

Relationships key in bully battle, experts say

By Kim Zarzour

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Tackling bullying. Dr. Deb Pepler addresses a host of educators at a bullying seminar, hosted by York University, at the Markham Convergence Centre Monday. *Michael Barrett*

Ontario may have the strongest legislation in the world and a slew of proven anti-bully programs, but it's not enough to stop bullying in schools, a conference of educators heard today.

Bullying won't go away until relationships are given the same priority as reading and math and until more resources are allocated to help students struggling with the problem, according to two of the country's top experts.

More than 100 educators and administrators met in Markham today to find out about Bill 13, Ontario's proposed anti-bullying legislation, and what they can do to help make it work.

What they heard was frustration from Canada's foremost expert on the topic, York University professor Debra Peplar.

Dr. Pepler, who has spent the last 24 years of her career battling the bully problem, said, she has "hit a brick wall". "I've given way too many talks to gymnasiums of children... and leave and nothing has changed.

"We have good legislation and mounds of research. How is it we still don't have a solution?"

While Canada is near the top in the world academically, when it comes to relationships, it ranks among the worst, she said.

A UNICEF study in 2007 ranked Canada 18th of 25 countries when asked how often children eat a main meal with parents and 23rd of 25 countries when it comes to having time to talk with their parents.

“Children and youth are disappearing from our radar.”

That has to change, she said, if bullying is to be stopped.

Ontario’s proposed Bill 13 toughens up consequences for bullying, but Eric Roher, a partner and national leader of the Education Focus Group with Borden Ladner Gervais LLP, who advises school boards on education law, warned the legislation is not enough.

“It can’t just be one policy. There needs to be a whole continuum of strategies.”

For the legislation to be successful, he said, additional supports must be added, including more funding for mental health issues in schools, a recognition that bystanders play an important role in bullying and better training for staff and school administrators.

Dr. Pepler said schools should deal with bullying in the same way they deal with math and literacy because relationship skills are critical to academic success.

“When kids can’t read, we put in extra support for them,” she said. A similar approach should be used for students who have troubles with relationships.

In the same way standardized testing for literacy, math and science helps educators find out what schools are struggling, systematic measuring could also help identify which schools need help with bully problems, she said.

“If we don’t measure it, it means we’re not valuing it enough.”