

'Don't walk like a victim': Newfoundland and Labrador high school resource included concerning advice for sexual assault prevention according to email

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Laura Winters is the executive director of the St. John's Status of Women Council. - Contributed

Two years after flagging dangerously-out of-date curriculum material that included the advice of "Don't walk like a victim" as a sexual assault prevention tip, a Newfoundland and Labrador high school principal brought it again to the attention of Department of Education officials.

The west coast principal in an all-grade school was referring to the Human Dynamics 2201 course and its student/teacher resource material when she wrote about the questionable advice in 2016 — advice that jumps off the page of that email as sounding like victim blaming.

The principal's email and some discussion of it was included in a 740-page response to The Telegram under access to information legislation that sought documents related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer-plus (LBGT+) curriculum.

Though off topic to that specific curriculum, the principal's email was part of the access response because the principal had mentioned it to a safe and caring schools itinerant during a professional development session in 2016.

That itinerant then wrote another official in the department about the concern.



Allison Conway is a lawyer with St. John's law firm Budden and Associates.

"I asked her to put it in an email to me so I could share it with you, the itinerant said. "I know changing curriculum takes time.... Maybe a memo needs to be prepared with respect to this course in particular and the "outdated" information it contains."

"How should we respond?" the official asked a department director, whose reply was not included in the access response.

The one-page email from the principal noted she had brought her concerns to a program specialist in 2014 and that those concerns had been passed on. She shared what she told the department staffer in 2014:

"The teacher/student resource is dangerously out of date (with respect to stats, facts, and advice.). I mean, in one article about preventing sexual assault, a piece of advice given is 'don't walk like a victim.' Another article about a teen with HIV was published in 1993."

The principal also expressed concerns about gender identity and other outdated information, but it's the "don't walk like a victim" that is most jarring.

"There's no room for victim blaming statements in our society," said Laura Winters, executive director of the St. John's Status of Women Council, when The Telegram brought the "Don't walk like a victim" advice to her attention.

She said it's a crucial part of the education system to include proper education around issues such as sexual assault and healthy relationships and that type of advice is a hugely problematic and dangerous message, particularly in light of sexual assault rates in Newfoundland and Labrador.

"This is exactly the opposite of what it is appropriate to be teaching young children," Winters said, adding teaching kids to be good humans is both a responsibility of school and home.

How many teachers would have used the particular article referenced — its title and source was not listed in the email — would be hard to pin down, but the fact that it's included at all is disturbing to Winters.

Winters noted that community groups such as women's centres have been pushing really hard to get in the school system to share their expertise.

"It's a difficult thing to get in there," she said, adding the provincial government has resources on in the community it isn't tapping.

Allison Conway, a St. John's lawyer at Budden and Associates also said it's plain wrong for advice like "Don't walk like a victim" to be included in any educational system resource, especially since teachers are in a powerful position of being respected for the knowledge they impart.

"The problem with instilling these messages in young women and men is that becomes the narrative about sexual assault," Conway said.

"This particular principal seems to have been alert to the fact it is inappropriate but there may be someone who is assigned to the course who doesn't have that background who wouldn't know that that is not a proper thing to teach young women, so I can see that being hugely problematic."

There is nothing a survivor is responsible for. It is the assailant's fault 100 per cent all of the time.

Conway represents many clients who are victims of historical sexual assault.

Those survivors, she said, a lot of times don't come forward until they're adults because these messages have been instilled that it is somehow their fault.

"And I think the public narrative is shifting, but perhaps not fast enough — the message that it is never the survivor's fault. There is nothing a survivor is responsible for. It is the assailant's fault 100 per cent all of the time," Conway said.

The principal asked the department in 2016, if Human Dynamics would be updated as the curriculum and resources "are dangerously out of date. The curriculum guide was released in 2004 — and so much has changed with society and technology since then."

The high school course is still listed on the Department of Early Childhood, Education's website in its March 2004 version.

The principal, still a district employee, declined an interview through the Newfoundland and Labrador English School Board.

The district had told The Telegram the department would have to respond to inquiries about curriculum.

The department said in a statement Friday just before deadline: that all curricula is regularly reviewed and renewed in all grade levels and that includes family studies curricula and Human Dynamics 2201.

Curriculum reviews are informed by working groups of teachers and subject specialists and involve jurisdictional scans and reviews of academic literature, the department said.

It did not comment specifically on the existence of the advice in the article referenced by the principal.

"The intent of the health and family studies curricula references to preventing sexual assault is to open and encourage discussion around safety and how students can protect themselves. Teachers have the discretion and authority to cover outcomes using additional related subject matter and materials," the department said.

"School districts also have the authority to engage partner groups and organizations at their discretion to support teachers in the delivery of health curriculum and school-based programs."

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