

Board's decision a 'slap in the face' to every Catholic student, says youth trustee



A York Catholic District School Board (YCDSB) decision this week to formally reject calls to raise the Progress Pride Flag at its Aurora headquarters is a 'slap in the face' to every student at the YCDSB, says student trustee Jonah James.

On a 6-4 vote, YCDSB trustees nixed a motion from James and fellow student trustee Anthea Peta-Dragos to raise the flag at the Catholic Education Centre (CEC) on Bloomington Road for the month of June.

Although James and Peta-Dragos serve as the voice of students at the table, they're non-voting members. As such, their motion was brought to the table by Trustee Elizabeth Crowe, who represents Aurora, King and Whitchurch-Stouffville.

'For several months, our Board room has been filled with passionate, polarized voices for and against the Progress flag and its place in the hallways and flagpoles of our schools,' said Crowe. 'Genesis 1:27 states that we are created in God's image and therefore every single person must be treated with the dignity and respect that is due God's image-bearer. As a school board, we state that our goal is for every student to reach their full potential and nurture their God-given talents so they can be faith-filled, contributing members of society. As such, the students and staff that identify as 2SLGBTQIA must feel welcomed, safe and free to be themselves in our schools and workplaces. Some have argued that the Cross and the Canadian flag should be enough to show that we are welcoming and inclusive. Perhaps in an ideal world that would be true, but our Board statistics show that the marginalized in our system are struggling with mental health and anxiety, they feel unsupported and unwelcome.'

Citing a range of emails on the subject she has received in recent months, one in particular referencing students with Trans parents and those being raised by two moms as just two examples, Crowe said 'society has changed' and the YCDSB needs to serve the 'people who populate our schools.'

'Does flying the Progress flag endorse sin as many emails have said? This is a question I have struggled with,' Crowe continued. 'We are called to live a chaste life. All of us, not just those who identify as 2SLGBTQIA+. How many of us has sinned through lust? Sex outside of the union of sacramental marriage? Use of contraception, about adultery, remarriage without annulment? what about the use of invitro-fertilization (IVF) to conceive? Is homosexual activity a greater sin?'

The long-serving YCDSB member referenced a number of areas over the last three decades where parents were 'upset' with Board governance, including their 1994 document on AIDS, the optional vaccination against HPV, and whether or not YCDSB staff should be covered for IVF on their health insurance.

‘Does flying the Progress flag show support for our students [and] staff, or does it promote a sexual lifestyle over a chaste lifestyle? As a Catholic board, we must always put chastity at the forefront of all our teachings and we expect our teachers will do so and they will follow our Catholic religious curriculum and family life curriculum that is approved by the Bishops, but that does not mean we abrogate our responsibility for the health, the physical health, the mental health, the safety of our students. We must be pious but we must also be pragmatic.’

Similar views were offered by Vaughan trustee Jennifer Wigston, who said the Board has asked for data and what they received from ‘our mental health team, from our religion department, from our human rights and equity advisor’ and students via surveys, petitions and delegations’ have underscored the importance of the flag.

‘We have learned that 2SLGBTQIA students in the wider community and within York Catholic have experienced higher-than-average mental health concerns, higher than average rates of bullying, discrimination, and feelings of being unsafe or afraid,’ she said. ‘York Catholic has an obligation to uphold the human rights of our students. In addition, a safe, welcoming and inclusive school environment is inextricably linked to student achievement. How can these students reach their full potential if they feel unsafe, feel afraid, or when their mental health is negatively impacted? Remembering that as soon as students come through our doors, they become our children and we have a duty to protect them, give them a place to feel safe, included and loved. When those students, those children in our care, tell us about the discrimination and the danger that they face, we have a duty to act.’

‘Let’s park that for a moment as we consider the matter before us whether to fly the Progress Flag here at the CEC for the month of June. The Minister of Education himself has weighed in on this topic with a reminder that we’re talking about a community of children facing some of the highest mental health issues in the Province. These kids most especially need to feel affirmed, to feel safe, respected in the school community. He also added that we embrace the LGBTQ community. When asked what message he wanted to send to those kids, he said, ‘The government stands with them. We will continue to support and we will be celebrating what the message of pride is, which is inclusion and unconditional love to every child in Ontario.’ Every child. We cannot pick and choose the kids who should feel safe’ in 2023, no less.’

The flag, she added, was not a ‘panacea’ and that raising it should not be a ‘performative action’ ‘there is a lot of work that needs to be done.’

‘We are well-served to remember what Jesus said, ‘Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me.’ It is of paramount importance that those of us at this table use our voices to lift others up, to recognize our responsibilities in terms of human rights, to support those whose voices have been ignored or unheard and to set the example that we want our students to be proud of and want to emulate. Flying the progress flag at the CEC during the month of June would be a powerful opportunity for the YCDSB to showcase its commitment to some of our most vulnerable students. What will we do to and for the least of our brothers and sisters in Christ?’

