

Submission to the Standing Committee on Resource Management

Review of the Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblower Protection) Act (PIDA)

1. Institutional Overview

Red Deer Polytechnic (RDP) is a publicly funded post-secondary institution serving over 11,000 learners annually and employing approximately 1,100 faculty and staff. As a public-sector organization governed by the *Post-secondary Learning Act (Alberta)* and subject to oversight by the Office of the Public Interest Commissioner under PIDA, RDP operates within multiple legislative frameworks that intersect with the *Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblower Protection) Act (PIDA)*, including the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, *Access to Information Act (ATIA)*, *the Protection of Privacy Act (POPA)* and *the Alberta Human Rights Act*. Additional intersecting frameworks include the *Labour Relations Code*, *Employment Standards Code*, and *Criminal Code of Canada*, each of which underpins RDP's responsibility to maintain a safe, lawful, and ethical workplace.

RDP's institutional commitment is to maintain a safe, respectful, and accountable learning and working environment. The institution recognizes that the protection of those who disclose wrongdoing is foundational to public trust and good governance. RDP supports the continuous improvement of PIDA to ensure that it meaningfully serves employees—and, through institutional practice, supports students and members of the public who engage in good faith to report concerns.

1.1 Stakeholder Consultation Process

In preparing this submission, Red Deer Polytechnic (RDP) engaged members of its Executive Leadership Team (ELT) and key institutional stakeholders to ensure the feedback reflects diverse operational, academic, and employee perspectives.

Consultation included representation from:

- The Executive Leadership Team, including executive leads for Academic and Student Experience, Finance & Administration, Development and Partnerships, and Chief of Staff and Board Liaison portfolios;
- The Associate Vice President, Student Experience, representing student-focused policy and support systems;
- Employee & Labour Relations and Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S), representing employee-focused policy and support systems;
- Privacy & Compliance, supporting legislative alignment and institutional policy integration; and
- Campus Health & Wellbeing; representing institution-wide wellbeing, safety, and prevention initiatives; and
- The presidents of RDP's employee union and association, representing both the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE Local 071/003) and the Faculty Association of Red Deer Polytechnic (FARDP).

Feedback was consolidated by the People & Culture Division under the leadership of the Chief Human Resources Officer and Executive Director, People & Culture, ensuring that

recommendations remain consistent with PIDA's current definitions and RDP's internal policy frameworks.

2. Current Practices at RDP

2.1 Policies and Procedures

RDP currently complies with PIDA through the implementation of the Safe Disclosure (Whistleblower) Policy (2019) and the Reporting and Investigating Safe Disclosures Guidebook (2018), both of which are aligned with the institution's Employee Code of and other internal policies that support ethical reporting across both employee and student contexts (beyond the minimum scope of PIDA).

In combination, these documents:

- Outline the procedures for internal disclosures;
- Designate confidential reporting channels; and
- Ensure alignment with legislative obligations for protection and investigation.

In addition, the Divisions of People & Culture and Student Experience work collaboratively to ensure employees and students are aware of the procedures for safe and confidential reporting to ensure employees (and through separate institutional channels, students) are aware of safe and confidential reporting processes.

2.2 Confidence Line Service

RDP supplements its internal framework with the Confidence Line Service, a 24/7 independent third-party hotline and web reporting system that allows employees — and, through broader institutional practice, students and members of the public — to report concerns anonymously or confidentially. While PIDA protections apply specifically to employees, RDP's framework extends reporting access more broadly.

The service reinforces institutional integrity by providing:

- Multiple access points (phone, web portal, or written report);
- Options for anonymity;
- Case tracking for both the reporter and the intake authority; and
- Neutral third-party administration independent from internal hierarchies.

The Confidence Line operates as a trusted mechanism for reporting alleged wrongdoing as defined in PIDA and other workplace concerns such as harassment or safety issues handled under separate legislation.

2.3 Complementary Policies and Structures

Beyond PIDA's required Safe Disclosure framework, RDP maintains a suite of complementary policies that address related aspects of safety, respect, and wellbeing. These include:

- Respectful Workplace and Learning Environment Policy
- Respectful Workplace Training Procedure
- Complaints Procedures (for employees and students)
- Health, Safety, and Environment Policy
- Incident Reporting and Investigation Procedure
- Employee Code of Conduct
- Student Rights and Responsibilities Policy
- Accommodation and Return-to-Work Procedures
- Student Mental Health Framework
- Privacy and Data Protection Policy

Supporting teams and working groups include:

- Student Incident Response Team (SIRT): Acts as RDP's behavioural intervention and student support coordination team.
- Disability Management and Accommodation Team: Supports employees through medical, psychological, or workplace accommodation processes.
- Joint Workplace Health & Safety Committee and Incident Investigation Team: Address incidents and ensure confidential follow-up and continuous improvement in safety practices.
- Campus Health & Wellbeing Committee: Provides institution-wide leadership in promoting wellbeing, prevention, and psychological safety.

Together, these interconnected systems and policies provide safe and confidential pathways for employees to disclose wrongdoing under PIDA and for others to raise concerns through institutional processes for health, safety or respect.

