

Liberals called devious on bullying

New anti-bullying legislation accomplishes nothing, a London advocate warns

By KELLY PEDRO

A London anti-bullying group leader says the province was "deceitful" when it passed a bill she says has no teeth and does nothing to make children safer at school.

Bill 157, passed in the legislature this week, makes it mandatory for school staff to report bullying.

But Kathryn Wilkins, co-founder of the London Anti-Bullying Coalition, says the legislation lacks accountability. "If you look at what they (Liberals) did, they did nothing. It's deceitful. They didn't change one thing."

The legislation fails to spell out consequences principals and teachers face if they don't report bullying, said Wilkins, who was at Queen's Park last month to speak about bullying in schools and how poorly the system works.

Wilkins said she thought once she spoke with policy makers about what was going on -- how parents were swimming upstream to protect their kids, amid school administrators she called unresponsive -- things would change.

"The trip to the very top has taught us that not only do they know where the cracks in the system are, but they're not prepared to patch them and they're not even truly prepared to put a safety net under the crack," she said yesterday.

"They're prepared to lose a certain amount of students per year to this issue."

Education Minister Kathleen Wynne said yesterday the Ontario College of Teachers disciplines teachers and principals when they don't follow the rules. She said the legislation was created to cover gaps in the system.

"There was a clear gap in terms of requirement of teachers to report to principals when there was a serious incident, but there was no gap around disciplining of principals and teachers. That's already available to the Ontario College of Teachers."

But Conservative education critic Joyce Savoline called Bill 157 "feel-good" legislation. The province missed an opportunity, the Burlington MPP said.

"All we asked for was that the principals keep a file and document what actions the principal took . . . and that file be filed in a superintendent's office. If you're doing everything right, what's the matter with that? What are you hiding?"

She said she was shocked politicians would hear the tragic bullying stories of families yet do nothing to amend the legislation.

"We know there will be more incidents (of bullying) and when those come forward I will make them public to the minister to prove to her that nothing has changed and hopefully we can force something in the future," she said.

The anti-bullying coalition will step up awareness and make bullying an election issue, Wilkins vowed.

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