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DEBATES and PROCEEDINGS

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Gay-Straight Alliances

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is no legitimate reason for this government to refuse to implement legislation to enshrine the rights of students to form gay-straight alliances or gender sexuality alliances, and the explanation from the Premier, the Education minister, and the Sask Party MLAs just don't add up. To the Education minister: what's the real reason this government is so afraid to pass legislation on GSAs [gay-straight alliance]? Is it because the Sask Party is afraid to offend social conservatives?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: Mr. Speaker, the member opposite and I agree on the benefits and the values of having GSAs in our schools. Both of us have seen the benefit that that gives to students. This isn't a matter about social conservatives or where you sit on the political spectrum. It's a matter of doing the right thing for students.

We have by policy directed that they shall exist in schools in each and every school where one has been requested by students. Everywhere we have checked, where there's been one requested, we have determined that one has been provided. Mr. Speaker, if the members opposite know of a place where one has not been provided, we would be pleased to continue to look at that and verify whatever is taking place. If a student is unable or unwilling to come forward and do that, have them do it through second-hand . . . through information, and we can check and follow it up there, or use the online reporting tool which is totally anonymous.

Our focus, Mr. Speaker, is and will continue to be to make sure that we do everything to ensure that our students have the supports that they need.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, here's a quote from government's own internal document, and

I quote, “Sexual minority and gender-variant youth continue to experience discrimination, prejudice, and abuse.” And we know that over half of LGBTQ students have thought about suicide, yet for some reason the Premier argued last week that we have a happy circumstance in our province where students don’t need a legislated right-of-way to GSAs. Does the Education minister actually expect us to believe that he hasn’t heard about kids encountering problems when trying to set up GSAs?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Whether GSAs are enshrined by way of policy or by way of legislation makes no difference. It’s difficult for a student to be willing to come forward and ask for it where they need it and where they require it. It is the goal of this government to ensure that it is required. Having it enshrined in legislation doesn’t make it any more easy or any more appropriate for a student to come forward if a student is having difficulty. We will continue to work to make sure that they are available in each and every school where a student has asked for it and, Mr. Speaker, we will reach out to students where we think that they’re not being heard.

Mr. Speaker, I’ve heard the same kind of allegations that the member opposite has put forward. We have tried to follow up on any of those that we’ve heard. It would make no difference whether it’s by way of legislation or by way of policy. We intend to find any place where the GSAs are not made available and make sure that in fact they are made available. We have not yet in fact found such a situation but, Mr. Speaker, we will continue to work with students because that is the first priority of this government.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, Amanda Guthrie is the youth and education coordinator at the Avenue Community Centre in Saskatoon. She says, and I quote:

A lot of students that I work with have needed the support of friends or teachers when asking for a GSA, and the addition of legislation would only help students to feel more confident in their ask. Having legislation sets a precedent and puts power on the side of the student rather than the school or school division.

Amanda knows of students who have been denied or discouraged from establishing a GSA. Chandra McIvor has also worked in this area and knows of many students who’ve been denied or discouraged from establishing GSAs, and she says that this minister has heard about these circumstances too. Why is the minister bending over backwards to please social conservatives instead of the kids?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: Mr. Speaker, I’d indicated earlier this has nothing to do with social conservatives or a political spectrum. This has only to do with providing services that are necessary. Whether it’s enshrined legislation or otherwise makes no difference.

Mr. Speaker, I have a quote from Dan Shier, Queen City Pride, Global News, March 12,

2015: “I don’t see it currently being a huge necessity just because students are getting the services and the spaces that they require.” Mr. Speaker, our goal is to make sure that we provide the services wherever they are provided.

Mr. Speaker, the member opposite and I will agree on one thing. We’ve heard students speak. We’ve heard students talk about the need for it, and if students aren’t comfortable coming forward and raising the issue, we want to be able to reach out to them either through social media, through the online reporting tool, or whatever else. If a student isn’t willing to give us their name, if they will at least tell us the school, then we can go to the school and find out.

Any time where we’ve heard the name of a school before, we’ve gone to that school and in fact found that a GSA existed. We haven’t found a situation where one has been refused. We have confidence in our schools that they’re compliant with the policy and, Mr. Speaker, we’re going to continue to work that way.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: I would encourage the minister to read the whole quote when he’s quoting folks about this issue. It’s very, very important to do that.

That minister and that Sask Party government needs to recognize it’s not good enough to leave this up to vulnerable youth to stand up and speak out. It’s up to us in this Assembly to take a stand and enshrine this right in legislation. That would make a big difference for our students in our province. The minister’s talk of possibly pulling funding is nothing but a ploy to avoid passing legislation.

To the Education minister: what will it take for the Sask Party government to shelve the social conservative . . . the excuses and finally show some real leadership when it comes to GSAs and vulnerable youth?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: Mr. Speaker, the members opposite can talk about making a symbolic gesture, and I appreciate that they may wish to do that. Our goal, Mr. Speaker, is to reach out to the students that need help, that need support. That is the one thing I agree with the member opposite the most on, and it’s something that we want to do by finding the individuals that need help, working with them, making sure that supports are available in the school.

We’ve had good support from the schools. I give the schools credit for it. I give the school divisions credit. I give the individual teachers that are participating in it . . . And, Mr. Speaker, we want to continue going down that road.

Passing laws doesn’t make it any easier for a student to admit that that student needs help. What does help is that we know that the students can find the resources. The students have a method of accessing it. And, Mr. Speaker, we encourage students to use the online reporting tool to write to us, write to us anonymously. We at least need to

know where the school is so that we can do something within that school.

Mr. Speaker, we're going to continue doing that and I would urge the members opposite if they know of situations, help us bring them forward so that we can identify if there are gaps in it. Passing a law isn't going to make the gaps go away. Identifying where the gaps are and working with us will.