LGBTQ Youth Mental Health, Gay-Straight Alliances, and School Board Policies

Brief submitted by:

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Thank you for the opportunity to share a few brief comments with you regarding LGBTQ youth mental health, gay-straight alliances (GSAs), and the importance of developing LGBTQ-inclusive comprehensive policy, programs, and legislation.

Given recent discussions in the BC Legislative Assembly, I would like to introduce into the public record for this consultation five articles:

(1) Opinion Editorial entitled “Bill 10 is Prentice’s litmus test”, published on December 4, 2014.

This editorial outlines 10 key points government officials should know about the realities of LGBTQ youth in our schools.

(2) Opinion Editorial entitled “Wells: GSAs are lifelines for gay students”, published on December 23, 2014
http://calgaryherald.com/opinion/columnists/wells-gsas-are-lifelines-for-gay-students

This editorial provides an evidence-informed rebuttal to religious groups condemning GSAs in publicly-funded schools.

(3) Media release1 entitled “By 3 to 1, Catholics in Alberta support gay-straight alliances”, released on December 15, 2014

This media release shared the results of a Leger poll, which showed 52% of Catholics in Alberta supported GSAs, while only 18% of Catholics were opposed.

(4) Media release entitled “Premier and MLAs lag behind Albertans on gay-straight alliances”, released on December 29, 2014.

This media release shared further results of a Leger poll, which showed that no matter where Albertans lived in the province, there was support for GSAs.

1 Please see attached media releases.

This media release and background document provided examples of how Catholic teachers, students, and trustees have been actively silenced and prevented from speaking out in support of gay-straight alliances.

I am confident the recent legislative discussions that have occurred in Alberta, which are encapsulated in these written submissions, will be most instructive to similar conversations now taking place in the province of British Columbia. Since all of these written submissions are in the public domain and have been published in many media outlets, both locally and nationally, I will endeavor to cover different ground in my written submission.

To set the framework for my remarks, I would first like to begin by sharing some research that has been conducted very recently on LGBTQ youth in Canadian Schools. The statistics I will share are from the Fall 2014 published results of the Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB) Student Census. This student census is conducted every 3 years and in 2014 involved over 250,000 students.

What is most unique about this student census are the demographic questions asked, which include the option for students to self-identify their sexual orientation and gender identity. These demographic questions were asked of all students in grades 9-12. The 2014 TDSB survey found that 8% of student respondents identified as LGBTQ or questioning. This is consistent with similar results from the 2011 TDSB student census.

According to 2014/15 BC student population records there were 633,428 registered students attending school. If we extrapolate the TDSB survey findings of 8% of the student body identifying as LGBTQ or questioning, in BC this would equate to 50,674 students – a sizeable and significant portion of the overall student body.

What did the TDSB survey tell us about the experiences of LGBTQ students when compared with their heterosexual peers?

**High School Completion**

- Only 68% of LGBTQ students completed high school vs. 78% for heterosexual students (Improving high school completion rates are a priority area for most governments in Canada.)

- Only 54% of LGBTQ students applied for postsecondary education compared to 68% of heterosexual students

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3 See: https://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reports/pdfs/student_stats/prov.pdf
School Violence
- 27% of LGBTQ students were threatened with violence at school compared with only 13% of heterosexual students

Bullying, Harassment, and School Safety
- 47% of LGBTQ students experienced name calling/insults compared with only 31% of heterosexual students (e.g. Casual homophobia with phrases like “That’s so gay” and “faggot”, which are considered forms of microaggression, which are often linked with bullying.)
- 34% of LGBTQ students did not feel safe at school compared with only 22% of heterosexual students
- 19% of LGBTQ students reported cyberbullying compared with only 8% of heterosexual students (Cyberbullying is a priority focus area for most bullying prevention strategies and schools are increasingly being asked to intervene).
- Sadly, 41% of LGBTQ students did not feel supported by teachers compared with only 31% of heterosexual students
- Interestingly, 22% of LGBTQ students were somewhat more likely to identify as peacemakers at school than their heterosexual counterparts (16%). This could be partly attributed to leadership opportunities fostered in gay-straight alliances.

