

Grade 8 pupils swarm mother

The woman refuses to lay a complaint after a group of boys mock and attack her.

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A woman swarmed by a mob of Grade 8 boys in an apparent racially-charged attack near a northwest London school says she forgives her tormenters.

"They are young," the woman said yesterday, stepping with her son off the same well-travelled path near Clara Brenton school where the swarming occurred Monday.

The woman was reportedly head-butted, slapped and mocked for her Chinese accent, while at least one of her tormenters recorded it on a cellphone video camera.

"I want to give them the chance to learn. If they don't bother me again, it's OK."

The mother of a Grade 1 boy at the school, the soft-spoken woman didn't want to be identified and wouldn't file a police complaint.

Reports from pupils, parents and neighbours -- some of it firsthand, but much of it not -- recount a shocking story that can't be fully pinned down because the school board isn't talking publicly about the case and the police say they can't release anything without a complaint filed.

Despite a policy that encourages reporting of bullying, officials with the Thames Valley District school board were tight-lipped.

Trustees, and school and board administrators either refused to provide information about the incident, or provided only the sketchiest of details.

"We are aware of an altercation that happened outside the school Monday evening," said board spokesperson Chris Dennett.

"It was pursued internally. We do not discuss disciplinary actions in the school community." He added school boards are banned from doing so under Ontario privacy law.

However, one U.S. observer says keeping quiet about bullying only defeats efforts to end it.

"By them not saying anything, they're working against everything they were preaching against before," said Derek Randal, a Chicago-based author and former teacher, who helps parents help their children deal with bullies.

"It seems they're at a point where they are saying, 'Let's cover our ass,' " he said.

"If they really expect the community and parents to help them, they need to be open and honest with their community and their staff."

Outside the school yesterday, pupils said school officials had disciplined three of the boys involved in the swarming with suspensions served at school.

Dennett wouldn't confirm the reported detentions.

School staff referred Free Press questions to the board, which wouldn't say exactly what happened or whether any pupils were disciplined.

Pupils say they've been told by staff not to discuss the situation. But outside the school, Grade 7 and 8 kids buzzed with witness accounts of the story neighbours had also related.

The harassment of the woman -- she speaks English, but Chinese is her first language -- had gone on for some time, usually when she walked the narrow, steep-staired path between Guildwood Boulevard and St Croix Avenue to pick up her son at the school.

It was always the same group -- multicultural, mostly Grade 8 boys -- who intercepted her, taunting her with mock Chinese, several pupils said.

The woman, about five feet tall, would usually pass as some of the boys chimed in, often getting in her face and pretending to



Pupils said three of the boys involved in a swarming were disciplined with suspensions served at the school in northwest London. (Mike Hensen, Sun Media)



speak Chinese.

But the situation escalated Monday, when the woman had had enough of the humiliation.

"She just said to one of them, 'Where do you live?' said a Grade 7 girl, who added she saw the attack unfold.

The girl said a large group of kids --more than 10, and at least one holding up a cell-phone camera -- stood around watching and laughing while the ringleaders weighed in.

"They were mimicking her, pretending to speak Chinese," she said. "Then (one boy) head-butted her."

"And (another boy) slapped her," said a different girl.

The woman made her way past the group, they said.

Accounts vary whether it was the woman or a witness who reported the attack to school staff.

Ironically, one neighbour said, the school recently held an anti-bullying seminar for its pupils.

At first, no one from the school called police, but a call was later made, said Dennett.

He wouldn't say how the board is handling the case.

London police went to the school Thursday to investigate, and again yesterday, but the woman declined to file a complaint, said Const. Amy Phillippo.

A large group of kids gathered after school yesterday, chatting about the attack on the path where it occurred.

"That's her," one boy whispered as the woman neared. "Hello," she said, passing them on her way to the school.

On her way back, she held hands with a little boy she said was her son.

"They apologized," she said of the youths, dismissing questions about Monday's incident.

"They are young kids. They make mistakes."

WHAT OTHERS SAY

Sheri Polhill, trustee: "Bullying off the school grounds is just as bad as bullying on the school property. We would hope the proper disciplinary action will be taken. It's definitely something everyone needs to step up on."

Peter Jaffe, trustee and child psychologist, outspoken on bullying prevention: "There apparently was an altercation . . .," he said late Thursday. "It has been reported to police. The school is looking at the issue in some detail. It will be reviewed in a disciplinary sense within the school."