

**DATE:** April 10, 2012

**TO:** Board of Trustees

**FROM:** Trustee Sarah Hoffman, Chair, ASBA Issues and Resolutions Committee  
Trustee Dave Colburn, ASBA Issues and Resolutions Committee  
Trustee Cheryl Johner, ASBA Issues and Resolutions Committee

**SUBJECT:** Proposed Issues for the ASBA 2012 Policy Process

**RESOURCE STAFF:** Anne Sherwood

**REFERENCE:** [April 13, 2011 Board Report – Proposed Issue for the ASBA 2011 Policy Process](#)

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### **ISSUE**

In preparation for its fall Annual General Meeting, the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) invited school boards to identify matters on which ASBA policy is required, and forward these to their Zone by April/May 2012.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

**That the following proposed ASBA policy positions for submission to ASBA Zone 2/3 be approved:**

- 1. That investment in early education is critical to students reaching their full potential, and urges the province to mandate fully-funded half-day kindergarten and, for children with socio-economic vulnerabilities, mandate fully-funded full-day kindergarten to equalize their opportunity to reach their full potential.**
- 2. That all member school boards are committed to establishing and maintaining a safe, inclusive, equitable, and welcoming learning and teaching environment for all members of the school community, including sexual orientation and gender minority students, employees and families. Research has shown that sexual minority youth experience more bullying, harassment, alienation, and suicide ideation than do their heterosexual peers and therefore, boards are encouraged to counter pervasive cultural biases against sexual minorities through proactive and specific policy, and regulation to ensure that all sexual orientation and gender identity minority individuals are welcomed, respected, accepted and supported in all of their schools.**

### **BACKGROUND**

The Board's ASBA Issues and Resolutions Ad Hoc Committee invited Trustees and the Administration to suggest possible policy issues that could be brought forward to ASBA Zone 2/3 for consideration in the ASBA policy development process. Trustee Shipka submitted one directive for action relative to changing the start and end of the school year to allow the winter recess to fall between the two high school semesters. The proposed resolution and background rationale from Trustee Shipka is provided in Attachment I.

In addition, the ASBA Issues and Resolutions Committee suggested the ASBA advocate for mandatory full-day kindergarten for socio and economically vulnerable students, and an ASBA policy relative to the protection of sexual orientation and gender identity students. The proposed resolutions and background rationale are provided in Attachments II and III.

**RELATED FACTS - N/A**
**CONSIDERATIONS & ANALYSIS**
**a) School Calendar Change (Attachment I)**

*That the Alberta School Boards Association urge Alberta Education to move the school calendar start and end dates back one month to commence school in early August and end in late May to enable the winter recess to fall between the two high school semesters.*

The Committee acknowledged that the Board has considered the matter of a modified school calendar this past Fall and did not take a Board position on the question, nor is it part of the Board's key advocacy issues at this time. Given Zone 2/3 is limited to six policy submissions to the ASBA Policy Development Advisory Committee, the ASBA Issues and Resolutions Committee does not recommend this item be submitted to ASBA Zone 2/3 at this time.

**b) Mandated Kindergarten Programming (Attachment II)**

*The Alberta School Boards Association believes that investment in early education is critical to students reaching their full potential, and urges the province to mandate fully-funded half-day kindergarten and, for children with socio-economic vulnerabilities, mandate fully-funded full-day kindergarten to equalize their opportunity to reach their full potential.*

The Committee believes that the proposed resolution goes beyond the existing ASBA policy statement for funding in that it calls for mandated half-day kindergarten to give all children the benefit of a quality pre-school experience to help them reach their full potential. In accordance with supporting research, provision of full-day kindergarten is beneficial to assist children deprived due to economic factors, language barriers or other specific learning needs to initially equalize their learning opportunities. While all children may benefit from full-day kindergarten, the priority for mandated full-day kindergarten should be for children with socio-economic vulnerabilities to equalize their learning opportunity to reach their full potential.

**c) Health, Safety and Learning Needs of Sexual Minority Students and Employees (Attachment III)**

*The Alberta School Boards Association believes that all member school boards are committed to establishing and maintaining a safe, inclusive, equitable, and welcoming learning and teaching environment for all members of the school community, including sexual orientation and gender minority students, employees and families. Research has shown that sexual minority youth experience more bullying, harassment, alienation, and suicide ideation than do their heterosexual peers and therefore, boards are encouraged to counter pervasive cultural biases against sexual minorities through proactive and specific policy, and regulation to ensure that all sexual orientation and gender identity minority individuals are welcomed, respected, accepted and supported in all of their schools.*

The Committee believes it is important for the Board to continue showing leadership on this issue. The ASBA Board of Directors has already approved the development of an ASBA policy advisory based on the Board's submission last year. However, given the emphasis in the new *Education Act* on anti-bullying and the expectation that school boards will develop supporting policy, it is timely to advocate proactively for all boards to adopt a specific policy to meet the needs of LGBTQ students and staff.

