

Supporting 2SLGBTQ+ Students in the Toronto District School Board during COVID-19

As our schools turn to remote learning and well-being to accommodate physical distancing during COVID-19, a number of Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Non-Binary, Queer (2SLGBTQ+) students have lost face-to-face time with affirming peers and educators in Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) as well as in other spaces. Many are now forced to isolate in homes that are unwelcoming, unaffirming, and even violent.

2SLGBTQ+ youth are especially vulnerable to mental health concerns, and face increased risk of physical and sexual abuse, substance use and suicide. 2SLGBTQ+ youth are 14 times more at risk of suicide than straight cisgender youth.^{1 2}

Intersectionality refers to an approach by which intersecting experiences of marginalization and the needs of the whole person are considered. Youth may experience multiple forms of marginalization at the same time, such as racism, sexism, poverty, disablism and other factors which impact their experiences of biphobia, homophobia, and transphobia in unique ways. TDSB census data indicates that Black Queer and Trans youth face increased marginalization.³

A growing body of research confirms that a Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) – a student-led group that the *Education Act* mandates schools to support-- has a positive and lasting impact on students' overall health, well-being, self-esteem and academic performance, since GSAs aim to promote feelings of belonging, acceptance and community. Supportive environments that consider the needs of the whole person are essential to mental health.

Physical distancing requires a new set of strategies and provides new opportunities to support and affirm 2SLGBTQ+ students, especially when they live in unsupportive environments.

This tip sheet offers considerations for the GSA staff advisor, teachers and support staff to work with 2SLGBTQ+ students in virtual settings, and guidance to help mitigate some of the emerging challenges they face during the pandemic.

¹ Benibgui, M. (2011). Mental health challenges and resilience in lesbian, gay and bisexual young adults: Biological and psychological internalization of minority stress and victimization. Concordia University, Montreal.

² Bauer, G., Boyce, M., Coleman, T., Kaay, M., Scanlon, K., Travers, R. (2010). Who are trans people in Ontario? Toronto: Trans PULSE E-Bulletin. Report No:1(1).

³ (2017, June 30). Retrieved May 13, 2020, from <http://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/research/docs/Census/Census - Black LGBTQ Students - Revised June 30.pdf>

1. Create an Affirming Virtual Meeting Space⁴

a. Maintain Safety and Confidentiality

- **Use approved online platforms:** Different online platforms have their own pros and cons. The TDSB has approved Google Meet and Brightspace Virtual Classroom as online platforms staff can use. Continue to follow the directions from your professional colleges and unions.
- **Keep engagement transparent:** Monitor chat spaces and ensure that groups can only meet when a staff member is present.
- **Create or amend group agreements:** Take time to review whether the current in-school GSA agreements still apply or whether updated versions may be more relevant for the virtual group.

b. Maintain Accessibility

- **Promote the new virtual format:** Distance gatherings may be more accessible to some students (e.g. if someone had previously felt too intimidated to attend in person) but may be less accessible for students who live in unsupportive environments or who don't have access to a computer or reliable Wi-Fi.
- **Enable students to engage in different ways for confidentiality and accessibility:**
 - **Chat/DM/Text only:** Parents/guardians won't be able to overhear what they are saying.
 - **Call-In Options:** Students can go for a walk and connect with more privacy.
 - **Video Off:** Students don't have to be self-conscious of their background (many video platforms also have the ability to blur or create virtual backgrounds).
- **Create an alternate group name if needed:** Some educators are concerned that the most vulnerable students won't be able to join the virtual club, as home may not be an accepting space. One solution may be to create a separate group with a different name so students have less risk of being outed by their participation.

c. Maintain Engagement

- **Create more opportunities for social connection:** Allow extra time for check-ins and schedule regular breaks. Create opportunities to do non-screen activities together, such as writing or art while still interacting.

⁴ Note. 3 Tips for a Successful Virtual GSA / SOGI 1 2 3. Adapted from <http://www.sogieducation.org/all-educators-posts/3-tips-for-a-successful-virtual-gsa> by S. Sauve, 2020. Copyright 2020 by The ARC Foundation. Adapted with permission.

