

# Putin, pride and policy

In BC, 35 out of 60 districts do not have a policy prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

A Sea to Sky principal champions the cause in her district and offers other principals and vice-principals a blueprint for action.

By Dr. Christine Perkins



Putin was on my mind this summer. I couldn't help myself. In June, Putin signed into law, a policy that would see \$122 fines for those who "propagate" homosexuality to children. The amount increased to ten times that if you are a public figure. Using technology to do the same would result in a fine of \$2240. Worse yet, the law would apply to foreign athletes and visitors during the Winter Olympics in Sochi. Putin's crackdown on LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning) persons even caused some, including myself, to think the next Olympics should return to Vancouver/Whistler. While the logistics of this thought was lost in the moment, the sense of disgust toward his action remains. The event has ignited global reaction with many pointing out Putin's violation of human rights. This got me thinking about our policies here at home.

In August, Vancouver hosted its 35<sup>th</sup> annual Pride Parade. Almost half-a-million people showed up to celebrate equity and inclusivity. Whistler's own Olympic alpine skier Mike Janyk was there showing his support and promoting sport as a human right for everyone, regardless of race, religion, creed, or sexual orientation. Most school *Codes of Conducts* in BC promote these same human rights. However, I don't believe we are being explicit enough. As educational leaders, more work against homophobia needs to be done.

In BC, 35 out of 60 districts still do not have a policy prohibit-

ing discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This is a call to action. In our schools, it is important that educational leaders consider offering in-service professional development for all staff on issues of homophobia. Educational leaders already know the benefits of providing in-service and professional development courses on topics such as Aboriginal history and culture to teaching in diverse classrooms, and from how to close the poverty gap to teaching immigrant students. Even informing staff about Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) and trying to encourage a staff member to take up the cause would be helpful. Research suggests that fear of “not knowing about the topic” prevents a lot of school leaders from “leading the way,” but like many educational issues, there are plenty of resources available. GSAs are created with a set of guidelines that include all interested students regardless of their sexual orientation. Principals can act in their schools. For example, saying you support women in educational leadership roles and then not having any women principals would indicate inaction. Promoting and creating a safe space in your school for a GSA, or similar group, is positive action.

Many resources exist and best practices are readily accessible. I encourage all districts to formally show their sense of pride for their LGBTQ parents, staff, and most importantly, students, as quickly as possible. And all of this must be backed up by district and school-based policies and professional development that support anti-homophobic practices. Congratulations to the following districts who have done so: Southeast Kootenay, Cariboo-Chilcotin, Quesnel, Chilliwack, Surrey, Vancouver, Burnaby, Maple Ridge,

North Vancouver, West Vancouver, Sunshine Coast, Haida Gwaii/Queen Charlotte, Prince Rupert, Bulkley Valley, Peace River South, Greater Victoria, Sooke, Gulf Islands, Nanaimo-Ladysmith, Comox Valley, Gold Trail, Fraser-Cascade, and Fort Nelson. At the time of this writing, my own district, Sea to Sky, has passed a sexual orientation/gender identity policy through first and second reading and should be joining the above this fall.

For those of you who have not gone down this path yet, I encourage you to be courageous educational leaders, like all of the above, and begin. You may be surprised to know that you already have the support of both CUPE and the BCTF. The following best practices may be helpful and is gathered, compiled, and adapted from a variety of sources including, but not limited to: PFLAG (Parents & Families of Lesbians and Gays) Canada; EGALÉ (Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere) Canada; GLSEN (Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network); and the BCTF guide *Challenging Homophobia in Schools*.

### Suggestions for How to Walk the Walk and Talk the Talk

- Diversity means promoting and implementing an inclusive curriculum in your school. Equity and human rights should lead the way in all decisions made in your school.
- Transmit respect for diversity throughout your communities by affirming the experiences of your students, by ensuring the curriculum encourages critical thinking and an examination about stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.

- Work toward a more just society in everything you believe and value as an educational leader.
- Be outraged by obstacles put in the way against all marginalized community members and help make members of the LGBTQ community visible in your school and school district by including them in the curriculum, in what you say, in writing, and in district policy.
- Be aware that homophobia exists in all schools and work diligently to ensure that queer students and their families, and your employees, feel safe.
- Ask for, and demand, professional development around LGBTQ issues.
- Be honest with students; if you cannot guarantee their confidentiality for legal reasons tell them. Send students to adults who are informed and can help them.
- Make no assumption about sexuality.
- Understand and perceive the word “homophobia” as bullying, harassment, and discrimination that should be challenged.
- Take complaints about homophobia seriously. Students do not have to be identified as gay to be bullied and feel the effects of homophobia.
- Your attitude should reflect that sexual orientation is not a choice or a problem.
- Use inclusive language as subtle changes can make a huge difference. For example, when talking to a student about graduation ask, “Are

you bringing a date to grad?” instead of, “Which guy are you going to grad with?” and abolish the phrase, “man up.”