**NEXT STEPS**

Subject to the Board's approval, the resolutions will be forwarded to ASBA Zone 2/3 for consideration.

**ATTACHMENTS**

- Attachment I - Proposed Directive for Action: School Calendar Change
- Attachment II - Proposed Policy: Mandated Kindergarten Programming
- Attachment III - Proposed Policy: Health, Safety and Learning Needs of Sexual Minority Students and Employees

AS:

**Proposed Directive for Action: SCHOOL CALENDAR CHANGE**

*That the Alberta School Boards Association urge Alberta Education to move the school calendar start and end dates back one month to commence school in early August and end in late May so as to enable the winter recess to fall between the two high school semesters.*

**Rationale:**

An earlier start would relieve students from school during June when conditions such as higher temperatures and longer daylight hours may distract many students from focusing on their studies. As well, an earlier start to school in August would permit high school students to complete their first semester by the winter break and thus allow more students flexibility to enter post-secondary studies in January if they wish to advance or need more time to complete their high school diploma. Many American schools have three months summer holidays inclusive of June.

**Proposed Policy: Mandated Kindergarten Programming**

*The ASBA believes that investment in early education is critical to students reaching their full potential, and urges the province to mandate fully-funded half-day kindergarten programming and, for children with socio-economic vulnerabilities, mandate fully-funded full-day kindergarten programming to equalize their opportunity to reach their full potential.*

**Rationale:**

There is an existing ASBA policy with respect to Education Finance which outlines ASBA support for early intervention with the provision of kindergarten for those children who by assessment have been identified at risk of not achieving their full potential. Section 6.1 lines 12-15 –*Funding for up to full-time pre-kindergarten and kindergarten for those children who by assessment are identified as at risk of not achieving to the level of their potential should be included in the base instructional grant.*

Premier Redford has indicated that the Province will move to fund full-day kindergarten. However, neither the current half-day kindergarten nor proposed full-day kindergarten are a mandated part of the basic education program.

The proposed policy goes beyond the existing ASBA policy statement in that it calls for mandated half-day kindergarten to give all children the benefit of a quality pre-school experience to help them reach their full potential. We know that research supports the provision of full-day kindergarten to assist children deprived due to economic factors, language barriers or other specific learning needs to initially equalize their learning opportunities. Dr. DaCosta's research suggests that there are groups of high needs children who better benefit from the full-day kindergarten experience than others. The first groups to stop demonstrating significant literacy gains over their half-day kindergarten peers were those from the schools located in the higher SES communities. While no children are harmed by the full-day kindergarten experience, if dollars are limited, the priority for mandated full-day kindergarten programming should be for those children not only with assessed special learning needs but also those with socio-economic vulnerabilities to equalize their opportunity to reach their full learning potential.

**Proposed Policy: RECOGNIZING THE SPECIALIZED HEALTH, SAFETY, AND LEARNING NEEDS OF SEXUAL MINORITY STUDENTS AND EMPLOYEES**

*The Alberta School Boards Association believes that all member school boards are committed to establishing and maintaining a safe, inclusive, equitable, and welcoming learning and teaching environment for all members of the school community, including sexual orientation and gender minority students, employees and families. Research has shown that sexual minority youth experience more bullying, harassment, alienation, and suicide ideation than do their heterosexual peers and therefore, boards are encouraged to counter pervasive cultural biases against sexual minorities through proactive and specific policy, and regulation to ensure that all sexual orientation and gender identity minority individuals are welcomed, respected, accepted and supported in all of their schools.*

**Rationale**

The Public Health Agency of Canada indicates “that experiences of discrimination, stigmatization, violence, and the associated negative mental health outcomes disproportionately impact the physical, emotional, and educational lives of sexual minority youth” (2010, p. 3). Correspondingly, the Suicide Prevention Resource Centre reports that sexual minority youth are 1.5 to 7 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. Likewise, researchers at the University of Calgary found that gay male and bisexual youth in Alberta were 13.9 times more at risk for suicide attempts than their heterosexual peers. A 2007 study from the McCreary Centre in British Columbia also found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, when compared to their heterosexual peers, were more likely to:

- have experienced physical and sexual abuse, harassment in school, and discrimination in the community;
- have run away from home once or more in the past year;
- be current smokers, tried alcohol, or used other drugs;
- report emotional stress, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts;
- participate less frequently in sports and physical activity, and report higher levels of computer usage/time; and
- feel less cared about by parents and less connected to their families (Wells, 2009).