- **Use the convenience of a virtual platform to engage others:** Transportation barriers no longer exist, so consider connecting with other school GSAs by partnering with another GSA or inviting guest speakers.
- **Keep it playful and fun!** Many students will appreciate the opportunity to keep it light, be silly, and play games. Pictionary and charades translate effectively through video calls, or there are numerous word games and guessing games more suitable for voice-only sessions. Be creative.

2. Anticipate Unique Challenges When Families are not Affirming⁵

While some 2SLGBTQ+ students find affirming support at school, many live with unsupportive families. When 2SLGBTQ+ students are unable to be their authentic selves, or when they are forced to live in unsupportive environments, the effects can be overwhelming.

a. Check in with the student

If the student is not open about their identity at home and if you can confirm that the virtual connection with the student is private, consider asking how their family dynamic is impacting them while in isolation at home.

b. Ask what self-care practices they have tried and what, if anything, is helping to alleviate the stress

Brainstorm new strategies together and check in with them to see which ones are working best. Make sure they know that you see them, that you affirm their identity and that this time of social isolation is temporary.

3. Protect Confidentiality and Privacy

While some students are open about their 2SLGBTQ+ identity at school, many are not out at home. Privacy and confidentiality are critically important for 2SLGBTQ+ youth, especially for those who do not have supportive families. Rejecting behaviours can have dire consequences: 25-40% of the homeless youth population in Canada identify as 2SLGBTQ+, most as a result of rejection by immediate family members.^{6 7}

- a. **Consider new risks** when meeting virtually with a 2SLGBTQ+ student. Unsupportive family members, or those who are unaware of their child's 2SLGBTQ+ identity could potentially listen in. For example, if a young trans boy is open with you

⁵ Note. SUPPORTING LGBTQ STUDENTS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS QUARANTINE: A Tip-Sheet for School Counselors. Points 2-5 Adapted from https://assets2.hrc.org/files/documents/SchoolCounselorTipSheet_COVID19_042920.pdf by Dr. Vincent Pompei, 2020. Copyright 2020 by The Human Rights Campaign. Adapted with permission.

⁶ Abramovich, A. (2016). Understanding How Policy and Culture Create Oppressive Conditions for LGBTQ2S Youth in the Shelter System. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64(11), 1484–1501. doi: 10.1080/00918369.2016.1244449

⁷ Gaetz, S., Donaldson, J., Richter, T., & Gulliver, T. (2013). *The state of homelessness in Canada 2013*. Toronto: Homeless Hub.

about his trans identity but not with his parents/guardians, think through how to best protect his safety and privacy and take the direction from the student.

- b. Create an electronic form** for meeting requests that allows the student to include the name and pronouns they want you to use during virtual meetings. Their answers may depend on their ability to secure privacy during virtual sessions. Add a blurb about the confidentiality rights of students, and provide suggestions to improve privacy, such as using an earpiece, or identifying a private area of the home during scheduled meetings. These strategies may improve the likelihood that 2SLGBTQ+ students will get the support they need.

4. Promote Resilience

When 2SLGBTQ+ students are affirmed and supported it is easier for them to think beyond current challenges. Additionally, when students feel more connected to their education, their desire and ability to learn improves. Encourage your 2SLGBTQ+ students to explore the myriad of online resources that can raise the hopes of students and encourage goal setting and planning for their future.

- a. Discuss scholarships, grants** specifically for 2SLGBTQ+ students (<https://bill7award.ca/>) and the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) for students eligible to graduate (<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/economic-response-plan.html>)
- b. Work with students to plan and set goals.** Their goals for this year may have changed. What are some experiences they'd like to have when the pandemic is over? What are some experiences they can have now, while practising physical distancing? Have they given thought to career and post-secondary goals?

5. Refer Students to Virtual Supports for 2SLGBTQ+ Youth

Affirming GSA staff advisors, teachers and support staff are often the lifeline for students, but with school buildings closed, their spaces to connect are no longer just down the hall. Having a direct connection to supportive peers and those with shared identities is critically important to the overall well-being of 2SLGBTQ+ youth. This is especially true during challenging times. With 2SLGBTQ+ drop-in centres closed and student clubs (i.e. GSAs) no longer in session, some 2SLGBTQ+ students have lost their only outlets to fully be themselves.

