

October 5, 2017

Dear Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, School Board Trustees and Directors of Instruction,

I am a parent of two children attending public schools in School District 71, a daughter in grade 6 and a son in grade 9. I am writing to request that the district extend its funding of sexual health education to all students, for each and every year of their education in the schools in our district.

It is my understanding that the district currently funds only grades 1, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 10 (although this has recently changed as grade 1 was not covered in previous years). I also understand that the PACs of some elementary schools fundraise to pay for sexual health education for the other grades in their respective schools. This is an unfair burden on parents. It also results in unequal education in our district as some PACs have less affluent neighbourhoods to draw from and many children miss out on this important component of their development into mature and responsible adults.

Dr. Claire Vanstone's recent presentation at Lake Trail in early September ("Teens, Phones and Sex: Inoculating Your Child in Today's Sexualized Digital World) emphasizes the need for more and better sexual health education for our children. In it, Dr. Claire informed parents that:

- The average age of a child's first exposure to sexually explicit online materials (the Canadian legal term for pornography) is between 11-12 and a Canadian study of teenagers with an average age of 14 found that 90% of boys and 60% of girls had watched pornography, with 1/3 of boys and 2% of girls doing so at least one a month. Not only did she teach/remind us that accessing SEOM under the age of 18 is illegal, but also that research has shown that adolescent exposure to SEOM/pornography:
 - Encourages earlier sexual debut;
 - Fosters the belief that women are sex objects and are sexually submissive;
 - Encourages a stronger interest in sex and more frequent thoughts about sex;
 - Fosters an acceptance of sexual coercion and encourages and supports sexual aggression; and
 - Portrays men and women in unrealistic ways.

- 24% of high school age teens (14-17) have been involved in a form of nude sexting; 15% of Canadian grade 11 students surveyed had sent a nude photo and 36% said they had received one; and 15% of teens who have sent or posted nude/semi-nude images of themselves send these messages to people they have never met, but know from the internet. Laws regarding age of consent (for sexual activity) and the distribution of child pornography laws apply to the sending of intimate images/sexting and can result in serious legal consequences to young people

According to Peggy Orenstein's book *Girls & Sex* (published in 2016), girls are particularly vulnerable. Based upon her own research (for which she interviewed more than 70 young women between the ages of 15 to 20 who were in college or college-bound), she reports that:

- “Fully half the girls had experienced something along the spectrum of coercion to rape” (and only two of whom had previously reported what had happened to an adult);
- “Even in consensual encounters, much of what the girls described was painful to hear” as their experiences catered to male pleasure and perceptions thereof; and
- Every single girl regardless of her class, ethnicity or sexual orientation had been sexually harassed in middle school, high school or college or often all three.

Further, as lower mainland sexual health educator Meg Hickling reminds us in her book *Speaking of Sex*, studies from all over the world consistently show that children who are educated about healthy bodies, including the scientific/proper naming of body parts in their early childhood, and healthy sexuality are better protected from abuse and exploitation.

In light of these statistics, it is imperative that our district (and better yet our provincial ministry) provide more comprehensive education on sexual health issues to our students. (Please note that I am not simply advocating for more presentations to parents (although I think that initiative would also be beneficial), but rather that a sexual health educator be hired to teach every class of students age-appropriate materials, such as is being done through Dr. Claire in our schools.)

I appreciate that our district faced tremendous financial pressures in previous years due to chronic underfunding of public education in our province and the declining enrolment problem that plagued the district for years, but these problems have been corrected with the Supreme Court of Canada’s decision late last year, the election of a new provincial government and the influx of young families to our district (particularly to West Courtenay and Cumberland). As such, as the board and administration consider its budgetary priorities this year, I urge you to consider and approve the extension of funding to cover sexual health education for all students every year that they attend school in our district.

Regards,
SHANNON ALDINGER