



School bullying still not a priority for trustees: MacDonald

By **MOIRA MACDONALD**, TORONTO SUN
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School's out but Corina Morrison, co-founder of the London Anti-Bullying Coalition (London ABC), is urging parents to do their homework in advance of fall trustee elections.

"What I want parents to do is educate themselves. I want them to be more aware of what's going on out there in their school system ... and I want parents to demand more of their trustees," Morrison told me over the phone Monday.

Morrison often gives parents looking for help a crash course in School System 101 — who to talk to, how to talk to them, who their trustee is and how the trustee might help. She talks about the difference between conflict — ordinary disagreements and misunderstandings that crop up between people — and bullying, a conscious and repeated use of power over someone in a weaker position for the bully's personal satisfaction.

She also helps families learn to "take the emotion out" of a bullying concern so the problem gets properly heard and dealt with.

The election is a golden opportunity for parents to get trustee candidates to face up to the seriousness of bullying, she thinks, as well as the role trustees have to bring such concerns to the board table.

Education legislation still suffers from a woeful lack of enforcement and oversight, especially when it's parents complaining. Like others, Morrison would like to see Ontario's ombudsman's powers extended to school matters.

Trustees can be an important piece of that oversight.

Morrison, who does this on a volunteer basis, has crafted a sample letter parents can send trustees seeking re-election, with key points about school bullying, such as the fact Canada ranked in the bottom third of an international survey on bullying by the World Health Organization and that parents frequently feel shut out when it comes to making schools safer. Trustees "are not representing parents as well as they should be, at least in London," Morrison says. "I want safe schools to be on everyone's agenda, before we lose another child."

She means death by bullying.

London ABC started six years ago out of such an incident. Morrison and another mom, Kathryn Wilkins, had been dealing with bullying of their own kids at school, running into the same pattern of inaction and deflection by school authorities.

Traumatized boy

Then came the death of 15-year-old Josh Melo. Traumatized by anti-gay bullying at Strathroy District Collegiate (Melo was not gay), the distraught boy finally hung himself from a tree in his yard. His father had to cut his son down.

Morrison and Wilkins decided enough was enough.

Since then the McGuinty government's Bill 212 has come into effect, mandating the use of "progressive discipline" for bad behaviour, something Morrison finds ineffective. It does put bullying and cyberbullying on the books as punishable infractions. But if schools refuse to deal with a situation, so what? Morrison has also noticed principals too often deal with alleged bullies' misdemeanors in isolation, instead of stepping up discipline for those with a history of infractions.

"I know that there are schools out there that are doing a wonderful job and schools that do a horrible job," says Morrison, who has seen both with her two boys, now graduated.

"What we hear is ... that it is the victim who has to make the change. Why aren't we dealing with the bully? The bully has more problems than the victim."

The bullying and deaths continue. Since 2004, London ABC has worked on 362 bullying cases brought to its attention. To put a finer point on it, the U.S. had lower bullying rates on that WHO study than Canada did.

And we thought we were nicer.