School Participation
- LGBTQ students (27%) were much less likely to participate in sports than heterosexual peers (38%)
- LGBTQ students were more likely to participate in arts activities (34%) than heterosexual students (24%)

Given these and other consistent research findings, Dr. Catherine Taylor, a professor at the University of Winnipeg and lead author of Canada’s first and largest LGBTQ student climate survey⁴, asks this key question:

“How many educators [and Government officials] are underestimating the extent of homophobia and transphobia in their school cultures and the damage being done to the students in their care?”

These statistics provide clear and compelling evidence of the differential, and often harmful, experiences of LGBTQ students in Canadian schools when compared to their heterosexual peers.

In case further evidence is needed as a call for immediate intervention, in January 2014, *The Lancet*, the World’s leading medical journal, published an editorial describing a “mental health crisis” amongst LGBTQ youth and described schools as “fearful and hostile environments for LGBTQ youth [which have] failed badly in educational, emotional, and health information and support” (Lancet, 2014, p. 282).

The Lancet called for several key interventions to improve the mental health and well being of LGBTQ youth, which include:

1. increased mental health training and special consideration for the mental health of LGBTQ youth;
2. schools to become places where LGBTQ youth can find information and support (which includes GSAs); and
3. systematic review and development of policies and supports for this vulnerable student population.

Given the growing evidence of elevated risk, what does the research have to tell us about ways in which schools might successfully intervene to reduce these risk factors and build resilience and improve mental health outcomes among LGBTQ and questioning students?

The research is clear: Students in schools which have comprehensive sexual orientation and gender identity policies, compared to students in schools which have “generic” or “catch all” policies (which are often said to include ‘everyone’) showed lower incidences of biased remarks (such as casual homophobia), significantly lower rates of victimization, and school staff were more effective in addressing issues of bullying, harassment, or assault.

For example, specific and clearly enumerated (or standalone) sexual orientation and gender identity policies provide students with a clear understanding of their rights to safety at school. Furthermore, enumeration also provides educators with the tools needed

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to intervene in harassment and implement strategies to reduce bullying. Importantly, clear and specific sexual orientation and gender identity policies also send an important message to the entire school, and larger community, about the values of diversity, equity, and human rights.

New Canadian research shows that in schools, which had a GSA for more than 3 or more years, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students reported fewer experiences of discrimination and suicide ideation. Other studies show how GSAs and LGBTQ-inclusive policies can increase student safety; improve feelings of connectedness; provide a greater sense of belonging; and students report feeling that teachers care about them and treat them fairly.

The research is clear: school-based interventions are needed to support the positive mental health of LGBTQ youth. Research also indicates how comprehensive LGBTQ policies and support for gay-straight student alliances can and do make a significant and positive difference in the lives of LGBTQ and allied students. It is not an exaggeration to say that GSAs can and do save lives.

Key Recommendations

1. Require all school districts in BC to develop comprehensive ("standalone") sexual orientation and gender identity policies.
2. Provide specialized training on LGBTQ youth mental health issues to all school-based personnel, including teachers, educational assistants, school nurses, school resource officers, counselors, etc.
3. Show provincial leadership by passing legislation to support a student’s right to create a gay-straight alliance (or similar club) in their school and to name that club a gay-straight alliance, if they so choose. Ontario, Manitoba, and Alberta have all passed similar legislation.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Kristopher Wells
Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services
University of Alberta

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Opinion: Bill 10 is Prentice’s litmus test

BY KRISTOPHER WELLS, EDMONTON JOURNAL    DECEMBER 5, 2014

Gay-straight alliances can and do save lives, argues Kristopher Wells.

Photograph by: John Lucas, Edmonton Journal/file

During the last election, Wildrose Leader Danielle Smith faced a choice regarding LGBTQ rights in our province, which proved to be a defining moment in how she and her party were seen by Albertans on issues of human rights.

