

London Community News

Competing anti-bullying bills

By Sean Meyer

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Contributed Photo

This is a group of students at Jack Chambers Public School who took The Pledge to end bullying at a special assembly at their school during Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week. Students learned about the importance of being "Upstanders" by standing up to bullying and other inappropriate behaviour.

The provincial Liberals and Conservatives have recently introduced legislation that each says will make a difference to the ongoing battle against bullying in Ontario schools.

The question is, no matter what piece of legislation is ultimately passed, will it do enough to keep students safe? More specifically, will it make any difference at all?

"I don't think it is really anything brand new, but legislation can't be a bad thing," said Phillip Squire, chair of the board of trustees of the London and District Catholic School Board. "We do all of this stuff already. We have what are called safe school committees in our schools, which is directly specifically at the issue of bullying."

Last month the Liberals tabled Bill 13, the Accepting Schools Act 2011. Bill 13, among many things,

recommends tougher consequences for bullying and hate-motivated actions, up to, and including, expulsion. The bill also puts a focus on sex education, supports student-created action groups and greater attention for what the legislation calls the LGBTTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, two-spirited, intersexed and queer) community.

At the same time, the Conservatives brought forward Bill 14, the Anti-Bullying Act 2011. Greater detail in the definition of bullying, and support programs for both victims and bullies are just two of the recommendations included in Bill 14.

Barb Sonier, superintendent operations with the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB), agreed with Squire saying local boards are already greatly committed to anti-bullying initiatives, but also noted actual legislation could only strengthen the fight.

"Just the fact that it has become important legislation — and the ministry is seeing this as important — I think raises awareness. I think it is important for everyone to engage in the dialogue," Sonier said. "For both (parties) to see this as an important issue raises awareness. We have to look at everyone's perspective when it comes to bullying."

Corina Morrison has been sharing her perspective on bullying for nearly a decade. Morrison is co-founder of London Anti-Bullying Coalition, an organization that has worked for seven years to focus attention on the issue of bullying.

For the past two years the coalition has been working with the Conservatives to bring forward anti-bullying legislation.

Morrison said having both the province's current government and its official opposition talking about bullying is a positive step forward, but added the provisions in Bill 13 somewhat muddy the issue.

"What we wanted was a strict bill just on anti-bullying because every student deserves to feel safe. Not just the gay kids, not just the kid who wears glasses, not the kid who wears red sweat pants," Morrison said. "We want a bill that is protecting all children. You can be — quote, unquote — normal, and still be bullied. You can be — quote, unquote — normal, and be bullied about being gay. It's the perception." Squire said he also doesn't agree with focusing attention on any one group over another. However, a focus on any kind of homosexual lifestyle is something Squire said any Catholic board would have to deal with in a different manner than its public counterpart.

"We have the Bishops of Ontario who will speak on the issue, but they have made it really clear that any person, gay, straight, whatever, is entitled to be treated with the same level of care and dignity that any other person is," Squire said. "That (the gay/straight component) is something the Liberals decided to add, but I don't personally agree with it. I would rather see students all working together, leaning on each other, helping each other."

Morrison is also not a proponent of suspension, or particularly expulsion, as a consequence of bullying. She adds a strength of Bill 14 is how it creates remedial programs for both bullies and their victims.

Sonier points out suspension and expulsion are tools TVDSB principals have always had for dealing with bullying in cases where a weapon, physical assault or death threats have been involved. However, she adds entrenching those options in legislation is a positive step.

"Those are all areas presently where a principal can consider a recommendation for expulsion. I think, in Bill 13, they relate it to hate-motivated crimes," Sonier said.

"A lot of what is in these bills, Thames Valley already does. This just puts it in legislation. This just formalizes what we are already doing."

Whether it is Bill 13, Bill 14 or some compromised combination of the two, Morrison said she doesn't expect legislation could pass before the end of the current school year. And that timeline is just another bit of the frustration she has dealt with on an ongoing basis.

"We've been working behind the scenes for seven years, very quietly, trying to get someone to take the lead on making sure all kids are safe," Morrison said. "We have had five suicides since September in Ontario that were linked to bullying. Enough is enough."