It's Never Okay: Ontario Government Releases an Action Plan to Combat Sexual Violence and Harassment

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In March 2015, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne released a 35-page Action Plan called, "*It's Never Okay: An Action Plan to Stop Sexual Violence and Harassment.*" The $41-million, three-year initiative aims to tackle sexual violence and harassment from a number of perspectives. The most ambitious of the sweeping measures proposed are directed towards creating a sustainable culture of consent.

Statistics from recent Canadian studies compelled the Ontario government to act on the "deep-rooted and widespread" problem of sexual violence. For example, these studies found that:

- one in three women will experience some form of sexual assault in her lifetime;
- 47% of violent crimes against girls under the age of 12 are sexual in nature;
- Girls aged 12 to 17 are eight times more likely than male youth to be victims of sexual assault or another type of sexual violence; and
- 99% of sexual assaults involve a male perpetrator.

Among other things, the Action Plan indicated that raising public awareness of sexual violence and harassment is a key to change. The Action Plan confirms the importance of teaching our children about healthy, equal relationships and the critical role of the "bystander" to intervene when they see this behaviour and stop it before it happens.

Along with the release of the Action Plan, the government is launching a multimedia public education and awareness campaign to engage Ontarians in a discussion about how to prevent sexual violence and harassment.

Among other things, the government is committed to:

- updating the Health and Physical Education curriculum to help students from grade 1-12 understand root causes of gender inequality, and healthy relationships and consent;

- ensuring that students learn concepts related to issues such as physical and emotional well-being, mental health, online safety, sexual orientation, equity and inclusion;
- developing resources for teachers and parents;
- creating activities and resources to raise student awareness; and
- providing students with the opportunity to lead projects and research that will support healthy relationships and a safe and inclusive school environment.

Together, these proactive efforts are intended to teach young people respectful behaviour from an early age.

More Training For Educators

To bolster the efforts above, the Ontario government intends to provide educators with training materials to demystify the complex issues surrounding sexual violence and harassment. Among the various topics covered, an emphasis will be placed on training educators to respond appropriately and sensitively to the survivors of sexual violence. Special materials will also be developed for new teachers to help them better understand the root causes of sexual violence and harassment.

These training initiatives are part of an overall scheme to raise awareness among Ontario professionals to ensure that survivors of sexual violence feel safe when accessing various services.

Creating A Safer Workplace For Educators

As part of its multi-pronged approach, the government is also targeting sexual harassment and violence in the workplace. The proposed measures will inevitably affect educators in their respective workplaces.

These measures include:

- introducing a definition of sexual harassment to the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) to clearly define the parameters of consent;
- introducing legislation establishing clear requirements for employers to investigate and address workplace harassment complaints, including the duty to make every reasonable effort to protect workers from harassment, including sexual harassment, in the workplace;
- creating a new Code of Practice for employers under the OHSA so that employers know what steps to take to make their workplaces safer for employees;
- establishing a special enforcement team of inspectors who will be trained to address complaints of workplace harassment and enforce the OHSA across the province; and
- developing educational materials to help employers create a harassment-free work environment.

Collectively, these changes attempt to better ensure the safety and security of educators while they, in turn, teach their students about consent and respect.

Introduction of Revised Curriculum

On September 1, 2015, the revised curriculum for Health and Physical Education for Grades 1 to 12 was introduced in school boards across Ontario. The purpose of the revised curriculum is to give students accurate information that will keep them safe and healthy. Among other things, the curriculum is intended to help students to develop an understanding of the root causes of gender inequality.

It should be recognized that the majority of the Health and Physical Education curriculum has been taught in Ontario schools since 1998. Some of the updates address current issues relevant to student health and well-being and better reflect Ontario's growing and diverse population. These updates include topics concerning healthy relationships, consent, mental health and online safety.

In May 2015, the Ministry of Education started providing a professional development and training for specialized school board staff across Ontario. Classroom teachers will have professional learning opportunities to support their teaching of the revised curriculum.

The Ministry has developed additional resources to assist teachers implement the new curriculum and help parents support their child's learning.

In discussions with parents, it is important for school boards to confirm that it is the role of the Ministry to develop the curriculum and it is the role of the school board to implement it. If a parent has a question or concern about the learning in their child's classroom, they should raise the concern directly with the teacher or principal so that a discussion can take place to clarify the concern and receive information about the curriculum content.

While the government's Action Plan may impose additional obligations on school boards and teachers, it is important to remember that these efforts are intended to secure a safer Ontario for educators and students alike.

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BLG Offices

Calgary

Centennial Place, East Tower
520 3rd Avenue S.W.
Calgary, AB, Canada
T2P 0R3

T 403.232.9500
F 403.266.1395

Ottawa

World Exchange Plaza
100 Queen Street
Ottawa, ON, Canada
K1P 1J9

T 613.237.5160
F 613.230.8842

Vancouver

1200 Waterfront Centre
200 Burrard Street
Vancouver, BC, Canada
V7X 1T2

T 604.687.5744
F 604.687.1415

Montréal

1000 De La Gauchetière Street West
Suite 900
Montréal, QC, Canada
H3B 5H4

T 514.954.2555
F 514.879.9015

Toronto

Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower
22 Adelaide Street West
Toronto, ON, Canada
M5H 4E3

T 416.367.6000
F 416.367.6749

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