In the past few days, our new premier, Jim Prentice, has had a similar choice to make about Bill 10, which has replaced the more progressive and inclusive Bill 202, as proposed by the Alberta Liberal MLA Laurie Blakeman.

Here are 10 things the premier and every MLA should know about the realities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning/queer youth in our schools.

1. In Canada, the three most targeted groups for hate crimes are the black, Jewish and LGBTQ communities. Of all the hate crimes committed, the most violent attacks are directed against LGBTQ persons.

2. The No. 1 perpetrators of hate crimes in Canada are youth. The No. 1 victims of hate crimes in Canada are also youth. What are we teaching our students in schools? Hate crimes are the product of dehumanization that happens in the space of silence and indifference to diversity and inclusion.
3. The Lancet, the world’s leading medical journal, identifies an urgent mental health crisis among LGBTQ youth and states “schools should be places where young people can find support, but they are not for LGBTQ youth.” The editors call for school-based interventions to address fearful and hostile school environments, which place many LGBTQ youth at increased risk for a host of mental health problems including depression, self-harm, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide.

4. Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) are student-led and teacher-supported initiatives designed to provide a respectful, welcoming and safe learning environment for all youth in our schools.

5. Research clearly demonstrates how GSAs serve as a critical protective factor for many LGBTQ and heterosexual youth by increasing a sense of connectedness and belonging to school, and helping to reduce drug and alcohol abuse, smoking rates and suicide ideation. It is not an understatement to suggest that GSAs can and do save lives.

6. Supporting LGBTQ students is not about balancing or protecting religious rights. Providing a safe space in schools for vulnerable youth does not conflict with religious values. As Pope Francis has said, “Who am I to judge?” It’s time our politicians and school boards stop judging and provide support equally to all students, without qualification or restriction.

7. Similarly, gay-straight alliances are not about promoting a so-called “gay lifestyle,” as the more Putin-esque critics might claim. These alliances are about the rights of young LGBTQ persons to exist — and to have the security of knowing that others in their midst support them.

8. Today, there are more than 90 GSAs in our public schools. There are no GSAs in any Catholic school in Alberta.

9. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms mandates that every person is entitled to equal protection and benefit of the law without discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. This means that students in all publicly funded institutions, which includes virtually all private, public, Catholic and francophone schools in Alberta, have the right to a school environment free from sexual discrimination.

10. The refusal by schools in Alberta to sanction GSAs is a denial of this fundamental right. That is why clear policy and legislation are needed to ensure students receive the support they need in their school to create a GSA, and name it as such.

Mr. Premier, and all MLAs, there was a day in the not-too-distant past when ignorance of LGBTQ concerns was pervasive. But that day has passed for large numbers of Albertans. If we fail to embrace and continue to fear the diversity that surrounds us, we do so at our own peril. Bill 10 and its amendments attempt to move some issues forward, while leaving the most important issue behind: direct and unequivocal support for our students in each and every school in Alberta.

I urge you and your colleagues in the legislature to move our province into the 21st century where every LGBTQ student will find support rather than banishment like the lepers of old; can have an identity rather the denial of existence; can have the freedom of association, rather than exclusion; and
can have security and protection, rather than the fearful environments so many kids still face in their schools.

This is not about a balancing of rights and interests. The only rights that should come first are from students in need of our support and protection.

I truly hope that Alberta will put students first.

Kristopher Wells is an assistant professor and director of programs and services at the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services, University of Alberta.
The research is clear: Gay-Straight Alliances can be a lifeline for many students at-risk for depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide. Currently, GSAs exist in over 90 public schools across Alberta. However, not a single GSA exists in a Catholic school. The reason for that is simple: Catholic school boards have refused to allow GSAs in their schools. In recent pastoral letters, Alberta’s Catholic bishops...
outlined their reasons for supporting the rights of school boards to continue to block GSAs. This doctrinal reasoning warrants further examination.

