kept refusing to 'move in' and kept telling him to leave me alone, but he wouldn't go away and kept trying to sit beside me. When he tried to physically sit down beside me, I had to put my leg up to block him. He only left after some 10 minutes of me telling him no.

On the same bus ride (what a bad day that was), a grade 12 guy also tried to 'flirt' with me. Later on the same bus ride, he made his way over to my seat and just sat down without asking me. I told him I wanted to sit alone, but he just sat down and started talking to me. He tried to take a selfie of the two of us. He kept trying to talk to me for another 15 minutes before leaving. When I got off the bus and started walking to the commercial area to meet my friends, he





popped out of nowhere a few minutes later. This made me really scared and uncomfortable because we were alone, in a thin forest path behind the backyards of houses. I made it clear that I didn't want to talk to him, but he continued following me. Once I reached the busy intersection across from the commercial area, he asked 'where are you going?' and stopped following me as I crossed the street and walked into the commercial area. Once he was out of sight I sprinted to a bookstore and hid in a bathroom stall. I called my friends and they met me there. I didn't know who the guy was at the time and described him to them. When they figured out who it was and showed me his Instagram profile to confirm his identity, one of my friends said 'Oh, him? He's harmless.' Which is a shame. He seemed to be a pretty popular person, the type you'd want around at a party, but I knew several other girls at the time who he'd harassed. One of my classmates told me two years later that she'd gone to the guidance counselor to express how uncomfortable he'd made her feel, but guidance didn't do anything. Sexual harassment is a behaviour that needs to be fixed in elementary and secondary school as early as possible, because people will learn to push boundaries and break consent gradually and gradually until it escalates into really harmful behaviour. When I was in grade 11 and after he'd graduated, he got exposed for raping multiple women at his university. I can't help but wonder whether he would not have ended up assaulting those women if his behaviour was corrected earlier on in high school.

Another time in grade 10, two male classmates (who I both considered friends at the time) said that the girls at my school were all 'flat.' That was a really gross comment to make and I can't believe they felt comfortable saying it to my face while I was right there. This type of objectification is unfortunately common, though, female students in other grades and in other schools have told me about getting similar comments.

Schools often try to instill positive traits (e.g. character trait awards, learning skills) in children as opposed to just teaching academic material. I do strongly believe that school environments have sometimes contributed to people getting to unlearn racist or homophobic beliefs, which to me demonstrates that schools also have the potential to be a place that corrects sexist and consent-violating behaviour. Behaviour like sexual harassment and sexual assault is so, so common in this world. I do not know a single girl or woman who has not experienced it. Schools should discourage this type of behaviour early on, not only so that female students don't have to experience these violations while trying to access their education, but so that boys do not feel empowered to escalate this behaviour as adults and commit even more harmful acts of sexual assault and harassment. It starts young, and schools need to intervene early.

On an entirely separate note, I want to touch on my friend's experience as a queer student. She's talked to me a lot before about how the sex ed curriculum in Ontario doesn't cover safe sex methods (e.g. protection) for same sex couples, and how it's comedically absurd that she only found out how to have safe sex via information posted on a university centre website. Despite all the years she spent in health classes at school, she was never taught once about the types of protection available to same sex couples. From my own memory of the health classes I've been in, I only remember being taught about condoms and female condoms (and birth control) as well. So the sex ed curriculum definitely needs to be updated.

She has also mentioned to me that while efforts to improve representation in other curriculums (history, English) center around racial and cultural inclusion, the perspectives and history of queer communities are invisible currently. I think she has a really good point; there is a lot of attention given to improving cultural representation in arts curriculums but few people think of integrating other histories and perspectives, for example (like she mentioned) those of queer communities and those of disabled folks.

The last thing I'll touch on now is the importance of schools providing free period products in washrooms. It's blatantly obvious to me that pads need to be treated the same way as toilet paper, aka as a basic hygiene product. So, so many female students end up missing class or being late to class trying to manage their periods when they don't have access to period products. It's really about school participation. While some schools provide period products at the guidance office upon request, that's not enough because trans students, for example, would have to out themselves requesting period products. And most students aren't comfortable asking staff for these products anyways, because period stigma is still a thing. Multiple school boards in the province have passed motions to provide free period products in school washrooms, but this needs to happen province-wide. The Ministry should mandate that these period products be provided for free in school washrooms, and then provide school boards the funding to do this. British Columbia has already done this so there's no reason why Ontario can't too. What's also funny is that the health curriculum doesn't explain how to use pads or tampons. We get taught how the menstrual cycle works, but we're never taught how to actually put on a pad. Super practical stuff that is missing in the curriculum. This is even more absurd when you realize practically every kid gets a demonstration on how to use a condom in health class, yet no one is taught how to use a pad or tampon." —Grade 12 Student

