

Local family adds voice to bully legislation

BY Kim Zarzour

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A York Region mother and son endured an emotional committee meeting at Queen's Park this week as the province's top experts joined victims of bullying, weighing in on how Ontario schools could better handle school violence.

Karen Sebben, accompanied by her 18-year-old son Daniel, was one of several presenters at the Standing Committee on Social Development who described their children's pain at the hands of bullies, and offered suggestions on what the province should do to make it stop.

It was a draining process for many, full of moving stories that stunned listeners and left Daniel emotionally wrought at the end of the day - but also left him hopeful that his efforts will prevent others from having their childhood destroyed.

"That night, when I went to bed, I just broke down. It just all hit me," said the Grade 12 student from Holland Landing who lived through years of bullying in elementary and high school.

"It was reinforcement in a way, finally realizing he's not the only one," said Mrs. Sebben, who is organizing a York Region coalition to battle bullying. "He hasn't had that kind of emotional reaction since my dad died. It was a good release for him; better than the anger he's been holding inside."

Like most of those presenting, Mrs. Sebben and Daniel urged the ministry to change its legislation and require schools to take bullying more seriously.

The committee met for the purpose of holding public hearings regarding Bill 157, an Act to amend the Education Act. The bill would require teachers to report serious student incidents like bullying to the principal. It would also require principals to contact the victims' parents, except in instances where they deemed the reporting would put the victim at further risk.

Clause-by-clause consideration of the bill is scheduled for Tuesday.

Most of those presenting agreed there should be clearer rules surrounding reporting of bully incidents, but there was some dispute regarding how much discretion principals should have, and how principals should be made accountable when they allow bullying to fall through the cracks.

Parents who presented agreed the current system is flawed.

"Without exception, our membership reports that they have been made to feel like overly involved, overly sensitive, unreasonable parents," said Kathryn Wilkins of the London Anti-Bullying Coalition, which represents victims' families.

Ms Wilkins told of a 5-year-old who was terrorized on the playground daily, throwing up before going to school, until a father resorted to filming the bullying to show the principal. The principal refused to view the video, and the next time the dad tried filming, the principal called in police to falsely report a suspected pedophile at the school.

In another school, a seven-year-old girl was lured into a corner of the playground known by kids as the "gross corner" and sexually assaulted, resulting in a vaginal infection and thoughts of suicide. When the parents complained, the principal pointed out their daughter had started a "kissing club", and said she'd be safe now that it was winter and kids were wearing snow pants.

"Our parents want to know, if the principal does not do their part, where do they go next for support for victims and for accountability when the system fails?" Ms Wilkins asked. She called for timelines for principals to respond to reports of bullying. "Parents are waiting three or four months just to get a letter or a phone call back from their first complaint.

"Our government has put millions of dollars into training our teachers, training our principals, yet on Thursday night we had a phone call from a parent whose Grade 5 boy is being bullied and the principal gave the parent a list of five things the victim should do differently in order to remain safe in the school. So with all the millions being put in, why are we still re-victimizing?"

The proposed bill won't solve the problem, Karen Sebben told the committee, because it leaves it up to the principal whether or not to report the bullying to police.

"If it falls in the list of offences included as grounds for suspension or expulsion, then police must be called."

Thomas Decker, a police constable employed with the Toronto Police Service, agreed.

"A staff employee of the board cannot turn a blind eye to a heterosexist pinching of a girl, for instance, and say, 'Well, boys will be boys.' That is simply unacceptable." There should be a consequence for principals who do not report, he told the standing committee.

But Martha MacKinnon, executive director of Justice for Children and Youth, said requiring principals to report bullying to police could lead to police involvement in "silly incidents". She described a current case involving several Grade 7 and 8 boys who are facing permanent police records as a result of "adolescent bravado" - "hallway bumswats" on female classmates.

David Walpole, a director at the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, agreed principals should be given room for professional judgment. "We don't pay them \$100,000 a year just to bind them by policies that give them no licence and no latitude."

But if principals decide not to report it, he said, they should state clearly why not.

The teachers' groups told the committee the bill should include a way for teachers to find out how the principal has dealt with the situation so they know what the follow-up will be.

"Too often when teachers report incidents to principals, there is a feeling on behalf of the members that it doesn't go anywhere, that it stays in the principal's office and doesn't go beyond that," said James Ryan, first vice-president of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association.

A representative for the Ontario's Principals' Council said there's a need for more funding to provide training for school staff, and better adult presence in hallways and in the schoolyard, particularly during breaks and transition time.

All adults in schools - including support staff, caretakers and lunchroom supervisors - should be responsible for intervening in bully incidents at all times, whether teaching, on break or prep period, said Doug Morrell, president-elect of the Ontario Principals' Council.

In a final, moving presentation via teleconference, an Ottawa mother named "Joyce" described how her seven-year-old daughter was held against a fence hidden from teachers' view while four boys shoved their hands down her pants and up her shirt.

The girl's complaints were dismissed by school staff.

"I was treated like a hysterical mother, whereas I wanted the situation properly investigated."

When the principal finally agreed to interview the boys, Joyce said she was told "this incident did not happen as my daughter described, that this was "a game of soldiers" that my daughter misinterpreted and that the school could offer counseling ... The main perpetrator, when properly interviewed by a children's aid society worker, [later] admitted to all my daughter's allegations."

The experience showed her that principals and teachers are not trained to deal with this sensitive type of situation.

Joyce asked the committee to amend the proposed legislation to include a team of "trained and independent investigators who could properly interview young children about traumatic events, implement rules and procedures, preserve evidence and act as a neutral body in a situation where emotions run high."

She suggested these investigators would be available anywhere they are needed in the province to conduct the investigation and to aid principals in their decisions as to how to best deal with serious occurrences.