### Actively Promote Socially Just Change by Removing Invisible and Visible Barriers

- Make sure there are visible indicators that your school is a LGBTQ welcoming and safe place. Many buttons, posters, stickers, flags, and symbols are available.
- Make school admittance forms less heterosexually biased.
- Ensure diversity stickers, anti-homophobia posters, and flyers that promote inclusiveness are available in your school.
- Encourage teachers to post anti-homophobia materials to make their classroom welcome and safe for LGBTQ students, parents, and staff.
- Encourage the formation of GSAs in your school and district. Access the following resource: MacGillivray, I. K. (2007). *Gay-straight alliances: A handbook for students, educators and parents*. Binghamton, New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Encourage teachers and community experts to discuss anti-homophobia topics in their schools.
- Act as a catalyst by role-modelling positive interventions whenever and wherever homophobia occurs.
- Actively supporting LGBTQ and straight families in your words and actions.
- At assemblies, at least once a year, provide a role model who is openly gay or transgender. They would

also benefit from knowing an openly gay teacher, coach, or principal.

- Try to avoid creating classes for strictly girls or boys. This includes physical education classes. All classes should be welcoming for all students.
- Have a gender-neutral bathroom.
- Asking your school community to be tolerant and accepting of gender diversity.
- If you are in a senior secondary school, offer and promote the BC Ministry of Education’s Social Justice 12 program.

### Louder than Words: Actions

- Acknowledge your own biases by reading and talking to people comfortable with LGBTQ issues.
- Consult with experts in the LGBTQ communities as you educate yourself about anti-homophobia.
- Invite informed guest speakers to your school assemblies.
- Create reader friendly brochures about district policies around all human rights and have them available in your school.
- Be explicit in your “welcoming” statements that all students in all shapes, sizes, race, religions, family makeup, and sexual orientation are welcome in your school. Yes, you can say the words, lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc. out loud.
- Inform students, staff, and parents who are the “safe contact” people at your school. These would be trusted people educated in

and sensitive to LGBTQ concerns.

- Be conscious of the need for enhanced adult awareness and security for LGBTQ students around bathrooms, locker rooms, and stairwells.
- Research and make all possible resources available to those wishing to form a Pride committee or club.
- Announce meetings and constantly say, “Everyone is welcome.”
- Support members of your school community who complain of homophobia with advice, information, counselling, time, or whatever is needed.

### Resources, Policies, and Programs

- Work with the Board of Education, parents, teachers, and students to develop and implement explicit sexual orientation policies.
- Make sure sexual orientation policies are known to all students, parents, vice-principals, principals, school-based staff, district-based staff, and Board of Education members.
- Work consistently to ensure your school district and schools are welcoming places by stopping all verbal, physical, psychological, and emotional harassment as it comes to your attention.
- Educate all your counsellors and support workers by providing in-service professional development around the knowledge and skills required to deal with LGBTQ issues with students and their families.
- Make yourself aware of

Ministry of Education resources, policies, and programs on diversity, safe schools, and anti-homophobia.

- Create “quick access” resources on your school website.
- Purchase resources for your school library offering a range of materials from academic resources to novels with LGBTQ representation. These should include, but not be limited to resources about LGBTQ celebrities, sport, political, historical and media figures, and should include news resources, CDs, and DVDs.
- Support teachers in finding and providing LGBTQ role models in your school and in their classes.


### Professional Development

- Learn to identify the letters in LGBTQ. Being able to articulate the words behind the letters and understand what the terms mean will go a long way toward families, students, and staff knowing you actually do “get it.”
- Learn about social networking. Homophobic cyber-bullying is just as harmful as that which occurs in person.
- Attend workshops on human rights, social justice, and educational leadership on challenging homophobia and heterosexism in our schools.
- Understand and respond positively to homophobia by addressing the underlying causes of all homophobic and heterosexist bullying, harassment, and gender-

based violence in your school.

- Learn about the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Human Rights Code*; the *Ministry of Education’s Safe, Caring and Orderly Schools*, and district policies and how they impact and support LGBTQ members of your community.
- Support organizations such as GSAs, PFLAG, GLSEN, The Trevor Project, worldwide Pride Celebrations, and Egale Canada.

By implementing the above, your students will feel safer in their schools. Remember, “it is extremely unlikely that there is a high school anywhere in Canada, public or private, religious or secular, that does not have students who are LGBTQ; the figure is probably somewhere between 2.5% and 11% of the stu-

dent body” (Egale, 2009, p. 87). In addition, LGBTQ students will feel recognized, accepted and more than likely find school a more enjoyable experience. Students will feel more comfortable talking to their teachers and principals about their concerns. Students will feel protected when they see and hear their teachers and principals address homophobic discourse in the hallways. There will be less bullying and less silence. Right now, the silence is still deafening. Learn to understand and respond by speaking up, taking action and ensuring through explicit proactive policies and practice that our LGBTQ students never have to live in fear. Making our schools safer will help facilitate increased learning and achievement and after all, that is what we all want. 

Dr. Christine Perkins is Principal, Howe Sound Secondary in the Sea to Sky School District. She has recently worked with the district’s main stakeholders and the Director of Human Resources to draft a policy aimed at formalizing ‘safety and respect for everyone’ regardless of sexual orientation or gender identify. She can be reached by email at [cperkins@sd48.bc.ca](mailto:cperkins@sd48.bc.ca) for article references and resources to aid in your policy success.



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