3. Strengths of the Act in Practice

The *Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblower Protection) Act* provides essential legislative authority for the protection of individuals who disclose wrongdoing in good faith. It offers the legal foundation for institutions to build robust, transparent disclosure systems that protect individuals from reprisal and reinforce a culture of accountability.

At Red Deer Polytechnic (RDP), the Act has supported the development and enforcement of comprehensive organizational policies designed to safeguard employees under PIDA and to extend comparable confidential supports to students and members of the public through internal policy. It provides legislative backing for institutional policy enforcement and prohibits reprisal against employees who make or seek advice about a disclosure, while RDP adds internal supports to assist individuals through the process.

These legislative protections have contributed to a growing sense of employee confidence and organizational trust in disclosure systems at RDP. Designated intake processes are led by individuals trained in trauma-informed practice, ensuring that disclosures are received, assessed, and managed with care and respect.

Embedding psychological safety in all aspects of training—particularly through mandatory programs such as Respect in the Workplace—aligns RDP’s internal policy framework with the Act’s intent to encourage good-faith reporting. While PIDA applies to employees, RDP extends similar cultural principles to students through its own policies.

The introduction of the Confidence Line Service has further reinforced these outcomes by offering a neutral mechanism for confidential reporting that goes beyond PIDA’s minimum requirements for disclosure intake. This independent service provides 24/7 access and anonymity, removing perceived barriers and enabling individuals—especially those in smaller departments or close-knit teams—to report concerns safely and confidently.

Together, these elements demonstrate how the Act’s intent can be realized through institutional practice—strengthening confidence among employees in good-faith disclosure and promoting a broader culture of accountability and ethical conduct.

4. Challenges and Gaps

Despite progress, RDP has identified several ongoing challenges in applying the Act within complex, multi-stakeholder environments:

4.1 Limited Visibility and Understanding

While the *Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblower Protection) Act* provides important protections for employees who disclose wrongdoing in good faith, awareness of the Act and its processes remains limited across much of the public sector. At Red Deer Polytechnic, many employees are uncertain about the specific protections available under PIDA, the role of the Designated Officer, and how disclosures differ from other types of complaints or workplace concerns.

This lack of clarity can lead to hesitation, misdirection, or reliance on informal channels of communication that may unintentionally spread misinformation or erode trust within teams. Even when employees wish to act in good faith, uncertainty about the appropriate pathway—whether under PIDA, occupational health and safety, or internal complaint procedures—can discourage formal disclosure.

RDP has made progress in increasing awareness through initiatives such as the Confidence Line Service, Respectful Workplace training, and employee communications. However, greater emphasis on education, consistent messaging, and practical guidance is needed to help employees understand when PIDA applies, how to access its protections, and where to find confidential advice before making a disclosure.

4.2 Perceived Lack of Confidentiality and Fear of Reprisal

Although the Act protects employees who make or seek advice about a disclosure from formal reprisal, the perception of confidentiality risk remains one of the most significant barriers to reporting. Employees—particularly in smaller teams or academic departments—may still fear that raising a concern will reveal their identity or affect their employment relationships.

While PIDA defines reprisal as a measure that adversely affects employment or working conditions, employees often experience subtler impacts such as social or professional exclusion. These experiences, while not captured within the legal definition of reprisal, can erode trust and deter individuals from reporting wrongdoing.

Red Deer Polytechnic has implemented several mechanisms to mitigate these risks, including trauma-informed intake processes and independent reporting options such as the Confidence Line Service. However, sustained cultural reinforcement is required to ensure that confidentiality, fairness, and non-retaliation are lived values across the institution. Continued education and leadership modelling remain essential to building the psychological safety needed for meaningful disclosure.

4.3 Complexity, Legislative Overlap and Procedural Risk

Red Deer Polytechnic operates within a complex public-sector environment where multiple legislative frameworks intersect — including the *Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblower Protection) Act*, the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, the *Protection of Privacy Act (POPA)*, and the *Alberta Human Rights Act*. Each of these frameworks establishes obligations for addressing concerns related to safety, conduct, privacy, and human rights, but their overlapping mandates can create procedural uncertainty.

Determining which reporting channel or investigative process applies in a given situation—particularly when a concern involves multiple dimensions such as workplace safety, privacy, or interpersonal conduct—can be confusing for both employees and administrators. In some cases, concurrent reviews (e.g., WCB claims, internal investigations, or OH&S reviews) may feel fragmented or even punitive to the individuals involved.

To mitigate these challenges, RDP uses independent reporting mechanisms such as the Confidence Line Service to provide a single, trusted point of entry. Nonetheless, clearer legislative integration and guidance across Acts would help streamline reporting obligations, promote consistent interpretation, and enhance confidence in disclosure processes across Alberta's public sector.

5. Recommendations for Improvement

Red Deer Polytechnic (RDP) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the legislative review of the Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblower Protection) Act.

Based on practical experience implementing the Act within a complex academic environment, RDP respectfully recommends the following amendments and enhancements to strengthen the Act's clarity, inclusivity, and effectiveness.