Reason #1: GSAs infringe upon parental authority over children. This statement represents a fundamental misconception about GSAs. Gay-Straight Alliances are student-led and teacher-facilitated extracurricular groups. Participation is open to all students and is voluntary. As a result, GSA’s do not infringe upon parental authority any more than any other extracurricular activity, like participation in a chess club or volleyball team.

Reason #2: GSAs restrict parents’ freedom to instruct children in a manner consistent with their faith. GSAs are designed to create safe and caring learning environments for vulnerable students. It is unclear how this is inconsistent with the Catholic faith. However, even if parents were to object on religious grounds, the creation of a GSA in a school does not interfere with the ability of any parent to provide religious instruction, because participation by students is voluntary.

Reason #3: GSAs interfere with Catholic worship and the practice of religious beliefs. Again, it is unclear how creating safe spaces for vulnerable youth interferes with the right of any person to practice his or her religion. In fact, one’s faith calls a person to reach out and support those who are most vulnerable in our society.

Reason #4: Catholic schools must have the right to determine both the name and content of initiatives in accord with Catholic doctrine. In his pastoral letter, Calgary Bishop Fred Henry states that the Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that all persons with “same-sex attraction” must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Gay-Straight Alliances, both in name and in content, are in accordance with this doctrine. Indeed, the refusal by Catholic school boards to approve even a single GSA in this province may be argued to conflict with this doctrine. Students should have the right to create, name, and advertise their GSA in their school environment, like all other student groups do. Silence, invisibility, and erasure only serve to make students even more isolated, alienated, and marginalized.

Reason #5: GSAs single out LGBTQ students and privilege them above all others.

Steps taken by Catholic schools to address all forms of bullying are laudable. However, by definition, GSAs are about far more than addressing bullying; they are critical alliances to help understand and celebrate our differences as inherent gifts that we all possess. The very strength of GSAs lies in the fact they actively include any student, both LGBTQ and straight.

There is one other disturbing development in the discussions about Gay-Straight Alliances, that being the censorship of open discussion by Catholic school trustees of this matter. One Edmonton trustee has been quoted saying that she would no longer speak publicly on this issue because “I promised the Archbishop I wouldn’t do this anymore.”

(http://www.edmontonjournal.com/More+support+coming+LGBTQ+youth+Catholic+trustee/10539400/story.html) In some ways this is the most ominous step of anything we have seen in this whole debate — not only is
the freedom of association being restricted with GSAs, but it feels like freedom of speech is now also being denied.

Bishop Henry has described Bill 10 as a “win-win for everyone” by enshrining the rights of parents, recognizing the autonomy of school boards, and recognizing the rights of students. However, so long as Catholic school boards continue to bar Gay-Straight Alliances and restrict fundamental freedoms, it is hard to see how this is a win for anyone.

Dr. Kristopher Wells is an Assistant Professor and Director of Programs & Services at the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services, University of Alberta.
Emilio Fantin · SAIT
The word “gay” has been changed by the present culture norms to mean “physical relationships between the same genders”. It is a scientific biological fact that human beings exist because of the physical relationship between a man and a woman. How do opinion polls, statistics, bullying, name-calling, student absenteeism, suicide, and any individual desire is to be tolerated, make same gender physical relationship normal? Some of the above issues are serious and work must be done to find solutions. However to use the above issues to promote physical relationships between the same gender as normal and on the same level as physical relationship between a man and a woman goes against common sense, against science and against history. For non-Catholics, the Catholic Church uses the universal concept of “natural law”, (I do not mean the laws of nature), to explain the positions it takes on social matters. The promotion of same gender physical relationships goes against science and will lead people into confusion.

Reply · Like · 32 · Follow Post · December 23, 2014 at 10:39am

Sarah Graves Stelfox · Top Commenter
It is also a scientific biological fact that homosexual behaviour has been documented in thousands of animal species. In fact, one species of goose that forms a male pair bond and mates with a female each season is more successful at raising their young than male/female pairs are, as there’s one male who can remain to guard the female on her nest, and one who locates food for her. So I don’t think you’ll get too far trying to use science to back you up. You also mentioned history: I think the ancient Greeks might like to challenge that notion. Common sense? Well, it seems like common sense to me that if approximately 5% of the population is gay, and simply wants to lead their lives without interference from busy-bodies, then common sense dictates that I follow both the “live and let live” motto, as well as the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have done unto yourself.” GSAs help kids, help schools, and hurt no one.

