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Students demand change in province-wide walkout



By Brock Weir

Riley Maniscalco has dreams of attending law school.

As a Grade 11 student at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School, it's crunch time to make sure she has the courses in the year ahead to lay the foundations of a successful post-secondary career, but Riley says she feels she's at a crossroads ? as did hundreds of students across Aurora taking part in a province-wide walkout last Thursday afternoon to oppose sweeping changes to the Provincial Government's approach to education.

?This is very important to me because I am a big believer in a strong and good education, and I am here not just for myself and my fellow students, but for all the ones to come because it is going to effect all the future students of Ontario.?

One of her main concerns, she said, was the cancellation of free tuition in favour of a reformed OSAP system, which has put an emphasis back on loans as opposed to the grant system put in place by the previous government. ?I would be an OSAP recipient and the fact [Premier Doug Ford] is cutting down on the family income to be even lower and taking away the six-month grace period, which would mean I would start collecting interest and I would have to start paying bills the second I graduate school, really worries me because I am already going to be in a lot of debt. Not having that grace period is definitely very concerning. If I don't have OSAP, I don't really know what I'll be doing.?

Riley was not alone; concerns over OSAP funding were a familiar refrain from students across Town, and were added to a list that included worries about class sizes, a mandatory shift towards e-learning for multiple high school courses, as well as cuts to arts and special education

programs and supports.

?I am out here as much for the students as for the teachers,? shared Cory Mueller, a Grade 9 student at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School, who moved their protest from outside their school to the corner of Yonge and Dunning. ?This is classic just cutting of funding for really important things such as education and health. We are the next generation and there are a lot of people who are being singled out by this: arts are getting singled out, individual teachers are going to get laid off. Whether you believe it or not, that is how it is going to happen. Larger class sizes means that teachers aren't going to be able to connect enough with their students and classes aren't going to be able to get the support they actually need.

?Originally, we were told not to protest. Our walkout for our school was called off by our principal, but we were able to get it started just at the corner.?

Taylor Lindsay, a Grade 10 student at Williams, added she was out to protest cuts to the Special Education programs. Taylor said she has an IEP ? an Individualized Education Program ? to help her through certain subjects and she didn't want the IEPs cut along with Educational Assistants and support teachers.

?I need certain accommodations to help me in math and English,? she said. ?In Grade 3, I ended up having trouble and I ended up not getting help until Grade 6. I don't want that to be lost in high school because people need help in certain areas.?

The Williams students were joined by at least two students from a feeder school, Regency Acres Public School, who said they were trying to send a message, speaking out in particular about changes to the health and sex ed curriculum which, they said, they believed was ?sending a message that LGBTQ really doesn't matter? and was reminiscent of the 1940s, and larger class sizes.

Larger class sizes was another top-of-mind issue over at St. Max.

?This is our future,? said Grade 12 student Sathana Surendran. ?Students only make up 20 per cent of the world right now, but we are 100 per cent of the future. How are we supposed to have a future when all of these cuts are made to our education? [What's most concerning] is making four classes mandatory online. I think when you're in high school and elementary school, your fundamentals are built. When you're being taught online, you don't get those fundamentals. You need to be strong and you need strong learning; without those teachers and people supporting you, you don't necessarily get that.?

Added Grade 9 student Austin Fortia, ?I think Ford's cuts

are kind of stupid, like e-learning and increasing class sizes. Some kids need a teacher to learn. It cuts the one-on-one time. Kids aren't even going to be able to ask questions.?

While Christopher Hillmer, Principal of Dr. G.W. Williams, refused any and all questions related to Thursday's walkout, Principal Peter Parente offered some insight as he kept a watchful eye on students from just outside St. Max's Wellington Street entrance.

?My main goal as Principal of the school is to ensure the safety of my students and that they do what they intend to do to exercise their democratic right peacefully ? and that they're safe above all else. We did speak with our student leaders and our teachers who oversee student Council to remind them about what a peaceful protest looks like, to be particularly mindful of traffic along Wellington Street, to ensure they stay well back of the road so they can be safe.?