



Ombudding in?

By **MOIRA MACDONALD**, TORONTO SUN
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How many times have I heard politicians say they don't think there's a problem with something because, "I haven't had any calls?"

To that end, some parents are organizing to show there definitely is a problem with lack of school board oversight, taking yet another stab at expanding the Ontario ombudsman's powers.

While Ontario ombudsman Andre Marin is not allowed to investigate complaints related to school boards, his office still gets them.

Ombudsman Ontario's latest annual report, released in June, includes a section called "Beyond Scrutiny." It details the more than 1,500 complaints received last year for the MUSH sector — municipalities, universities, school boards and hospitals.

School boards represented only a small part of those, just 110 complaints, but even that number has increased over the past four years, while school enrolment has fallen. Most were related to students with special needs, unsafe school and transportation conditions, lack of resources, school violence, school closures, and inappropriate suspensions and expulsions.

The ombudsman's office has made no secret it would like its powers expanded to include school boards. Anti-bullying activist and parent Karen Sebben says she and other activists are ready to help — and they've already got started. Even though the ombudsman can't investigate them, Sebben is urging parents to send their school-related complaints to the ombudsman anyway. The ombudsman's office has received 17 since April.

"We are encouraging parents who are not getting anywhere ... to also submit a complaint to the ombudsman," states Sebben, founder of the York Region Anti-Bullying Coalition. "The higher the numbers in his annual report will indicate a need for an outside independent investigative authority."

Like so many other frustrated parents, the York coalition has fought not so much for school laws to be changed as it has fought for existing laws simply to be followed.

A recent package of parent submissions to the ombudsman, compiled by Sebben and an ad hoc group of other concerned parents, included allegations of student-on-student sexual abuse that went unpenalized, kids on the verge of suicide because of bullying, and parents who themselves had felt bullied by trustees for daring to complain.

'Chain of command'

A common link was parents had already taken their concerns "up the chain of command," including to the Ontario College of Teachers in instances involving accredited teachers — and had gotten nowhere.

These parents aren't looking for someone to fight their battles the moment they have a conflict with someone at school. They're looking for an office of last resort after they've tried everything else.

B.C., New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Yukon Territory allow their ombudsman offices to investigate school board-related complaints.

There was talk at the Toronto District School Board's special education committee this year to create an ombudsman for the board.

From what I could see, ignorance (as in the idea the status quo is sufficient oversight, including via elected trustees) and the triumph yet again of political interests over parental or student ones trampled that one into the ground.

Besides, if an ombudsman is to have real teeth, the position must be as separate and independent as possible from the people and places it's charged with investigating.

If parents really want school board oversight they'll have to take the issue right out of the school boards' arena — and fight for it as hard as they can.

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Your Comments

The London Anti-Bullying Coalition has been in touch with the Ombudsman's office for years. It is unfortunate that they do not have jurisdiction to investigate the MUSH sector. Our school boards, school administrators, Min. of Ed. and the Ontario College of Teachers must be held accountable for policies that are not implemented or circumvented by administrative interference. An outside third part like the Ombudsman must be given authority to investigate and report to the Legislative Assembly to correct misuse of power. As with any self-governing corporation, our boards are not without political struggles within that come at the cost of our children's education.

Corina Morrison, August 11th 2010, 12:24pm