

Coalition: sex-ed lessons on 'solid, honest ground'

SCHOOLS

Diverse groups, including many faithful, join to support change

Organizations representing Muslim parents and recent immigrants have joined a new, diverse coalition of 144 groups that plans to fight the ongoing anti-sex-education boycotts and billboards with their own public-service announcements and open appeal to Ontarians.

"We have examined the new sex-ed curriculum and — as people who live and breathe the health and well-being of Ontario's diverse communities — we say that the curriculum stands on solid, honest ground," says the Ontario Coalition Supporting Health Education in an open letter.

Members of the new coalition will gather at Queen's Park on Wednesday to voice their support for the new curriculum and to release the letter and a video.

Opposition to the updated health curriculum has come from different faith and community groups — with thousands of families pulling their children out of school last spring for up to a week in protest.

But the epicentre of the controversy continues to be Toronto's Thorncliffe Park neighbourhood, where the local public school was half-empty on the first day and where 120 students remain out of school, most from Muslim families who consider the curriculum immoral and age-inappropriate.

Another provincewide school boycott is scheduled Oct. 1, and billboards are now springing



Rabea Murtaza, head of Muslims for Ontario's Health and Physical Education Curriculum, hopes to challenge the popular narrative that Muslims are united against the updated health lessons. COLE BURSTON/TORSTAR NEWS SERVICE

up across the province warning that the curriculum threatens children.

"It seems like the opposition as it exists is not just Muslim, but that has captured the narrative. But on the ground, it is really diverse," says Toronto mom Rabea Murtaza, who founded the 682-member Muslims for Ontario's Health and Physical Education Curriculum, which has joined the coalition. However, she says, those who support the curriculum are just as diverse.

"I've heard from a lot of people. I'm part of a number of Muslim mom Facebook groups and ... they care about education. The debate is really rich in these groups, and there are lots of voices that say, 'It's OK. We came here for education. Our kids need this.'"

The coalition comprises religious organizations, First Nations groups, hospitals, universities, parents and community health agencies.

Maya Roy, executive director of Newcomer Women's Services Toronto, said her agency got outside after some of its South Asian members worked on a project in which "aunties and grandmothers were trained to go out and run sharing circles in homes and mosques and temples" about domestic violence and "were shocked to find out that you can have sexual assault and rape within a marriage." They wanted to inform

their own children and grandchildren about that, she said, as well as issues like inappropriate touching, which is covered in the new curriculum.

"We feel a small minority is getting a lot of attention," said Roy.

The curriculum itself is "benign," she argues. Faith-based criticisms "don't hold water," said Roy, who is Hindu. Critics say the curriculum violates family values, "but it actually supports family values and encourages kids to talk to an elder or go to a mosque or temple" for guidance.

"In our religion, we acknowledge that people have both fe-

male and male elements; our gods and goddesses have male and female elements," she added, addressing critics who oppose children being taught about different sexual orientations or gender identities.

Doug Kerr, father to a five-year-old son, was surprised by the animosity toward the new curriculum and he began what is now a 10,000-member Facebook group in support of it.

"A lot of the fears around this are around misinformation and around gender and gender issues. There's a lot of homophobia and transphobia happening as well. It's a concern to me as a parent of a same-sex family. I believe the curriculum is absolutely critical; it brings what kids learn in line with modern families today."

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“The entire conversation has been hijacked.”

Maya Roy

COMMUNITY HOUSING

Retrofits to boost energy efficiency



Gilbert Ngabo
Metro | Toronto

The climate-change fight is coming to community housing.

The Toronto Atmospheric Fund has teamed up with the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) for a \$4.2-million project that will perform energy-efficient retrofits on old buildings.

Dubbed TowerWise Retrofit, the project will start with seven buildings, all of which are at least 45 years old. The upgrades will include double-glazed windows, high-efficiency refrigerators and boilers and low-flow faucets.

"Buildings use a lot of energy but they also waste a lot of energy," said Julia Langer, CEO of the Toronto Atmospheric Fund.

The proposed retrofits are projected to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by 30 per cent, while utility costs will be reduced by 20 per cent.

IN BRIEF

High speed blamed in fatal rollover on Highway 401

The OPP believe excessive speed was a factor in a crash on Highway 401 that killed Alizeb Mirza, 27, of Mississauga.

The OPP says that just before midnight, a driver lost control near Dixie Road. The vehicle rolled, and the unbuckled driver was ejected. Witnesses told police the vehicle was possibly in a race before the crash.

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