

Anti-bullying task force recommends police in schools

By Melania Daniel Special to Londoner

Having the police in schools will go a long way towards reducing incidents of bullying. This view was contained in the report of the Thames Valley District School Board's anti-bullying task force, which was released last Thursday.

The TVDSB's report laid out a summary of the comments from participants in a massive community forum. About 600 people from across the Thames Valley school district were assembled simultaneously in three locations – Woodstock, London and St. Thomas – to brainstorm solutions to the problem of bullying.

According to Barry Wagner, facilitator for the task force, the recommendation to place cops in schools was made independently by each of the three groups. However, he said, they were not really suggesting anything unprecedented.

"We already have the police present in schools," said Wagner. "So I think that validates us. People believe the police can provide help in terms of early intervention."

The community forum consisted of representatives from the police, health, media, children and youth, parents, students, schools and community organizations. One of its objectives was to find out what role community organizations can play in stopping bullying, Wagner said.

The task force was assembled following the death in May last year of St. Thomas teen Bryten Brown. He was a victim of school bullies.

"The director [of Education on the TVDSB] was at the time concerned about bullying," said Wagner. "That suicide and his thinking on how to stop bullying prompted the formation of the task force."

The report of the task force, which contained more than 2,000 suggestions from the public, identified parents, police and media as powerful allies that can work with schools to help prevent bullying.

It also identified education as a key factor in ending bullying. Comments focused on how the media could raise awareness of the inappropriateness of bullying and on ways to stop it. The report also suggested that schools should increase the amount of anti-bullying education in their curriculum, and encourage students who witness incidents of bullying to report it.

"Schools are continually looking for ways to educate children about the seriousness of bullying," said Bill Tucker, the TVDSB's director of education. "Research shows the earlier you make children aware that bullying behaviour is unacceptable, the better the

chance we have of tackling the issue."

The report also called for a more proactive role by parents in providing good role models for appropriate behaviours and in educating their children against bullying.

According to experts, bullies are often children with little emotional support or supervision from their parents. If parents use discipline styles that are extremely strict or excessively permissive, then that can also increase the risk of children becoming bullies.

The task force is scheduled to meet again on April 13 to outline actions member organizations will take to address the report's findings. Its facilitator, Barry Wagner had some clear markers regarding what would indicate progress in the push to end bullying. That would be a time, he said, "when we effectively support persons being bullied and make them feel safe and secure, when we work with the bully to get them to see the hurt they're causing, and when we provide education and support for the bystanders to empower them to intervene."