"My school is in the process of course selections and this is the first year that poster advertisements have gone up to encourage enrolment of specific electives. One of these classes is business. The posters all follow the same theme more or less: 'John had \$100 in stocks and now he's a millionaire,' 'John started a business with \$10 and now he's rich,' etc. Except every poster has a 'John.' There isn't a single poster with a woman on it (there's pictures and names of only guys). But then one day I noticed one by my class. The catch? 'Juliet and Jill are learning financial planning.'" —Grade 11 Student

"This year I realized that I am asexual, and while I am still questioning my romantic attraction, I believe I may be aromantic. In terms of where I fall on the asexual spectrum, I feel no sexual attraction and have no desire to be in a sexual relationship.

While both my elementary school and high school were very diverse and welcoming, I feel the sex-ed teachings I received veered away from asexuality as a concept. It should be noted, I was aware of asexuality and aromanticism, however this was through my work with the GSA.

In sex-ed, we talked about abstinence, and the choice not to have sex, but only ever as a "waiting till marriage" situation. I felt like sex was an inevitability, not a question of "if", but "when". Even if someone chose to stay abstinent for marriage, the underlying message was still that sex was going to happen eventually. As such, I kept thinking that I must feel some sexual attraction, but I just never did.

I remember once in grade 7 or 8 health class when we were learning about body positivity we had to do this social experiment of sorts. We had to find 3-7 pictures of women and 3-7 pictures of men we found attractive and explain why. These pictures were then shown to the class to show the trend of what we find to be the standard of beauty.

It was meant to make us think. It made me think, be definitely not in the intended way.

I was panicking, frantically searching for any person I felt an attraction to. Most of my class spent the majority of their time on their explanations, whereas I struggled to find pictures. I ended up just choosing random people I've seen on television. I did not think they were attractive; I didn't think any of the pictures I saw were attractive. I was just confused. I believe this contributed to why it took me so long to realize my sexuality. I felt that I needed to be sexually and/or romantically attracted to someone in some way. For some time, I thought that I may be lesbian, as I did not feel a strong attraction to boys. I knew I didn't feel that way about girls either, but I felt like I had to be sexually attracted to someone.

I think there needs to be more done for asexual and aromantic individuals in health class, especially sex-ed. I think that all students should be aware of gender identities, sexualities, and the LGBTQIA2S+ community. I think increased knowledge of sexualities and gender identities is needed. Further, I think that through education the decision to not have sex can be destigmatized, and I think it should be emphasized as a reasonable and valid choice regardless of circumstance." —Grade 11 Student

# SCHOOL SUPPORTS



Fostering a safe and inclusive learning environment in education must be a priority for all stakeholders. Schools should be safe havens for growing children to effectively learn without the fear of ostracization. However, these stories reveal that many students feel unsafe due to their gender identity or sexual orientation. Many stories also reveal that discriminatory acts are tolerated or instigated by teachers; such practices must be systemically eliminated. The needs and concerns of these students must be addressed promptly in order to eliminate the disparities in their outcomes and experiences. Currently, school environments do not empower students of marginalized gender identities or sexual orientations to realize their potential and are instead oftentimes hostile environments that harm their physical and mental well-being.

In recognizing these truths, all stakeholders in Ontario education must mobilize ensure that they are promoting learning environments that nurture and support all students, especially those who may not currently have their voices empowered. Ontario's education system must uphold the human dignity of all students. OSTA-AECO recommends

**1.1:** The Ministry of Education require school boards to routinely collect disaggregated identity-based data (through a Student Census that allows for the examination of the experiences and outcomes of students of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations) and subsidizes this practice;

**1.2:** School boards supplement the disaggregated identity-based data with qualitative data from focus groups and interviews with students, parents, educators, and advocates of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations to identify the underlying issues resulting in the opportunity and achievement gaps identified through the data;

**1.3:** The Ministry continues to commit funding for human rights and equity advisors in Ontario, and extend such funding into every school board and school authority, with select amounts of funding particularly addressed towards high priority areas;<sup>1</sup>

**1.4:** That the Ministry of Education and Ministry for Children, Community, and Social Services establish a new fund that would allocate monies towards school boards for no-cost menstrual hygiene products for students who menstruate;<sup>2</sup>