Reply · Like · 13 · December 23, 2014 at 11:31am

David Watson · Top Commenter · Edmonton, Alberta
Your argument might be more successful if you didn’t try say “against Science” and “against History”, since neither is true. The “normal” that you are trying to reinforce is a relatively new construct historically and religiously speaking. I don’t think you will find any research/evidence to back your viewpoint.

Reply · Like · 1 · December 24, 2014 at 3:12pm

Danny Ceccheto · Top Commenter · SAIT Polytechnic
Emilio, your entire comment is a load of crap. This issue is extremely simple....are you for equality of all persons or not. This is also another example of how catholic medieval thinking clashes with modern society. Hopefully within a generation or two when the last remaining bigots like yourself are long gone, these pathetic debates will be looked upon with shame, just like we look back at black rights, women voting etc.

Reply · Like · 2 · December 24, 2014 at 7:05pm

Bob Franssen · Top Commenter
Well all I have to say is God loves everyone no matter what maybe the church should maybe think that way

Reply · Like · 4 · Follow Post · December 24, 2014 at 12:14am

Danny Ceccheto · Top Commenter · SAIT Polytechnic
While I appreciate the way you think, you’re god does not think everyone is equal. There is numerous verses in the bible that incites hatred toward gays, women, black people, jews, etc.

Reply · Like · 1 · December 24, 2014 at 7:07pm

Emilio Fantin · SAIT
Let’s play a game. This extraterrestrial has been studying the people on the planet earth and has observed that there are mutually exclusive ideas among the human beings. Some human beings believe that sexual relationships between the same genders is normal and acceptable, Other human beings believe that sexual relationships are normal and acceptable between the opposite genders only. This extraterrestrial believes the principle that “two opposing ideas can not both be true”. Of the following religions or ideologies or philosophies; Atheism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Marxism, New Age, Secular Humanism, Sikhism, Social Age, Sem, Zoroastrianism, or some other one; which one would you tell the extraterrestrial contains the “most” truths about humans beings? What worldview can be the most accurate about the reality of the universe? The extraterrestrial would probably tell us to stop wasting our time arguing about contradicting individual issues. The extraterrestrial would probably tell us to pick the most accurate religion or ideology or philosophy and live by the rules and rights of that worldview. Once that is decided, human beings would get along much better! Let’s start with Judaism and Christianity. Which one will you pick or suggest?

Reply · Like · Edited · December 30, 2014 at 11:06am
December 15, 2014

For Immediate Release

By 3 to 1, Catholics in Alberta Support Gay-Straight Alliances

(Edmonton, Alberta) Last week, in a Leger poll of 1000 Albertans, 52% of Catholics supported Gay-Straight Alliances in Alberta schools, while 18% of Catholics were opposed. The remainder did not support or oppose GSAs. In releasing the poll results, Dr. Kristopher Wells made these comments:

"When only 18% of Catholics are opposed to Gay-Straight Alliances, this is an indication of how far Albertans have moved on LGBTQ issues and a stunning reflection on how far Alberta’s elected officials have fallen behind their constituents.

"In Alberta today, there are over 90 Gay-Straight Alliances in Public Schools; yet there still has not been a single GSA allowed by a Catholic school board.

"One has to ask: for whom do these school boards speak? It doesn’t appear to be the Catholic community; and it is certainly not the young LGBTQ students who need our support and protection. Research has conclusively shown again and again how GSAs serve as a critical protective factor – it is no understatement to say that they can and do save lives.

"No one is forced to join a Gay-Straight Alliance; they simply represent spaces of safety and belonging for students who are often the most vulnerable. In Canada, the greatest number of hate crimes are perpetrated by and against young people.