- a. Discuss online safety** with students and suggest 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive options. An excellent resource on online safety and dealing with cyber-bullying can be found here: <https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/cyberbullying-how-stay-safe>

Summary

2SLGBTQ+ students need to feel connected, affirmed, and supported during this period of social isolation and uncertainty. As educators and support staff, we have a critically important role to play in providing and holding space where students can express all their identities. We can support 2SLGBTQ+ students in self-care practices, finding meaningful resources and connections, and reducing the tension and stress they may be experiencing while at home.

Virtual Resources for 2SLGBTQ+ Youth

In addition to the resources listed on the board's main website (<https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Remote-Learning/Resources-During-Covid-19>), here are some 2SLGBTQ+ youth specific resources.

Black Food Sovereignty Freedom School

Black youth in custody, Black youth in care and Black LGBTQ youth, aged 12-15.

WHEN: **June 29-July 3, 12-4 p.m.** with Chef Posh, **ONLINE.**

Get free groceries delivered to cook a meal for your whole family every day for a week!

Explore growing herbs and Caribbean cooking!

Learn to cook jerk chicken, channa over rice, saltfish fritter with callaloo, and strawberry pound cake.

REGISTER: freedomsschooltoronto@gmail.com

Friends of Ruby



Friends of Ruby

Virtual Programming Schedule

Monday

Art for Change
3-4pm

Tuesday

BIPOC Drop-In
4-5pm

Wednesday

Virtual Drop-In
4-5pm

Thursday

Art Therapy
4-5:30pm

Friday

Gaming
3-4pm



All Friends of Ruby programming is for LGBTQI2S youth ages 16-29. Registration is required to participate. Links to groups will be provided to registered participants. To register, call us at 416-359-0237 or email info@friendsofruby.ca

REGISTER for Virtual Programming

Phone Number: 416-359-0237

Email: info@friendsofruby.ca

LGBT youthline

Youth Line offers confidential and non-judgemental 2SLGBTQ+ peer support through telephone, text and chat services from Sunday – Friday, 4pm – 930pm.

Website: <https://www.youthline.ca/>

Phone Number: 647-694-4275 or toll free at 1-800-268-9688 or **TEXT** 647-694-4275

SOY Community Check-Ins



REGISTER for Virtual Programming

Phone Number: 416-324-5077

Email: soy@sherbourne.on.ca

The 519 Friendly Check-In

As access to community spaces is limited right now, we are offering our communities a friendly phone or email check-in by The 519 staff once a week **from Monday to Friday**. This service is to check-in on how you are doing and offer information and updates. Please note that this is not a counselling session.

If you would like to register for the Friendly Check-In program, please complete the following online form: bit.ly/519fcpp.

Website: <https://www.the519.org/news/covid19-the519-info-updates>

Phone Number: 416-392-6874

The Studio

The Studio might be closed physically, but our virtual presence has increased. We focus on daily activities that help 2SLGBTQ+ Toronto youth connect over Zoom calls and activities such as Netflix parties.

The Studio is also here for youth that are in need of food and/or basic needs support.

Follow [@StudioAtSkylark](https://www.instagram.com/StudioAtSkylark) on [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/) to stay up to date with initiatives from The Studio.

Trans Lifeline Hotline

This hotline is a peer support service run by trans people, for trans and questioning callers. Our operators are located all over the U.S. and Canada, and are all trans-identified. If you are in crisis or just need someone to talk to, even if it's just about whether or not you're trans, please call us. We will do our best to support you and provide you resources.

Website: <https://www.translifeline.org/hotline>

Phone Number: 1-877-330-6366

Further Support is Available in your Learning Centre

LC1

Josue Tario (josue.tariocheverria@tdsb.on.ca), Student Equity Program Advisor

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Additional Resources for Safety Issues and Suicidal Ideation

Self-harming behaviours are an attempt to cope with and manage strong feelings. Students report that it provides comfort and relieves tension. The behaviour "works" in the short term. Self-harming tends to be progressive in nature and may require intervention.

If you suspect or know a youth is at risk or expressing suicidal ideation, **please contact your school social worker for support.**

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