In terms of direct violence, a recent survey from the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics revealed that gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults experienced higher rates of violent victimization including sexual assault, robbery, and physical assault and rates of discrimination three times higher than heterosexuals. Statistics Canada found that the majority of hate crimes involve young people (under the age of 25), both as the perpetrators and victims of hate crimes. Only one in ten hate crimes are ever reported to authorities.

Overall, this body of research evidence clearly indicates that sexual minority youth often encounter multiple risk factors, have fewer protective factors (such as a sense of connectedness to school and family), and experience more bullying, harassment, alienation, suicide ideation, and substance abuse than do their heterosexual peers. Over a decade of research evidence identifies how educational institutions have a legal, ethical, and professional responsibility to respond appropriately to the urgent health, safety, and educational needs of sexual minority youth (Wells, 2009).

In 2008, in an effort to address these considerable risk factors, the Alberta Government became the first government in Canada to name homophobic bullying as an educational concern and to create print and web-based resources to assist students, parents, coaches, and teachers in creating safe, inclusive, and welcoming environments for students who are, or who are perceived to be, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, or two-spirited (LGBTT).

In Alberta, all publicly funded school districts have a legally mandated responsibility to provide discrimination-free educational environments. This positive duty includes a proactive, rather than reactive strategy when responding to incidents of bullying, harassment, and discrimination against sexual minority students. For example, Courts have indicated that a school district must do more than implement a progressive disciplinary strategy to respond to complaints as they arise, rather school districts should work proactively to address a pervasive school-wide culture of homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. This “proactive duty” means that specific LGBTT-inclusive policies ought to be developed, supporting programs and services established, professional development and in-service opportunities provided, and appropriate financial and human resources assigned to ensure that these efforts are effective and meaningfully communicated to all members of the school community.

Contemporary research demonstrates that vulnerable minority groups have needs and concerns that are seldom effectively addressed by broad “catch all” policies. For example, many school boards now have specific Aboriginal and multiculturalism policies to reflect the changing needs and diverse realities of their communities. A specific LGBTT policy and accompanying regulations are necessary to help provide teachers and administrators with the necessary knowledge, strategies, and resources to create safe, caring, equitable, and inclusive learning environments for sexual minority students and employees. In addition, these policies also provide important support for heterosexual students who may come from same-sex parented families. Importantly, the development of specific policy and regulations will also create recommended actions and outcomes from which progress can be measured and evaluated. Ultimately, these policies create important benchmarks from which to gauge a district’s progress in creating safe, equitable, and inclusive learning environments for all students and employees regardless of their actual or perceived differences. However and perhaps most importantly, as an invisible minority, a standalone policy visibly signals to the LGBTT community that they are a valued and respected part of our school communities.

### **ASBA’s Vision, Mission, Mandate, and Guiding Principles**

This suggested directive is consistent with the vision, mission, mandate, and guiding principles of the Association, which are in keeping with the following policy statements:

- ASBA believes “the K-12 curriculum should reflect a strong human rights emphasis”.
- ASBA supports a “vision for public education”, which is founded on the commitment to “educate all children well”.
- ASBA supports a “comprehensive approach to health and learning in schools and school systems”.

These tenets of ASBA’s foundational beliefs are also supported by the following legal, legislative frameworks.

## **Existing Policy and Legislative Framework to Support Implementation**

### ***Alberta School Act – Section 45(8)***

“A Board shall ensure that each student enrolled in a school operated by the board is provided with a safe and caring environment that fosters and maintains respectful and responsible behaviours.”

### ***Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms***

**15.** (1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

\*Sexual orientation is considered by the Supreme Court of Canada to be an analogous grounds of protection to the other characteristics listed in Section 15 of the Charter.

### ***Alberta Human Rights Act***

WHEREAS it is recognized in Alberta as a fundamental principle and as a matter of public policy that all persons are equal in: dignity, rights and responsibilities without regard to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, physical disability, mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income, family status or sexual orientation

Pending Bill 2 Education Act

Welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe environment	Boards will be required to develop policies obliging them to provide a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe environment – one that addresses all forms of bullying, including cyber bullying, and discrimination, both in and out of school. Boards will be expected to share these policies and the consequences of unacceptable behaviour with students, teachers and parents.
National Bullying Awareness Week	The Act proclaims the third week in November in each year as Bullying Awareness Week to promote awareness and understanding of bullying and its consequences in the school community.

### **References**

*Public Health Agency of Canada. (2010). Questions & Answers: Sexual orientation in schools. Author: Ottawa, ON. ISBN: 978-1-100-15119-9*

*Wells, K. (2009). Research exploring the health, wellness, and safety concerns of sexual minority youth. Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality [SIECCAN Newsletter], 43(1-2), 221-229.*