

Diversity, Equity and Human Rights

[2003, revised 2013]

Principles, Definitions and Fundamental Elements

A primary role of public education in a democratic society is to foster equity, human rights, social responsibility and justice. The Alberta Teachers' Association is committed to eliminating barriers that prevent people from participating fully in education and society and to fostering understanding, empathy and compassion.

The Association is committed to the principles of respecting diversity, equity and human rights. The Association understands "respect for diversity" to mean adhering to beliefs and practices that demonstrate tolerance; accepting and respecting differences in people and their unique circumstances; recognizing differences as positive attributes around which to build educational experiences; and recognizing the complex and changing nature of individual identities. Rather than something to be managed, diversity is, in the Association's view, an asset that can help create an abundant and productive democracy. The Association understands "equity" to mean treating all people fairly and justly in light of their unique circumstances; ensuring that all people have an equal opportunity to reach their full potential; and ensuring that oppressed and marginalized individuals and groups are included in society and treated fairly. The Association understands "human rights" to mean the equal and inalienable right of all persons to live in a free, just and peaceful society without regard to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical characteristics, disability, marital status, family status, age, ancestry, place of origin, place of residence, socioeconomic background or linguistic background. Supporting human rights also entails recognizing and protecting the inherent dignity of all people at the individual, organizational and public policy levels.

The Association's work in the area of diversity, equity and human rights has four broad goals: (1) to foster the development of a safe and caring, inclusive school culture that provides students with a broad range of educational experiences that reflect the diversity of the community; (2) to ensure that student learning is based on giving all students an equal opportunity to meet high standards, using a curriculum and assessment methods that reflect the diverse nature of knowledge and that draws on differences among people to enrich learning and engaging students as active citizens; (3) to ensure that professional development for teachers encourages them to engage in reflective practice and research, helps them to accommodate diversity in the classroom and helps them understand how social class and power relationships contribute to sexism, racism and other forms of marginalization; and (4) to advocate for a form of educational governance and administration that provide adequate and equitable funding to schools, regards educational funding as an investment in the broader community, uses a broad range of accountability measures that reflect the complex nature of learning and supports research that sheds light on the complex relationships among poverty, racism and all forms of marginalization. These goals recognize the importance of adapting a multifaceted and research-based approach to promoting equity, human rights and respect for diversity.

Inclusive Learning Communities

The Association believes that schools should be inclusive learning communities. As inclusive learning communities, schools should demonstrate the following characteristics: a respect for diversity, equity and human rights; support for the intellectual, social, physical, emotional and spiritual development of each child; respect for the values of cooperation, trust, caring, sharing, respect and responsibility; a commitment to racial harmony and gender equity; support for Indigenous First Nations, Métis and Inuit education; support for initiatives that address the effect of poverty on children; a commitment to peace, global education and the prevention of violence, support for the development of systemic and sustainable school/family/community partnerships; and provide ongoing professional development and resources that support inclusive learning communities. Schools that have these characteristics are places of empathy and safety in which differences are valued.

The Association fosters the development of schools as inclusive learning communities by supporting teaching practices that promote respect for diversity, equity and human rights; by supporting initiatives that schools, locals, specialist councils and other subgroups take to transform schools into inclusive learning communities; and by building partnerships with organizations that share our commitment to fostering inclusion.

Diversity, equity and human rights efforts can be sustained only through collaboration and principled partnerships. Cooperation among stakeholders and the willingness of government and nongovernmental agencies to share resources are critical.

The Association's Code of Professional Conduct admonishes teachers to respect the dignity and rights of all persons. Prospective teachers should be thoroughly prepared to cope with the increasingly diverse makeup of today's classrooms. Therefore, faculties of education should include and support the principles of diversity, equity and human rights in teacher preparation programs and practices.

The Association supports inclusive learning communities through the establishment of gay-straight alliance groups to create awareness and action that promote the creation of safe learning environments for all students in Alberta high schools.

Discrimination

The Association opposes any injurious discrimination on the basis of race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical characteristics, disability, marital status, family status, age, ancestry, place of origin, place of residence, socioeconomic background or linguistic background. Furthermore, the Association opposes the distribution of material that promotes racial or ethnic intolerance. Local and provincial programs should be developed to help teachers counteract and eliminate stereotyping and injurious discrimination by promoting intercultural respect, understanding and appreciation.

The Association respects single-parent, same-sex, biracial, bicultural, blended, extended, foster and traditional nuclear family units and believes that members of all such families have the right to be free from harassment, discrimination and violence; be treated fairly, equitably and with dignity; have their confidentiality respected; and be valued and affirmed as human beings. The Association also believe that everyone has the right to self-identification and freedom of expression.

