

# Parents can benefit as much as their kids from Ontario's new sex ed

September 4 2019, by Jen Gilbert

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In time for back-to-school 2019, the Ontario government released a revised health and physical education curriculum. Commentators have noted that despite Premier Doug Ford having stressed the need for an

overhaul, the [new curriculum is strikingly similar to the one from 2015](#), prompting some to call it a backtrack of election promises.

But what is new is that the Ontario government is now [touting an opt-out policy for parents who want to remove their children from certain lessons on human development and sexual health](#).

The new policy requires schools to implement a more detailed process to "[provide parents with a list of all Human Development and Sexual Health expectations by grade](#)." It also give [parents](#) at least 20 [school](#) days notice before students are taught human development and sexual health.

With regards to the new opt-out policy, there are significant concerns about potential threats to children's access to inclusive, accurate sexual [education](#). However, progressive responses that criticize the new parental opt-out policy must be careful to not get stuck inside the government's framing of [sex education](#) as a potential violation of parents' rights.

## Parents as partners

The majority of parents in Ontario support progressive, inclusive and comprehensive sex education. A large study by Alex McKay, executive director of the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada, and colleagues found [that 87 percent of Ontario parents agreed that sexual health education should happen in schools](#). The study was conducted during earlier conflicts over the Ontario sex education curriculum.

Even the government's own consultation process received [overwhelmingly positive support for sex education in schools](#).

But what about the parents who don't support the curriculum, and might be contemplating the opt-out?

Many advocates of progressive sex education oppose opt-out policies—and for good reasons.

Education researcher Lauren Bialystok, from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, for instance, writes that Ford's olive branch opt-out policy to those at odds with liberal norms is about framing democratic policy-making as an adversarial struggle between "the people" and "the elite."

She has argued that [parents' rights to determine how their children are raised shouldn't override students' right to learn about sexuality](#). I agree with her. However, my concern is that focusing now on the opt-out policy might reinforce the misleading belief that parents are only an obstacle to their children's sex education.

Why, we might ask, are schools not concerned about parents who might complain or opt out if their children are not receiving a progressive—and inclusive—enough sex education? What would sex education look like if progressive sex ed advocates took those concerns more seriously?

## **Larger issues**

Discussions of sex education should begin from the assumption that all parents are invested in their child's education. Even when parents—conservative or liberal—have concerns about the sex education their child receives at school, they act out of love and care, not just political convictions.

The government has cynically positioned sex education as a potential violation of conservative parents' rights. In response to this strategy, progressive advocates must be careful not to repeat and reinforce that antagonism.

I know of no studies documenting how many parents opt their children out of sex education in Canada. But qualitative research from the United States [suggests the number is very small](#).

If sex ed advocates, researchers or educators acquiesce to the government's framing of this issue and make the opt-out policy the problem, they may lose sight of the larger issues.

For instance: How can our society provide teachers with the resources to implement this curriculum? How will schools ensure all students, including racialized and Indigenous students, girls and LGBTQ students, are able to explore their ideas about sexuality and gender both in and out of the classroom?

## **Sex ed in the playground**

Even still, sex education researchers and advocates know that sex education is never confined to a single class. Even as parents, politicians, educators and researchers debate what should or shouldn't be included in a formal sex education curriculum, young people are taking the lessons they receive from their teachers out into the playground.

There, [the formal curriculum is modified by the informal sex education students receive](#) at school about gender and sexuality. Sex education happens in the cafeteria, locker room, on Instagram, in movies, through music and on Netflix.

Sex education includes all these teachers. And if schools are going to help young people navigate these lessons, both in and out of the classroom, they should enlist the help of parents.

Schools have a responsibility to offer students comprehensive, inclusive, medically accurate sexual health education regardless of who their

parents are. But this mission is enhanced when schools, and sex education advocates, recognize parents as resources for sex education.

Let's not be afraid of sending home notices about the sexual health education students will be receiving. Let's invite parents to share their concerns and hopes with schools and teachers. Let's opt parents into sex education. They may benefit from it as much as their kids.

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