



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

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The Honourable Stephen Lecce
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OPSBA Submission on Bullying in Schools and Anti-bullying Initiatives

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback to the Ministry of Education's recent consultation, "Bullying in Ontario Schools," that included online surveys directed at student, parents/guardians, and educators. As an Association that is dedicated to advocating for public education and with a core priority focusing on the [Whole Child and Student Well-Being](#), we were compelled to provide our input. One of our first recommendations is for the ministry to not only discuss the issue of bullying, but to include anti-bullying initiatives and to support school boards in their continued efforts.

We certainly agree with the ministry's statement that bullying is a serious issue and can affect students in many ways, including feelings of safety and overall well-being, and can in turn impact a student's ability to learn and achieve success. OPSBA recently convened a meeting of the Association's consultative working groups, which include trustees on our Education Program and Policy Development Work Teams. These groups include trustees from across the entire province and include representation from our Indigenous Trustees' Council. We also routinely seek input from student trustees on OSTA-AECO's Public Board Council executive.

Our members felt strongly that there must be student engagement and overwhelmingly stated the need for proactive parental/guardian education and support combined with the coordination of community partnerships. Bullying is a societal issue and should not be discussed in isolation within the education community alone. There is not a one size fits all solution, and this requires all partners to dialogue together and be able to adapt any initiative or approach in a way that meets local needs. Overriding all of this is the importance of building positive relationships, as well as promoting and modelling kindness and empathy.

OPSBA has a strong record of advocacy for measures that ensure the schools of Ontario are safe places for our students to learn and for our staff to work. As background, it is important to state that OPSBA was supportive of Bill 13, *Accepting Schools Act*, in 2012, and provided input into the revised drafts of:

- PPM 128 - The Provincial Code of Conduct and School Board Codes of Conduct,

- PPM 141 - School Board Programs For Students On Long-Term Suspension,
- PPM 142 - School Board Programs For Expelled Students,
- PPM 144 - Bullying Prevention and Intervention, and
- PPM 145 - Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour.

In our recent [Grants for Student Needs \(GSN\) submission](#), we included the repeated request for an increase in the School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO) infrastructure to support its coordination role, an increase in the number of school-based mental health workers and community supports, and continued support and expansion of Youth Wellness Hubs in all communities in the province.

Our advocacy in this area calls for a holistic approach to fostering pro-social behaviour and social emotional learning which would include all students – those who engage in inappropriate behaviour, those who are directly impacted by it, and those who are also involved because they are witnesses to it (the bystanders). All levels need to be considered: from school boards and schools to classrooms, individuals and the community. School boards have an integral role including policy, communication and modelling. Leadership and “walking the talk” are imperative and must be seen and demonstrated by our education leaders. The common themes of prevention, response, intervention, support, and monitoring should occur at all levels.

We advocate for a strong focus on positive school climates where all students feel valued, included and respected. This is what school boards strive for through character education and competency-based programs, as well as efforts that support authentic equity and inclusion for each and every student in our care. We want an environment in which bullying behaviours have no place. That being said, we are all too well aware that bullying still exists and that recent tragic incidents have occurred in our school communities. These have been difficult for everyone, and serve to reinforce the need to continue to deepen our collective efforts and share effective evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies.

The good work of school boards can be seen by the incorporation of violence-prevention education in all aspects of the curriculum. This is in fact mandated by PPM 144, which requires that “every board must establish a bullying prevention and intervention plan for the schools of the board, and must require that all schools implement the board’s plan.” Many classrooms and teachers are doing this by strengthening programs that teach responsible social emotional behaviours and address important issues including racism, sexism, homophobia and youth alienation. Often, bullying is inflicted on children and youth specifically because of their race, gender, sexual orientation or ability. It is crucial that all students in this province are safe and able to pursue their education free from discrimination, stigmatization, and victimization. That is why we continue to support peer-support clubs that promote inclusive, caring and safe schools and represent a haven for many young people.

We have also stated on numerous occasions that all students must be able to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and feel valued, included and respected. With recent changes to the Health and Physical Education curriculum we still need to ensure the principles of equity, social justice, inclusion and diversity are maintained for our most vulnerable students, including those that express themselves as transgender and LGBTQ.

In terms of management of suspensions and expulsions, our members indicated their support of creating and fostering pro-social behaviour. When faced with these decisions, school board staff and trustees always consider offering appropriate supportive programs that will address their

behaviour. This goes back to and supports our earlier statement about the importance of positive relationships, and consistently modelling both kindness and empathy.