Each recommendation below is framed as a proposed improvement to the Act—not a description of current requirements.

5.1 Clarify and Expand the Definition of “*Wrongdoing*”

The current definition of “wrongdoing” focuses primarily on acts that are illegal, dangerous, or constitute gross mismanagement.

RDP recommends that the Act be clarified and broadened to:

- Explicitly recognize systemic or repeated patterns of behaviour that amount to gross mismanagement of employees or compromise institutional integrity.
- Clarify that psychological harm, harassment, or cultural misconduct may constitute wrongdoing when they are systemic in nature and result in a substantial and specific danger to the health or safety of employees or the public.
- Provide interpretive guidance to help institutions distinguish between operational grievances (outside PIDA) and legitimate disclosures of wrongdoing (within PIDA).

This clarification would reduce uncertainty, promote consistency in application, and ensure that the Act remains responsive to modern workplace realities.

5.2 Extend Protections to Students in Public Post-Secondary Institutions

RDP recommends that PIDA be amended to provide explicit protections for students who disclose wrongdoing in the course of their academic, research, or practicum activities within public post-secondary institutions.

Students often occupy quasi-employee roles that expose them to operational, ethical, and safety concerns similar to those experienced by employees.

Extending protection to these individuals would:

- Strengthen integrity and accountability in publicly funded institutions;
- Ensure alignment with Alberta’s *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, which already recognizes “learners” as “workers” in certain contexts; and
- Support Alberta’s commitment to safe, respectful, and inclusive learning environments.

This amendment would close a current protection gap and reflect the collaborative, integrated nature of modern post-secondary institutions.

5.3 Clarify Legislative Integration and Information-Sharing

PIDA operates alongside several intersecting statutes, including the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, *Protection of Privacy Act (POPA)*, and the *Alberta Human Rights Act*.

To reduce duplication and confusion, RDP recommends that the Act:

- Include guidance on how disclosures under PIDA interact with obligations under these other Acts;
- Permit appropriate and lawful information-sharing between Designated Officers, investigators, and the Public Interest Commissioner to prevent fragmented investigations; and
- Establish a streamlined triage protocol for matters that fall within multiple jurisdictions.

Clearer integration would strengthen consistency across Alberta's public sector and promote trust in disclosure systems.

5.4 Embed Principles of Psychological Safety and Trauma-Informed Practice

Although not currently mandated under PIDA, RDP recommends that the Act encourage or reference the use of trauma-informed and psychologically safe practices in disclosure management and investigations.

These principles enhance fairness, reduce retraumatization, and align with leading practices in workplace investigations.

Recognition of psychological safety as a guiding principle would help institutions foster cultures where individuals feel safe to raise concerns in good faith.

5.5 Support Independent and Accessible Reporting Mechanisms

To enhance confidence and accessibility, RDP recommends that the Act:

- Recognize third-party or independent reporting systems (such as RDP's Confidence Line Service) as valid mechanisms for intake of disclosures;
- Encourage the use of multiple confidential access points, including hotlines, web portals, and external advisors, to reduce barriers to reporting; and
- Provide ongoing education and awareness funding to support consistent employee training on rights and processes under PIDA.

Formal recognition of independent mechanisms would help institutions of all sizes ensure impartiality and accessibility for those considering disclosure.

5.6 Continuous Education and Institutional Capacity-Building

Finally, RDP recommends that PIDA require or incentivize regular training for Designated Officers and investigators to maintain consistency and competence in applying the Act.

Establishing a provincial network or learning hub—coordinated through the Office of the Public Interest Commissioner—would facilitate knowledge-sharing, promote best practice, and build long-term confidence in Alberta’s disclosure regime.

Summary

Together, these recommendations aim to modernize PIDA to reflect the realities of Alberta’s public-sector institutions.

They would expand inclusion, enhance clarity, and strengthen public trust in the systems that protect individuals who come forward in good faith to report wrongdoing.

These recommendations reflect both RDP’s operational experience and its commitment to continuous improvement in public accountability and employee protection

6. Conclusion

Red Deer Polytechnic appreciates the Standing Committee’s leadership in reviewing the *Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblower Protection) Act*.

This review offers an important opportunity to strengthen the legislation so that it continues to serve the public interest in an era of increasingly complex, interconnected public institutions.

From a post-secondary perspective, effective whistleblower protection is fundamental to maintaining integrity, accountability, and trust in publicly funded education and research.

Extending the Act’s protections to reflect the realities of today’s learning and working environments—where students, employees, and contractors often collaborate side by side—would ensure that all participants in Alberta’s innovation ecosystem can speak up about wrongdoing without fear of reprisal.

RDP reaffirms its commitment to:

- Upholding the highest standards of ethical conduct and public accountability;
- Providing safe, confidential, and accessible channels for disclosure; and
- Collaborating with the Office of the Public Interest Commissioner and peer institutions to share best practices and strengthen a culture of trust across Alberta’s public sector.

By modernizing PIDA to promote clarity, inclusion, and psychological safety, Alberta can continue to lead in fostering transparent and responsible public institutions that earn the confidence of those they serve.

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