"Whether it is Catholic school boards or the Premier and his colleagues, it is time for someone to show the courage to do the right thing.

"It is time for Alberta to stick up for its kids."

Contact: Dr. Kristopher Wells, Assistant Professor; Director of Programs & Services, Institute for Sexual Minorities Studies and Services, University of Alberta
Ph. 780-492-9908 or Kris.Wells@ualberta.ca

Survey Details
The survey of 1002 Albertans over 18 was conducted by Leger between December 8th and 11th, 2014. Leger is the largest Canadian market research firm. The survey question was: "Recently there has been some discussion in Alberta about gay-straight alliances in Alberta schools. Do you support or oppose the idea of schools allowing gay-straight alliances in Alberta?" Those who identified as Catholics responded as follows: Strongly oppose (11.6%), Somewhat oppose (6.2%), Neither support nor oppose (19.7%), Somewhat support (14.4%), Strongly support (37.9%), Don’t know (10.1%). Further details from this survey will be released in coming days.

-30-
December 29, 2014

For Immediate Release

Newly released data from December 2014 Poll shows that:

Premier and MLAs Lag Behind Albertans on Gay-Straight Alliances

(Edmonton, Alberta) Data released today from a Leger poll of 1002 Albertans in December 2014 shows that only 20.7% of Albertans aged 18 and over oppose Gay-Straight Alliances in Alberta schools. A significant number were neutral or did not have an opinion (31.6%) while the greatest number (47.8%) supported Gay-Straight Alliances.

Support for Gay-Straight Alliances was strongest in Edmonton at 56.5% with only 18.0% opposed, followed by Calgary with 51.3% support and 18.6% opposed. Only 25.3% of Albertans living outside Edmonton and Calgary were opposed to GSAs. The greater discrepancy was between men and women – 13.8% of women opposed GSAs compared to 27.4% of men (detailed poll results are attached).

In releasing the poll results, Dr. Kristopher Wells made these comments:

“This poll by Leger once again reinforces just how far Albertans have come in their attitudes toward Gay-Straight Alliances. We have often been told attitudes are significantly different outside the big cities, but this is not true. No matter where people live in Alberta, rural or urban, we have collectively joined the 21st century. We’re not the dinosaurs people say we are, anywhere in Alberta.

“It leaves one baffled why the Premier and so many Conservative MLAs are hesitant to act on this issue. Early on, Mr. Prentice showed promising signs that he was going to be forward looking on LGBTQ issues. But on Gay-Straight Alliances, he has stalled; while Dr. Raj Sherman, Rachel Notley, and Danielle Smith all indicated they were ready to move forward and vote to fully support GSAs, without restrictions or caveats.

“There has been much speculation about the stance of PC MLAs. Clearly, there were pressures from certain church hierarchies who chose to involve themselves in the political debates about GSAs in Alberta. But those hierarchies are clearly out of step with their own followers, as polls demonstrate in Alberta. And throughout the world, the winds of change are making these ultra-conservative voices less relevant. Whether it is Archbishop Tutu in the Anglican church, or Pope Francis in the Catholic church, the voices for moderation toward LGBTQ human rights are gaining momentum. These are the voices of the future.

“There have also been suggestions of legal challenges from religious groups, which at best are a distraction and debatable. In Ontario, for example, while some groups huffed and puffed about legal action the Government had the courage to pass legislation in support of GSAs, without any legal repercussions.

“Here in Alberta, PC amendments to Bill 10 would have forced Alliances at many schools to meet off school grounds, treating LGBTQ students like the lepers of old. GSAs are voluntary student groups – no different from a chess club or a football team – and they are about the security and safety of LGBTQ students who still face pervasive discrimination in our schools. There is consistent evidence that Gay-Straight Alliances save lives.
This is not an issue that needs to be “paused”, but many of us fear the Premier feels under intense pressure to delay the discussion. Quite simply, the Premier and his MLAs just need to do the right thing and support LGBTQ students fully and unequivocally.”

