

Best Practice: Providing a Safer Educational Space for LGBTQ Students

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CITY: TORONTO

POLICY AREAS: EDUCATION

BEST PRACTICE

The **Triangle Program** is Canada's only high school program for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ) youth. Part of Oasis Alternative Secondary School in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the Triangle Program is a safe space, free from homophobia, transphobia and heterosexism where LGBTQ youth can be themselves, be respected, and be valued for who they are. The Program is a classroom that supports students to develop or rediscover the skills necessary to successfully transition back to mainstream secondary school programs, post-secondary education, or to the workplace.

ISSUE

Homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism exist in mainstream schools and many LGBTQ students often feel unsafe and are at risk for dropping out. The Toronto District School Board sought to provide a safer, social justice, community-focused, and equity-based high school program for students who have left school, or are thinking of leaving school.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The objective of the Triangle Program is to provide an alternative school where all will be respected and treated equally regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, class, ability, gender identity or sexual orientation. The Triangle Program is designed to assist students in developing both the academic and life skills necessary to move on to another high school program, post-secondary program or to the workforce.

IMPLEMENTATION



Triangle opened its doors in September 1995 as a program of Oasis Alternative Secondary School. Oasis has a long history of providing academic programming for a variety of students facing risk of dropping out of school. The physical space for Triangle was provided by the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto (MCCT), a long-standing place of worship for the LGBT community and their allies in Toronto. A combination of community support and Board staff worked diligently in the early 1990s to establish this unique school program. Pre-dating the Triangle Program, the

Human Sexuality Program of the Toronto District School Board provided individual, family and group counseling for LGBTQ students and families alongside Board-wide classroom workshops addressing homophobia and transphobia. Out of this work, a need was identified to provide LGBT students a step back into the school system that was safe, welcoming and affirming.

The Triangle Program is an alternative school program for LGBTQ students who have either dropped out of high school or are thinking about dropping out due to homophobia and/or transphobia. It supports students to develop or rediscover the skills necessary to successfully transition back to mainstream schools or the workplace. It is a student-centered program, with a teaching and support staff that work together to assist students in developing their potential with a curriculum that features our LGBTQ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, inter-sexed, two-spirited and questioning/sexual minority – literature, history, and lives.

Schedule

The classroom is open for personal study every day at 9:00 a.m. Classes begin promptly at 9:30 am and the school day ends at 3:30 pm. The Triangle Program is able to offer students a nutritious meal every day at lunch. Community volunteers

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prepare lunch, which always includes a vegetarian option. The opportunity to eat with each other serves as a way to bring the Triangle community together.

The Triangle curriculum has been adapted to offer both Co-operative Education and independent, project-based credits. The Triangle Program offers all Ontario Ministry of Education dictated compulsory courses in all grades and electives are in subject areas that the teachers are qualified in. Currently students may choose from a selection of courses including, Computer Science, English, History, Science and Social Science courses. A media arts credit is mandatory for all our students as we have a digital video project unit at the end of the school year that involves the entire student body. Students also attend a physical education program that takes place offsite once a week at the Metro Central YMCA. The YMCA generously donates passes to our school, and is free for all students.

The school year is divided into a total of 11 to 12 three week units of study. The units are held during the afternoon session of classes, while mornings are spent working on small teacher-led classes, or independently, at your own pace on credits with teacher, peer or volunteer tutor support.

Units focus on the issues, literature and history of lesbian, gay and transgender people and students are graded on assignments and coursework in the units depending on their grade and academic levels.

Units for 2010-11 School Year

- Homoequity
- Coming Out Stories
- Post Secrets
- Wellness
- Out on Film
- Color Purple
- Science and Society
- Stop Motion Animation Project
- The Holocaust
- The 12th night
- Zoolicious
- Triangle Video Projects

COST

In its initial year, the Triangle Program had one full time teacher, one part time teacher and a school social worker. From 1995 to 2006, Triangle registered approximately 18-25 students annually. All staffing costs are part of the TDSB. MCCT provides for the physical space at no charge. Additionally, the Triangle Program undertakes a variety of fund-raising activities to augment its nutrition program (free lunch daily), field trips, guest speakers and other costs not covered by the TDSB. From 2006 to present, the Triangle Program now has three full time teachers and social work support from the Human Sexuality Program. We now register approximately 42 students each school year. As of the 2009/2010 school year, Triangle's budget to provide for the above costs was approximately \$20, 000.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

For many students, one outcome is vastly improved attendance as school becomes somewhere they want to be rather than somewhere they avoid because of harassment and discrimination. Furthermore, students now see finishing high school as a real and meaningful goal and thus make plans for work and/or post-secondary studies. In the 2009/2010 school year, Triangle had its largest graduating class of 10 students and may surpass that number this year. While not a formal measurement, the



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success of Triangle can be viewed by persistent need for the program whereby it has received more calls from students than there is space to accommodate.

TIMELINE

September 1995 – Triangle Program opens its doors; 1.5 teachers, 20 students

September 2006 – Increased to 2 full time teachers, 30 students

September 2007 to Present – Increased to 3 full time teachers, 42 students

LEGISLATION

N/A

LESSONS LEARNED

The most effective way to develop the Triangle Program's policies and practices has been through a process of community input – communication with staff, students, parents/guardians, and our school council – and reflective approaches to teaching.

Students who experience homophobia and transphobia develop a variety of coping strategies that are often at odds with being a successful student e.g. substance use, school avoidance, etc. Earning the trust of such students so that they see school again as something positive is an on-going challenge each year. With some students, their lives outside school are a combination of unstable housing, difficult family, peer and romantic relationships and broader issues of feeling like outsiders. With an openly-GLBTQ staff, a curriculum that offers some reflection of students' own lives and experiences, and opportunities to rediscover their authentic selves, Triangle seeks to assist students to address and overcome both personal and institutional obstacles and realize their full potential. With a supportive community council, administration, trustees, and senior management TDSB support, Triangle continues to meet its challenges successfully.

TRANSFERABILITY

With political will and community support, there is nothing to prevent programs similar to Triangle being established in other school boards in Canada. Any jurisdiction that provides programming for youth at-risk likely includes many LGBTQ students. By first recognizing this fact, it is possible then to create a space similar to the Triangle Program within a larger space that ensures a safer learning environment. The presence of out LGBTQ staff would be crucial to making this happen.

CONTACTS

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Facts and figures in this report were provided by the highlighted city agency to New York City Global Partners.