**1.5:** School boards to modify school recordkeeping systems to allow students to specify the name and pronouns they wish to use in school and ensure those identifiers are respected by staff and faculty and reflected in class lists, yearbooks, diplomas, and other documentation;

**1.6:** School boards create avenues for graduates to obtain updated school records and diplomas consistent with their gender identity;

**1.7:** School boards support the creation of affinity networks and communal spaces for students of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (including at the elementary and intermediate level) and inform all schools that preventing students from forming groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances is illegal as per *Bill 13, Accepting Schools Act, 2012*;

**1.8:** School boards, schools, and staff deliberately seek out the voices of students of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations to guide decision-making, e.g. forming student advisory committees, conducting roundtable discussions, conducting outreach to student clubs and organizations; and

**1.9:** School boards revise the student dress code to ensure it is inclusive and non-discriminatory regarding gender identity and/or gender expression.

# CURRICULUM AND TRAINING

Students discussed in their stories how they feel underrepresented in school and have spoken to how their peers' or staff ignorance have contributed to their ostracization.

An inclusive curriculum will help reduce acts of bullying by normalizing students' identities, and thus preventing their alienation and stigmatization. Inclusive curriculum helps students feel welcomed by acknowledging and celebrating their identities. Inclusive curriculum improves the mental health of students by letting them know that their identity is valid, and they should not feel ashamed for who they are. Additionally, the representation of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations in curriculum raises awareness about the contributions these communities have made throughout history and the common injustices they face. Improved student and professional training ensures that students have the skills to support themselves and that staff prevent acts of historic discrimination from being replicated in learning environments. OSTA-AECO recommends

**2.1:** The Ministry of Education engage with educators and stakeholders to integrate the histories and perspectives of communities of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations across the K-12 education curriculum;

**2.2:** The Ministry engage educators and stakeholders in a revision of the K-12 health curriculums, ensuring the inclusion of topics supporting 2SLGBTQ+ students (e.g. safe sex methods for non-heterosexual people);

**2.3:** The Ministry collaborate with school boards to fund and support education on practical skills for students such as self-defense and bystander intervention training workshops; and

**2.4:** School boards establish regular mandatory professional learning for school and district staff on anti-oppression and human rights (with topics specifically addressing how to support students of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, e.g. maintaining student privacy, encouraging pronoun introductions, recognizing transphobic microaggressions) and provide additional training and capacity building professional learning opportunities for staff that are required as a prerequisite for promotion.



# POLICY PLANNING



Issues that are cultural in origin (e.g. homophobia, sexism) must be addressed in a systemic and structural manner. Stakeholders should develop plans explicitly aiming to improve the experiences and outcomes of students of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Policies, procedures, and practices must be created or updated to structurally empower students and prevent bullying, harassment, intimidation, and ostracization. Students, staff, and families should be appropriately informed on relevant policy changes. School systems must change in order to ensure that the school culture will change. OSTA-AECO recommends

identities and sexual orientations, and where disparities exist within individual schools, require action plans at the school level. These action plans should be developed with the input of these marginalized communities, from conception to implementation to evaluation, and made publicly available;

**3.5:** School boards develop strategies that create school environments free of sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, which all schools are expected to implement, and include ways to assess the effectiveness of these strategies by collecting information from students and parents; and

**3.6:** The Ministry of Education require all school boards to conduct a review of all forms of police involvement in schools (e.g. School Resource Officer programs) that centers community consultation of students and families with the most frequent and proximate interactions with police in a school setting.

**3.1:** School boards ensure that school policies against bullying and harassment are circulated to the school community and clearly understood by students, faculty, staff, and third-party providers operating in the school setting;<sup>3</sup>

**3.2:** School boards inform all parents and students about the complaints, advocacy, and appeal mechanisms available to them should there be issues with school policies and practices;<sup>4</sup>

**3.3:** School boards require documentation of all reported incidents of harassment from any individual present within the education system (e.g. staff, student, service provider), in addition to a documented response;

**3.4:** School boards develop a system-wide action plan to address the disparities experienced by students of marginalized gender

# CLOSING

We hope all stakeholders in education honour the courage of these students who shared their experiences. All stakeholders in education must work to provide students with the education that they deserve. The status quo is unacceptable and demonstrates that the idea of education as the great equalizer is currently an illusion rather than a reality.

Our education system must be equitable in order to produce equal outcomes for 2SLGBTQ+ students and girls. Schools should be sites that actively produce positive social change instead of replicating the vastly powerful, negative systems and problems that exist in the world at-large.

