

Discuss swarming, councillor urges

By JENNIFER O'BRIEN AND DANIELA SIMUNAC, SUN MEDIA

School officials should meet with a London neighbourhood about a racially-charged student swarming of an adult woman there last week, a city councillor says.

Many in Oakridge were shocked by a weekend Free Press report that a group of Grade 8 boys swarmed a woman outside Clara Brenton school, taunting her and mocking her Chinese accent.

Pupils and neighbours report the woman was slapped and head-butted with one youth video recording the incident on a cellphone.

Neither the school nor the Thames Valley District school board said anything about it at the time.

Five days later, when the story broke in The Free Press, school officials declined comment and the board provided scant detail.

The board said only that it was aware of an "altercation" off school property and it was "pursued internally."

Now, the community wants answers, says Coun. Paul Hubert, who lives nearby and has a son at the school.

"I think it's a community issue," he said yesterday.

"I was disappointed and saddened to read about that incident, and I have some huge issues around the message this sends out for London as a welcoming and caring community."

The board has said privacy law prevents it from saying anything more and the police -- contacted by a school vice-principal, but not right way -- say they can't release anything without a complaint.

The woman at the centre of the story said she forgives her young tormentors. She filed no formal complaint with police.

But some observers say the board's approach in the case runs counter to the openness needed to reduce bullying.

"There was a gag order," said Corina Morrison of the London Anti-Bullying Coalition. "Do you not think the school board or principal would have put a letter together to send out to parents?"

"I think we don't want to admit there is a problem in this area," she said.

Alan Leschied, a UWO professor and child psychologist said: "The board's policy is to encourage students not to sweep such things under the carpet. It would be very beneficial to have a meeting for the (Oakridge) community."

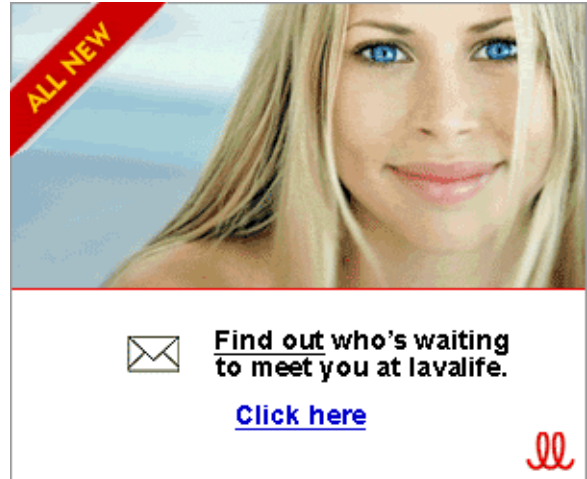
Hubert said he's especially concerned about racial overtones of the attack. "It's not just about bullying. This is about respect," he said.

"I think they should call a meeting of the community, bring parents in and inform them without violating any confidences of what has happened.

"Parents don't know what programs are available for the students and they need to put a plan in place."

Morrison said no one is asking the school to identify the pupils involved. "We don't need names, but we need to know as a community that the situation is under control and they have taken the proper steps."


John Thorpe, the board's acting director, said staff would be happy to attend a community meeting -- but only to discuss policy and the board's safe schools program.



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"We can't tell them what we can't tell them. The school board wasn't present, (the) principal wasn't present, I wasn't present and we are not able to speculate."

Bill Tucker, an education superintendent taking over as the board's education director Jan. 1, said he will continue to support "front-line staff" in their anti-bullying efforts.

"I don't think schools have a monopoly on bullying. It transcends all social and economic backgrounds," he said.