

Blind eye, coalition says

An anti-bullying group says its warnings about a school where a mom was swarmed have been ignored by the board.

By NORMAN DE BONO, SUN MEDIA

Clara Brenton elementary school has been "red-flagged" by the London Anti-Bullying Coalition as a problem school -- but its warnings have been ignored by the Thames Valley District school board, coalition founders charged yesterday.

The school, where a parent was swarmed Monday by a mob of Grade 8 boys in an apparent racially charged attack, has had four serious bullying incidents in five years, but the board has not revealed what it is doing about the problem, Kathryn Wilkins and Corina Morrison said yesterday.

"We have been aware of serious incidents at that school. I think people there are trying to do the best they can, but it is not working," Morrison said. "There is a problem there.

"Parents have asked us to come into the school and speak on two occasions, and now this has happened," added Wilkins.

But those charges were rejected yesterday by school board officials and parents who denied there are ongoing bullying issues at the school.

"I do not agree with that. I am not aware of that," said Joyce Bennett, the trustee who represents the school.

The woman who was bullied 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. She was the mother of a Grade 1 pupil

Jill Hensen, president of the home and school association at Clara Brenton, called the recent bullying "unfortunate," but it does not reflect the atmosphere at that school.

"It is a real shame, but it does not represent Clara Brenton. It is a wonderful school," she said.

Bennett has not heard from parents about violence concerns and said she would have been told if it were an issue.

But when issues of bullying at Clara Brenton were raised by the coalition, "we got the same answer as others," added Wilkins.

"They could not tell us what they were doing. We were told there are policies in place to deal with it such as bullying awareness programs."

Morrison pulled her son from Clara Brenton five years ago after he was bullied, and the board's inaction on that issue prompted her to form the coalition, she said.

"Since then we have been contacted by people who do not know my history at Clara Brenton," she said.

The coalition also slammed the board for secrecy, saying when it refuses to discuss details of violence, it contributes to bullying. "A transparent procedure is needed. It holds school boards accountable," Wilkins said.

The board refused to discuss the incident or whether the youths were disciplined.

While privacy legislation protects the identities of individuals, it is not necessary to refuse to discuss what happened or how it has been dealt with, Wilkins said. She said it exemplifies a culture of secrecy that pervades the board, allowing bullying to persist.

Morrison said, "We just want to know when something is being done . . . If they expect the community and parents to help them, they need to be more open with the community. I am not sensing that happening."

Bennett, however, said there are details the board cannot

discuss as they must respect

privacy guidelines.

"There are things we cannot share with the community. It is not something we can report on."

Brenda Hopkins, chairperson of London school councils, believes the board "has to be careful what they say. I do not have a concern. I am sure this council and school will have addressed the issue."



But Clara Brenton isn't alone in dealing with problems like this -- as many as 3,000 children in the Thames Valley system go to school everyday fearing violence, Wilkins said.

"There are pockets where they know they have dropped the ball. There are real accountability issues" with the board, said Wilkins.