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Sexual health education has been part of the Ontario school curriculum for decades. The Health and Physical Education curriculum, of which approximately 10 per cent addresses sexual health, is no different. This document builds upon previous versions of this curriculum with information that reflects the reality of being a student in a changing world. In some instances, it means lowering the age in which students are taught certain information to reflect earlier ages of puberty. In others, it means adding more detailed information to support teacher instruction on emerging issues such as online safety, bullying, consent, and mental health. This curriculum is in no way graphic or radical. In all respects, it is consistent with what is taught in other Canadian provinces and aligns with Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Ontario's Human Rights Code. Most importantly, it has been developed to provide kids with the current, up-to-date information they need.

Critics of this curriculum would like Ontario to adopt abstinence-only or value-based programs which are not only misguided but potentially damaging to young people's health. For cultural or religious reasons, such approaches would look to prohibit most programs from providing valuable information and building skills students need to make informed decisions about their sexual health and avoid negative sexual health outcomes. The reality is that today's kids are less healthy and are facing greater health risks than generations before them. Canada's rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unplanned pregnancies, and incidences of sexual violence are unacceptably high - but the appropriate response has been contested in Ontario because of debate over how sexual health education should be taught. While critics have supported a campaign of misinformation about this curriculum, the reality is that sexual health education does not encourage young people to initiate sexual activity at an earlier age or have more sexual partners. In fact, sexual health education achieves many positive behavioural changes among young people and results in lower rates of STIs and unwanted pregnancies.

Most parents understandably feel uncomfortable with their children learning about sexual health from peers in the school yard, TV and movies, social media or the internet. Despite what has been portrayed by critics, most Ontario parents believe that topics such as self-esteem, sexually transmitted infections, puberty, skills for healthy relationships, contraception methods, reproduction, sexual orientation, media literacy, abstinence and delaying sexual activity, should be addressed in schools. The Health and Physical Education curriculum is the most logical and appropriate place to provide health information, including sexual health education, because schools are the only formal educational institution to have meaningful contact with all students.

Canada is a diverse and inclusive society in which people with differing cultural and religious values live together with a mutual recognition and respect for the basic rights and freedoms that all people are entitled to. We collectively hold a belief that the health and well-being of our kids is important and this includes inspiring them to be active, to eat well, to be mentally healthy and to be able to manage life's ups and downs. Sexual health is one key aspect of personal health and overall well-being. The evidence is clear: abstinence-only programs do nothing to stop premarital sex or to equip students with the information they need to prevent pregnancy and STIs. If we really want to protect Ontario's young people, we must provide them with the information, self awareness, communication, and decision-making skills they need to make informed decisions about their sexual health. The implementation of the Health and Physical Education curriculum this September is an important step in ensuring that our kids are able to grow up healthy, feeling empowered to make informed choices about their health and well-being.

This op-ed is authored by Chris Markham, Executive Director and CEO of Ophea. Ophea is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to supporting schools and communities through quality program supports, partnerships and advocacy and is led by the vision that all kids will value, participate in, and make a lifelong commitment to healthy active living.