Our other areas of support include ongoing awareness, resources and training opportunities for students, parents and staff. Additionally, we support the continued promotion of Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week with many boards and individual schools already devoting specific activities to highlight their good work in their anti-bullying initiatives.

Current COVID-19/Coronavirus Situation

We have to acknowledge the current situation in Ontario and the augmented online learning environment for our students and their families. This has created different challenges for some students and could be increasing anxiety levels and other mental health issues. Supports for mental health have been provided but again, we know there are still students who are not receiving appropriate or sufficient help. School boards have been actively reaching out to their vulnerable students to provide those much-needed connections but this cannot replace the regular supports that students would have received in a school setting.

Not directly related to the pandemic, but increased screen time may heighten the opportunity for online or cyberbullying. We recognize the role that technology and social media have taken in today's society and how they can play a part in bullying. This has increased nexus issues that begin in the community and are brought into the school setting. Community and school-based programs that support internet safety and the appropriate use of social media are essential elements that have been incorporated into anti-bullying initiatives.

It is difficult to keep up with the current and emerging platforms (Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat, VSCO, Tellonym, Twitter and perhaps even Facebook) and one of the greatest challenges is having something inappropriate and reckless (or even dangerous) taken down after it is reported. More concerning is the creation of "ghost accounts" where owners can post and upload content – including bullying incidents – anonymously. In addition, we also monitoring the increased use of video conference platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams' Live Events, Facebook Messenger video, YouTube, Google Meet/Hangouts, Skype for Business.

This again ties into Nexus and the very real issue of something happening outside of school and/or school hours and then subsequently brought into the school environment. This could be a physical altercation or a weekend cyberbullying/social media incident that then causes major issues and continued harassment in the school. This appears to be at the core of many of our more significant bullying and violence issues. We would like to see this as an area of ongoing focus and discussion.

As part of our consultation process, we asked our trustees about school climate surveys and their school board prevention/anti-bullying measures. Included below is a summary of the actions and activities done by school boards across the province.

Climate surveys

Although mandated to conduct school climate surveys every two years, there are many school boards that administer these annually and use the results for various initiatives, including to develop anti-bullying plans and activities. The surveys provide invaluable data to school leaders so they are able to put in specific strategies that meet the needs of students and schools. Some boards are also establishing focus groups following their surveys to delve deeper into certain areas. Information gathered is also used for:

- Planning and programming of the annual Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week

- Setting content for staff PA days
- Assisting schools in determining the feelings of students in and around the school, gender opinions, cultural impacts, safety around the building and inside of the building
- Setting goals in school improvement plans
- Determining agenda items for meetings or parent consultations and workshops, etc.

Some surveys are bought from external suppliers (i.e. Tell Them from Me) but others are now being developed in-house by school boards. Concerns have been expressed about the generic type of questions included in the provincial survey as they do not always address the real nature of needs for all students and allow for regional variations (i.e. rural, Indigenous and northern).

School board prevention/anti-bullying measures

This discussion with our work team trustees generated many incredible and successful initiatives undertaken by school boards and schools, with local partnerships, across the entire province. Highlights include:

School Board, School and Student-led Programs and Initiatives

- School board-created posters, displays for school hallways and classrooms and print and web newsletters for families to raise awareness of the difference between bullying and conflict, and how to use effective language in conversations with students and families.
- A mental health and well-being campaign called “You Matter.” Students need to know they belong and that they are valued.
- Restorative Practice and Collaborative Problem Solving programs, which many schools have used for years, but also include other approaches that all schools will be expected to implement.
- A school board mental health symposium focused on helping students understand that they matter.
- A program in which youth were selected and trained to take on the role of Youth Leader. The students worked with a team of other interested Youth Champion student peers. All were invited to attend a training day.
- Shifting the work of Child and Youth Workers from almost exclusively focusing on poor or non-attendance of students to a heightened emphasis on the factors affecting why kids are not able to leave their houses or come to school: i.e. depression, mental health, bullying, parental addiction, and even homelessness.
- The creation of an Indigenous Youth Council, which brings Indigenous youth from across the district together to discuss strategies and share experiences. Students are paired with mentors and their feedback is brought to the board table through the Indigenous Student Trustee.
- A soon-to-be-announced anonymous bullying reporting email for students to use in the event they feel they can’t turn to anyone else.
- Well-being Committees that are made up of key stakeholder groups including the trustee, student and parent voice.
- Whole school approach or student-led initiatives like [We Are Better Together Student Involvement Project](#) and [Best Practices Support – Safe Schools](#).
- Redesigning of a parent-friendly progressive discipline poster [Progressive Discipline poster](#).
- Schools have well-established Gender and Sexuality Alliances, Natural Helper Groups and Ambassador Groups that all work together to support authentic inclusion with staff

and students to implement anti-bullying initiatives and help in effective intervention when something has gone wrong.

