

# Alarm grows as Saskatchewan bars third-party sexual health, sexual abuse prevention educators from classrooms

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Delilah Kamuhanda, Education and Outreach Co-ordinator with Saskatoon Sexual Health, in the library of the clinic in Saskatoon, Sask., on Oct. 20. Saskatchewan has banned all external organizations, including the Saskatoon Sexual Health organization, from presenting sex-ed sessions at schools in the province.

LIAM RICHARDS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

In [“I’m the Boss of Me,”](#) a program for Grade 4 students in Saskatchewan designed to prevent sexual abuse, a puppet show tells the story of three friends, two of whom are victims. The friends come to understand the abuse is not their fault and should not be kept secret, and that there are people to turn for help.

Through the last school year, 4,166 students took part in the program, which ran for 17 years through the Saskatoon Sexual Assault & Information Centre (SSAIC).

But the program is suspended this fall, after the Saskatchewan government halted all third-party educators from presenting on sexual health in classrooms. The directive has also barred staff working for sexual assault centres, who would visit schools to talk about sexual-abuse prevention, as well as organizations focused on LGBTQ safety and well-being.

The suspension is part of the government’s controversial [“parental inclusion and consent” policy](#). Issued days before school resumed this year, the measure also forced teachers, coaches and school staff to inform parents of any children under 16 asking to change their pronouns at school. The policy officially became law this month, even as experts argue it amounts to a forced outing of vulnerable LGBTQ students.

Both the pronoun policy and sex-ed stoppage are part of a broader “parental rights” push to give parents firmer say over what their children learn at school. Education critics say it is a bewildering and worrying direction, particularly as Saskatchewan has the country’s [second highest adolescent pregnancy rates](#), [heavy caseloads of HIV](#) and other [sexually transmitted infections](#), as well as [disproportionately high rates of interpersonal violence and sexual assault](#).

“Students have a right to this education. They have a right to learn how to keep themselves safe in dangerous situations,” said Reagan Conway, executive director at SSAIC, which is now also barred from teaching “No Is a Full Sentence,” a Grade 8 program focused on healthy relationships, consent, boundaries and dating violence.

For years, outside instructors would help teach sexual health and abuse prevention – lessons mandated by the province’s own curriculum. The goal was partly to assist time-strapped teachers who might not have the latest expertise or comfort level to deliver the sensitive material effectively.

But this fall, teachers are largely left on their own, as the ministry reviews third-party educators' work "to ensure alignment with curriculum outcomes." For now, only teachers and government staff, including nurses with the Saskatchewan Health Authority, are permitted to deliver sexual health education.

The move follows [Planned Parenthood being suspended](#) from presenting in Saskatchewan schools earlier this year after an instructor left out a series of cards about sexual vocabulary on a side table during a sexual-health class for grade 9 students in Lumsden. The secondary resource had not been reviewed by the school, and was deemed inappropriate for students. Several months later, all outside sex ed was paused.

"What we're seeing is a lot of misguided fear," said Caitlin Cottrell, executive director of Saskatoon Sexual Health, which is now prohibited from teaching sex ed in classrooms after getting more than 100 requests from schools in the previous school year.

The organization's elementary school sessions included discussions on puberty and healthy relationships, while high school topics included contraceptives and sexually transmitted blood-borne infections. The educators would share their online learning materials with parents, inviting them to reach out with questions or concerns.

"Sexual education is part of the standard curriculum from Grade 4 to Grade 10. We were just a very commonly used teaching tool," Ms. Conway said. "In situations like this, us being barred from providing education is very deliberate. It's through evidence-based education that we bridge this gap."

Teaching sex ed, instructors [must be direct and use proper anatomical terminology](#), not euphemistic language, experts say. They have to be prepared to answer students' questions, often posed through an anonymous question box. The questions can be sensitive and complex. They can be troubling; sometimes, students disclose harms at home.

Other times, students ask ridiculous questions to get a rise out of instructors – "teen stuff," said Delilah Kamuhanda, education and outreach co-ordinator at Saskatoon Sexual Health.

It can be a daunting exercise for teachers who have to face their kids all year. For outside educators, there is more distance, but also deeper experience in the

field, Ms. Kamuhanda said: “My comfort is going to be beyond what their comfort is.”



Students ask ridiculous questions to get a rise out of instructors, Ms. Kamuhanda says. Her comfort-level is beyond what a teacher's would be in answering these questions, she says. LIAM RICHARDS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Saskatoon elementary school teacher Zane Arnott worries the government’s move is having a chilling effect, as teachers could become reticent to raise any discussion of sexual health in their classrooms.

“I think that very little sexual health education is probably being taught this fall,” Mr. Arnott said.

In the past, the teacher would bring in reputable outside groups specializing in sexual health and abuse prevention – always informing parents beforehand, a standard practice. The sex ed instructors would arrive with well-developed lessons, Mr. Arnott found.

“Knowledge is not an attack,” the teacher said. “Knowledge is an opportunity to be ready to respond when the content of a kid’s life becomes more fraught, when they’re dealing with potentially risky activities.”

Saskatchewan’s ministry of education would not answer questions about why third-party sexual abuse prevention sessions have been halted in classrooms. In an e-mailed statement, the ministry wrote that counsellors from sexual-assault centres were still allowed.

Ms. Conway stressed that this is inadequate: “We’re talking about trying to prevent child sexual abuse, as opposed to counselling only after something has happened.”

She’s frustrated at the notion that abuse prevention lessons could run in any way counter to parents’ wishes for their children, as letters are sent home with students for parents outlining details of each program, school counsellors are present and guidance is provided for guardians on what to do if a child discloses abuse afterward.

“I really dislike the idea of pitting parents against educators,” Ms. Conway said. “We all want what’s best for children.”

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