The Association opposes all efforts by the Government of Alberta to opt out of any part of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In addition the Association vigorously protests hiring practices by school boards that violate the *Alberta Human Rights Act* or the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The Association believes that the Government of Alberta should take stronger action to prevent discrimination. For example, the Government of Alberta should amend the *Alberta Human Rights Act* to include gender identity as an area of protection. The Government of Alberta should also pass legislation that prevents school boards from discriminating against teachers who take part in politics or who are elected to the Legislative Assembly, the House of Commons or any other governing body. Such legislation should also include permission for leaves of absence for campaigning purposes.

Respect for Diversity

Multiculturalism

The Government of Canada officially adopted a multiculturalism policy in 1971. This policy, which strives to preserve and enhance the cultural diversity of Canadians while working toward equality for all, requires the support of all levels of government and institutions. The Government of Alberta should recognize that all citizens have the right to participate in all aspects of Canadian society. The Government of Alberta should also encourage the development of Alberta's linguistic diversity and multicultural heritage and promote intercultural awareness by developing policies that increase mutual knowledge and understanding of different cultures. Furthermore, the Government of Alberta should develop and prescribe for local approval multicultural education programs that promote intercultural respect, understanding and appreciation. For their part, school boards should ensure that schools are sensitive, in all elements of school culture, to the racial, religious and cultural makeup of their communities.

Equity

Social Justice

All people should have equal opportunities to benefit socially and economically in society. All students, regardless of their linguistic and cultural background, should have an equal opportunity to achieve their educational potential. Likewise, socioeconomic status should not determine educational opportunities. The Association supports actions intended to improve the economic status of families living in poverty. For example, the Association endorses the concept of a legislated minimum wage.

Gender Equity

Educators can promote gender equity by encouraging students to participate in educational programs regardless of their gender; by ensuring that responsibilities in school are not assigned on the basis of gender-role stereotypes; by adopting instructional materials and practices that discourage gender-role stereotyping; by using inclusive language in educational materials and in school communications; and by ensuring that career counselling does not promote gender-role stereotyping.

The Association endorses the increased representation of women in educational administration in situations in which underrepresentation has been identified.

Employment Equity

The Association believes that employment equity is a positive process leading to equal opportunities in education and employment. Accordingly, it endorses the concept of equity in employment for all people without discrimination on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, place of residence, age, mental or physical disability, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, employment status of spouse or socioeconomic background. Furthermore, the Association supports employment programs designed to (1) improve conditions for anyone disadvantaged because of discrimination and to (2) promote educational opportunities, professional development and career advancement for underrepresented groups.

Human Rights

The Association believes that human rights education should be integrated into the curriculum.

Rights of the Official Language Minority

The public and separate school systems are publicly funded and have historical and constitutional legitimacy. The Government of Alberta should support Alberta parents' right to have their children educated in the official language of origin and to have equal opportunity to become fluent in the other official language. The Association endorses the right of the official language minority to manage its own schools within the publicly funded system and believes that the Department of Education should ensure the Association the right, as an equal partner among the stakeholder groups, to participate in defining legislation and regulations governing the management and control of French minority language education by francophones.

Protection of Rights

A successful education system protects the rights of teachers, students and parents. All education partners share a responsibility for ensuring these rights. The Association attempts to ensure natural justice for its members. Because false accusations against teachers can destroy careers, the Association believes that the Criminal Code should be amended to protect the rights of the accused from publicity resulting from charges of child abuse and/or sexual assault until such time as the court finds the accused guilty.

Conclusion

The Association believes that the tensions that are an integral part of a democratic and inclusive society can—and must—be managed peacefully. Accordingly, the Association endorses the principle of worldwide nuclear disarmament. On a more local level, the Association works collaboratively through its policies and programs to build a culture of peace and nonviolence not only within the profession but also within the public education system and society generally. In doing so, it endorses the following guiding principles from the *United Nations Manifesto 2000 for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence*: (1) respect for the life and dignity of each human being without discrimination or prejudice; (2) rejection of violence in all forms, whether physical, sexual, psychological, economic or social, especially in relation to the most deprived and vulnerable elements of society, such as children and adolescents; (3) sharing of time and material resources in an effort to end exclusion, injustice and political and economic oppression; (4) defending the right of people to express themselves freely but in a way that involves discussion and listening and that avoids fanaticism, defamation and rejection of others; (5) promoting responsible consumer behaviour and development practices that respect all forms of life and preserve the balance of nature on the planet; and (6) contributing to the development of communities that respect democratic principles and in which women participate fully.