But these voices, and the other members who joined Crowe and Wigston in supporting the motion, were outweighed by the majority in the room, some of whom said raising the flag will not make the negative experiences of students go away; instead, they argued, change needs to be structural.

‘Coming into this role at the young age I am I was faced with decisions I can’t believe are being asked,’ said Vaughan trustee Michaela Barbieri. ‘There is a massive debate on the progressive pride flag. I am here tonight to do what I know is morally right. For all the young people out there that emailed me as well as parents, I side with your struggles, I acknowledge the oppression you are facing or have been faced with. But rest assured a flag will not set aside the struggles and misfortune that we as youth are faced with.’

‘There are many issues that surround students in their everyday life’ Flying the flag for a month to show ‘diversity and inclusivity’ will not bring it to an end. Much more is needed in order to help move towards the end goal. I have heard and read many people’s responses to the flag and one line truly speaks to me, which is eliminating division. I find there to be great hypocrisy within that line.’

Just having a discussion about raising the flag has created a division within the community and I cannot approve or vote yes for something you claim will help eliminate division and [promote] inclusivity, when it clearly has been doing the very opposite these past months, which we have all been privy to. You right now here (in the audience) are examples of the very division you and I speak of here tonight.

?I am not condoning the past behaviour and trying to justify it, because I am not. The heckling, the yelling, the unchristian-like behaviour from all of you is quite disheartening. I know it is difficult and frustrating to speak to, especially when you're trying to ensure your voice is being heard. I can assure you we have all heard everyone loud and clear. Tonight is not a matter of picking sides or who will win. It's about our students in our community. In life not everyone agrees and will not think the same, but have to learn how to still show respect for one another.?

Echoing these sentiments was Richmond Hill Trustee Joseph DiMeo, who acknowledged students experiencing ?struggles of hate, bullying and non-acceptance,? but agreed a flag that ?goes up in June [and] comes down in July? isn't the answer.

?Regarding the struggles of students are facing, I am learning something new every day and the more we talk and share about this, the easier it will be to address these issues and make sure everyone feels supported,? he said. ?I believe all the students at our Board are loved, supported and acknowledged, no matter what or who they choose to love. I don't support raising the flag just to check the box and say we did it, let's move on. I would rather keep the learning and growing to better support all students and communities, the way Jesus has taught us to.?

The teachings in the Bible were cited by Board Chair Frank Alexander at both Monday's Board meeting and at a press conference at the CEC the following morning.

?This is an important evening and in some ways an evening of two solitudes,? said Alexander at the meeting. ?As for me, everything I do is governed by my faith. I stand for God and for his glory. I stand for the Holy Catholic Epistolic Church. I stand by the word of God. This is my faith. This is what guides me. It is why I became a Catholic school trustee to ensure the York Catholic District School Board remains Catholic. It is what parents [sending] their children to York Catholic expect. For me, tonight's process is simple: I will just do my job.?

When asked Tuesday what his message might be to students who might feel that 60 percent of the York Catholic board doesn't have their backs, he said that is not the case.

?We're a Catholic school system and our fundamental belief is Jesus Christ is our saviour. If we focus on Christ as the centre of who we are as Catholics, we will find unity there. I think we find this unity when we get away from who we are as Catholics and we need to return to that. Part of my role and part of my role on the Board is to make sure that Christ remains the centre of who we are, that Catholic education remains strong, and so we begin to change the environment so people can feel and continue to feel at home.?

He also said he disagreed with a statement from Pflag York Region president Tristan Coolman that the YCDSB is ?unsafe? for 2SLGBTQIA+ students.

?Our schools are a safe place. There are some issues within our Board where students don't feel comfortable. For example, you may have heard the data on Black students, for example, who suffer probably to a larger extent than other students. They're feeling some of that. We do have a safe space. There are some things we need to fix and certainly we will do that.

?My faith is my rock and my safety and that's the basis on which I stand.?

But representatives for the students the Board serves have a very different viewpoint.

Describing the words shared at Board meetings over the last few months as ?shocking, hurtful, impacting all of us,? Student Trustee James said he will never forget the words of a student at the podium who asked what the Board will do ?when she gets attacked for

her identity.?

?The truth is this issue is about safety and wellbeing of our students. I don't need to say that as Christians the one thing you are called upon to do is support everyone on this planet no matter who are what they are?. I think we already know that. There is a massive campaign of hate around the Western World against the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and it hurts knowing our Board is making national headlines for being a place where this hate is demonstrated.

?Students have chosen to come to this board meeting whether in person or online to stand together to make their voices heard for a small? students particularly those of the 2SLGBTQ+ are risking their right to a safe, equitable, fruitful and quality education just to see a little shine of light at this Board that serves them. To say no today is honestly just a slap in the face to every student here at the YCDSB.?

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