Above all, we have a moral obligation to our students. Every student, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, should enjoy a rich education in safe and welcoming schools. We must free ourselves from our mental normalization of the status quo (where sexism, homophobia, and transphobia are prevalent), reimagine our practices, and work urgently to create an education system that lives up to its ideals.

With *Volume Three: Prism*, we aimed to uplift the voices and stories of marginalized students. It is now your turn do the same and create change.





# CALLS TO ACTION

## FOR THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

- 1.1: The Ministry of Education require school boards to routinely collect disaggregated identity-based data (through a Student Census that allows for the examination of the experiences and outcomes of students of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations) and subsidizes this practice;
- 1.3: The Ministry continues to commit funding for human rights and equity advisors in Ontario, and extend such funding into every school board and school authority, with select amounts of funding particularly addressed towards high priority areas;
- 1.4: That the Ministry of Education and Ministry for Children, Community, and Social Services establish a new fund that would allocate monies towards school boards for no-cost menstrual hygiene products for students who menstruate;
- 2.1: The Ministry engage with educators and stakeholders to integrate the histories and perspectives of communities of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations across the K-12 education curriculum;
- 2.2: The Ministry engage educators and stakeholders in a revision of the K-12 health curriculums, ensuring the inclusion of topics supporting 2SLGTBQ+ students (e.g. safe sex methods for non-heterosexual people);
- 2.3: The Ministry collaborate with school boards to fund and support education on practical skills for students such as self-defense and bystander intervention training workshops; and
- 3.7: The Ministry require all school boards to conduct a review of all forms of police involvement in schools (e.g. School Resource Officer programs) that centers community consultation of students and families with the most frequent and proximate interactions with police in a school setting.

## FOR SCHOOL BOARDS

- 1.2: School boards supplement the disaggregated identity-based data with qualitative data from focus groups and interviews with students, parents, educators, and advocates of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations to identify the underlying issues resulting in the opportunity and achievement gaps identified through the data;
- 1.5: School boards to modify school recordkeeping systems to allow students to specify the name and pronouns they wish to use in school and ensure those identifiers are respected by staff and faculty and reflected in class lists, yearbooks, diplomas, and other documentation;
- 1.6: School boards create avenues for graduates to obtain updated school records and diplomas consistent with their gender identity;
- 1.7: School boards support the creation of affinity networks and communal spaces for students of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (including at the elementary and intermediate level) and inform all schools that preventing students from forming groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances is illegal as per Bill 13, Accepting Schools Act, 2012;
- 1.8: School boards, schools, and staff deliberately seek out the voices of students of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations to guide decision-making, e.g. forming student advisory committees, conducting roundtable discussions, conducting outreach to student clubs and organizations;
- 1.9: School boards revise the student dress code to ensure it is inclusive and non-discriminatory regarding gender identity and/or gender expression;
- 2.4: School boards establish regular mandatory professional learning for school and district staff on anti-oppression and human rights (with topics specifically addressing how to support students of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, e.g. maintaining student privacy, encouraging pronoun introductions, recognizing transphobic microaggressions) and provide additional training and capacity building professional learning opportunities for staff that are required as a prerequisite for promotion;
- 3.1: School boards ensure that school policies against bullying and harassment are circulated to the school community and clearly understood by students, faculty, staff, and third-party providers operating in the school setting;
- 3.2: School boards inform all parents and students about the complaints, advocacy, and appeal mechanisms available to them should there be issues with school policies and practices;
- 3.3: School boards require documentation of all reported incidents of harassment from any individual present within the education system (e.g. staff, student, service provider), in addition to a documented response;
- 3.4: School boards develop a system-wide action plan to address the disparities experienced by students of marginalized gender identities and sexual orientations, and where disparities exist within individual schools, require action plans at the school level. These action plans should be developed with the input of these marginalized communities, from conception to implementation to evaluation, and made publicly available; and
- 3.5: School boards develop strategies that create school environments free of sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, which all schools are expected to implement, and include ways to assess the effectiveness of these strategies by collecting information from students and parents.

# REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> OSTA-AECO Executive Council, *Affording Our Students' Success: 2020-21 Pre-Budget/Grants for Student Needs Submission*. (Toronto: Ontario Student Trustees' Association, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, *"Like Walking Through a Hailstorm": Discrimination Against LGBT Youth in US Schools*. (United States: Human Rights Watch, 2016), 103.

<sup>4</sup> Carl E. James, Tana Turner, *Towards Race Equity In Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area*. (Toronto: York University, 2017), 76.

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