- Many schools institute random acts of kindness as a pro-social strategy, or assign roles and jobs within the school and community to ensure students have the opportunity to feel a sense of accomplishment and pride. For example, students may be assigned to be the morning greeter and hold up signs with “hello” written in different languages as students walk into school in the morning.
- Use of mentor relationships among students to help promote pro-social behaviors and interventions pairing older students with younger students. They may have friend clubs at recess where everyone is welcome to play, removing the social pressure of finding where you fit in, or in some cases being made to feel that you don't.

Staff Training

- A day-long training session including approximately 85 participants (teachers with school-based teams of ten to 12, counsellors, and the board's Mental Health Lead). Guest speakers covered topics such as cannabis and substance use, misuse, and risks.
- Monthly Administrator meetings include regular review and learning.
- Annual reminders to staff about process and procedures.
- Human Rights and Equity and Inclusion.
- [WITS/LEADs resources](#) for students and staff.
- MEND Foundation [training](#) for staff.

Community Partnerships

- Police services and health units working with students on programs to support healthy relationships.
- The Youth Mental Health and Addictions Champion Project, a pilot initiative between the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario and six public health units across the province. The focus is to improve the health and well-being of children and youth by focusing on mental wellness, reduce stigma related to mental illness, and discourage the use of drugs, alcohol, and other substances.
- [Mind Your Mind](#) provides helps identify mental illness and provides resources for support and treatment.
- The [Be Safe App](#) allows users to make a safety plan and helps them find appropriate help in a crisis. This application is available for iOS and Android devices.
- [My Tool Kit](#) is an interactive online tool that uses videos, mobile apps and education modules to provide mental health support.
- [Roots of Empathy](#) programs for students.

Advice and Next Steps

With regards to suggestions and advice, our members were quick to say that anti-bullying initiatives cannot be one-size-fits-all and there has to be shared responsibility and ownership. Boards want the local autonomy to create and direct action plans that work for their communities.

School boards would appreciate encouragement from the Ministry of Education to help to further engage parents and community members in prevention, awareness and detection of bullying situations. Support to engage the whole community in the process would also be welcomed, as well as recognition that grassroots approaches can work well. This initiative should involve other ministries to provide a coordinated approach.

It is important that the Ministry continue to provide sustainable funding that supports the creation of tools for schools and boards to gather data. This should include support for all existing evidence-based children and youth mental health initiatives, while integrating strong focus on:

- *Student leadership-building capacity* – encouraging innovation in small-scale student-led, in-school activities that improve school climate and provide peer support.
- *Parent and family engagement* – building capacity including and beyond Parent Involvement Committees, encouraging innovation in opportunities to support and develop school communities that help to form positive home climate and parenting skills.
- *Parents Reaching Out Grants* – Fully reinstate Parents Reaching Out (PRO) Grants which have provided the opportunity to offer guest speakers or workshops for students or parents or both.
- *Local diversity* – recognising bullying-related cultural views and norms and supporting student and parent leadership opportunities that can build consensus about the messages that school and home (and perhaps faith communities) are giving to students.

We also believe more needs to be done regarding bystander training with clear definitions and also recommend continued support for important partner groups like Kids Help Phone.

In closing, we are providing these recommendations to the Ministry of Education with the willing and open offer to work together on this important issue.

Sincerely,



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cc.

Christina Mitas, MPP (Scarborough Centre)

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The Ontario Public School Boards' Association represents English public district school boards and public school authorities across Ontario, which together serve more than 1.3 million public elementary and secondary students. The Association advocates on behalf of the best interests and needs of the public school system in Ontario. OPSBA is seen as the credible voice of public education in Ontario and is routinely called on by the provincial government for input and advice on legislation and the impact of government policy directions.