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Contact: Dr. Kristopher Wells, Assistant Professor; Director of Programs & Services, Institute for Sexual Minorities Studies and Services, University of Alberta
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LEGER SURVEY DETAILS

The Leger survey of 1002 Albertans, 18 and over, was conducted between December 8th and 11th, 2014 (with a margin of error of 3.1%). Leger is the largest Canadian market research firm. The firm surveyed the following question:

“Recently there has been some discussion in Alberta about gay-straight alliances in Alberta schools. Do you support or oppose the idea of schools allowing gay-straight alliances in Alberta?”

These were the response breakdowns to the above question:

All Alberta
Strongly oppose – 12.5%
Somewhat oppose – 8.2%
Neither support nor oppose – 20.4%
Somewhat support – 12.9%
Strongly support – 34.9%
Don’t know – 11.2%

Calgary CMA (Central Metropolitan Area)
Strongly oppose – 12.1%
Somewhat oppose – 6.5%
Neither support nor oppose – 17.5%
Somewhat support – 14.1%
Strongly support – 37.1%
Don’t know – 12.6%

Edmonton CMA (Central Metropolitan Area)
Strongly oppose – 10.9%
Somewhat oppose – 7.2%
Neither support nor oppose – 17.9%
Somewhat support – 12.0%
Strongly support – 44.4%
Don’t know – 7.6%

Outside Edmonton and Calgary CMAs
Strongly oppose – 14.5%
Somewhat oppose – 10.8%
Neither support nor oppose – 25.6%
Somewhat support – 12.5%
Strongly support – 23.4%
Don’t know – 13.2%
**Male**
Strongly oppose – 16.7%
Somewhat oppose – 10.7%
Neither support nor oppose – 22.8%
Somewhat support – 12.6%
Strongly support – 31.0%
Don’t know – 6.2%

**Female**
Strongly oppose – 8.2%
Somewhat oppose – 5.6%
Neither support nor oppose – 17.9%
Somewhat support – 13.3%
Strongly support – 38.8%
Don’t know – 16.2%

**Respondents Reporting as Catholic** (information previously released)
Strongly oppose – 11.6%
Somewhat oppose – 6.2%
Neither support nor oppose – 19.7%
Somewhat support – 14.4%
Strongly support – 37.9%
Don’t know – 10.1%
An Open Letter to Catholic School Board Trustees in Alberta

January 7, 2015

Dear Trustee,

Perhaps the great tragedy of the current debates in Alberta about Gay-Straight Alliances has been the silencing of the Catholic community.

As someone who hears from many Catholics who want to have a voice, this letter is an appeal to:

Let Your People Speak

It is, as well, an appeal to you to speak out, as elected trustees voted to serve the tens of thousands of Albertans who support Catholic schools.

The issues are well known to you. You know that Gay-Straight Alliances are voluntary student initiated groups proven to provide a safe environment and help save lives, in ways that no other alternatives have been able to deliver.

This view is shared by large numbers of Catholic educators, who have been silenced. It is felt passionately by many Catholic students – they too are silenced, as are their parents. I provide examples of these silenced voices in my attachment.

The truth is that the majority of Catholics in Alberta support Gay-Student Alliances compared to the less than 20% who are opposed\(^1\). Many more Catholics in Alberta appear to support the new spirit of conversation they feel is being advocated by their Pope. Yet trustees who agree with Gay-Straight Alliances, and who might speak for the majority of Catholics, are the ones silenced.

What does this say about our democracy if you are prohibited from speaking on this issue? Gay-Straight Alliances have taken one issue, that of freedom of assembly, and added another profound issue, that of freedom of speech.

I ask that even if personally you choose not to speak, that you remove the curtain of silence and allow others within your jurisdictions – educators, students, and parents – to have their say. In the year of 2015, in Alberta, that should be our democratic way.

Sincerely,

Dr. Kristopher Wells
Assistant Professor, University of Alberta

Attachment: Background Statement

\(^1\) December 8-11, 2014 Leger research poll.