

Monday, May 4, 2009

Honorable Chair, Members and Fellow Speakers

Good afternoon,

My name is Kathryn Wilkins and this is Corina Morrison. We are co-founders of the London Anti-Bullying Coalition. We thank you for taking the time to listen and for providing us with the optimistic hope that together we can build a system more responsive to our victims.

Five years ago, a free lance journalist, having heard many similar tales of our family's struggles with bullying in our schools, arranged for Corina and me to meet. Initially, we provided emotional support to each other as we struggled to work within the system to resolve our concerns and found ourselves getting nowhere. It was the news of the tragic suicide of a local teenager, followed by the denial of the Principal that his school had a bullying problem that propelled us towards the formation of the London Anti-Bullying Coalition. Listening to the boy's father, Mr. Melo talk about cutting his son out of a tree and witnessing the pain we knew we had only too recently avoided ourselves, led us to the mantra, never again shall we lose a child to bullying!!

Within 3 hours of announcing the formation of the London Anti-Bullying Coalition on a local radio program we received 12 phone calls.

I have listed a few of the concerns that were brought to our attention:

- A teenager was set on fire getting off the school bus. During the period that followed, while both the school principal and the bus line were assigning responsibility to each other for keeping the child safe, the young man was set on fire a second time. The bus driver finally advised the parents to put their child on another bus as he could not guarantee their son would arrive home safely.
- A 7 year old female was lured into a corner of her school playground, held down, and sexually assaulted, resulting in a vaginal infection and suicidal ideation. All of the children were aware of what they called "the gross corner". Why wasn't the administration? The response to the mother by the principal when she sought assistance was: "to be fair, Ashley started a kissing club". The resolution was to send her back to school because it was now winter and kids were wearing snow pants on the playground and she would be safe.
- As a result of his 5 year old son being terrorized on the playground daily until he is throwing up before going to school, a father films his playground then presents the video to the Principal who refuses to view material. The next time the father is filming the playground, the Principal calls in a false report of a suspected

pedophile and three police cruisers arrive with lights and sirens going to stop the father from filming.

- A mother concerned with sexually inappropriate behaviour of a teacher and demanding resolution is banned from her children's school and unable to attend her daughter's grade 8 graduation.

Under the mentorship of David Millen of the Ottawa ABC, we held a media conference to announce the forming of the coalition. Our media conference was attended by John and Maria Melo, Mike Neuts, and Cindy Wesley, all who lost a child due to this issue and strongly supported the formation of a parent's voice advocacy group. At our townhall meeting the next week we were surprised as the 40 attendees we expected turned into 120 participants. We were a little overwhelmed. It seems people thought we were already established and came looking for support. We were two moms who felt like we were in over our heads. It was made apparent that our community was fed up and looking for some answers. TVO was in attendance filming for their documentary "Battling Bullies" which was nominated for a Gemini award and featured families who became political as a result of the system's failure to protect their children.

The LABC does not hear success stories. The LABC hears stories of situations being unaddressed and of policies and procedures either being ignored or used incorrectly. The LABC has been told that the Ministry does not micro-manage their boards, and the boards state they do not micro-manage their administrators. Is it micro-managing to expect adherence to policy? Is it micro-managing to place accountability pieces into legislation? Is it micro-managing to consequence an administration that despite adequate training, fails to respond to parents in a positive collaborative way? We don't think so.

When policy and procedure fail, when the victim is blamed for being evocative, when the incident is overlooked because "boys will be boys", when parents are forced to seek alternative education for their children, or are simply told; if they just stopped twitching, being gay, eating, reacting, etc. the situation would improve, who is responsible for making it right? At this point, no one is. Parents who contact the Ministry are given no redress, parents who contact their boards, are offered no hope, situations that are handled inappropriately by their schools are not remedied and those who failed them are not held accountable. Where do parents go, when the three systems appear to collude with each other to avoid accountability?

Without exception, our membership reports that they have been made to feel like overly involved, overly sensitive, unreasonable parents. They have been advised to teach their children some street smarts, enroll them in outside of the school activities to help rebuild their damaged self esteem and to “safety plan” with their child, alternate routes to school, how to avoid high risk areas, how to turn the other cheek. Without exception the victims and parents of victims do not feel heard, validated or valued. In our review of Bill 212 and now Bill 157 we feel that the victim is once again being ignored.

The system keeps parents at arm’s length, blames them for not preparing their children for the real world and generally takes away the parents ability to make the situation right. No one wants safety and a good education more for a child than the parent. The parent should be empowered by a system that works. The parent should have a process in which their energy is utilized in keeping their children safe. When you take away a parent’s voice, when you do not assist them in making things right, you create parent’s who get political, involve lawyers in their battle, file human rights complaints, go to the media, pull their children from the school or perhaps, join a coalition.

The lack of accountability and frustration with a broken system is what created us. Our parent’s are well aware of policy and procedures, rules, regulations, and legislation relative to their struggle. With millions of dollars put into Safe Schools our members continue to ask us one simple question. Who is ultimately responsible for keeping my child safe while they are in school?

Bill 157 is a very simple Bill and our members want more teeth put into it. They are seeking support for the victims and accountability when the system fails.

A recent statement in the house pointed to the fact that 93% of Ontario’s 2 million students in publically funded education feel safe in their schools. 7% of 2 million is 140,000 thousand children afraid to go to school. One could extrapolate to include parents on both sides and administration. These numbers are unacceptable and not good enough. If legislation was clear and concise these numbers would be so much better.

It is on behalf of these silenced voices that I appear before you today.

In our critique of Bill 157, which you should have a copy of, you will note that all of our suggestions and amendments focused on the accountability piece and support for the victim. We trust our Ministry and our boards to create legislation, policy and procedure and know they have experts on board to impact their decisions. We ask that you include the accountability piece which includes timelines for responding, to give the parents a tool with which to resolve their child’s concerns and to assist in creating a culture of caring and respect in their schools.

The LABC is also pleased to announce that we are mentoring some parents in other areas of our province in establishing their own coalition with accountability and victim rights as their focus. We receive calls from every province as most established coalitions are filled with rhetoric and fearful of challenging the system. That being said we are often compared to MADD who with time, changed the way the issue of drunk driving is looked at, dealt with, and in fact changed the cultural message about drinking and driving. It is our hope that we will reach a place where bullying is dealt with the right way all the time and angry parents don't have to form political movements.

We encourage you to read the package of information provided. Enclosed is a detailed copy of our suggested amendments, some input from our membership, and a copy of our three year report.

In the end, if no accountability or support for the victim is built into legislation we will continue to assist parents navigate the bullying maze and lobby our elected officials to ensure safety for all students.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Sincerely,

Kathryn Wilkins

Corina Morrison

Co-Founders – London Anti-Bullying Coalition