

'Healthy minds and open hearts' at Dr. G.W. Williams earns award from Premier



By Brock Weir

Mary Tyler Moore might be able to turn the world on with her smile, but students at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School are hoping a simple little 'hello' will do the trick throughout their hallowed halls this year.

'Simply Say Hello' is a new initiative getting ready to be unleashed by students in the intensive class in Williams' Special Education department. According to teacher Joe Collins, the program will see the students fan out with a goal of saying 'hello,' 'good morning,' or the warm greeting of their choice to at least 20 people a day.

'The salutation is very simple, but we're targeting at least 20 people a day and we're hoping the ripple effect of that will help bring a healthier community within the school population,' says Mr. Collins.

If you're skeptical that this simple act of warmth will have the desired effect, chances are Premier Kathleen Wynne is not amongst the skeptics.

Premiere Wynne named Williams one of 10 schools across Ontario 'and the only one in York Region' as recipients of the 2013-2014 Premier's Awards for Accepting Schools. It is the second time the school has been recognized, after receiving the 2010 honour from Dalton McGuinty.

The award was formally celebrated by students on Monday morning.

The school was recognized for increasing student involvement in steering priorities and resources within the school environment towards causes and initiatives most important to the students in an effort to make each student feel safe and included, something the Province of Ontario says has been an ongoing challenge for Williams.

'However, some students with various exceptionalities were reluctant to participate in events or deliver announcements,' reads the citation. 'Knowing these challenges, the school wanted to promote the importance of healthy living, safety, and wellbeing in a caring, inclusive learning environment in a variety of ways.'

Such initiatives included ongoing work with the York Regional Police, Central York Fire Services, the Canadian Mental Health Association, and public health bodies on the creation of a Safety Week and Mental Health Week within the schools, with a special emphasis on 'Think Empathy' designed to increase awareness of bullying.

The 'Food for Learning' initiative enabled students to have access to healthy snacks during school hours, in addition to 'Subsidized Salad Weeks', while 'Purple Day' saw students join forces with the Gay-Straight alliance to show support for their LGBTQ community.

'The school's safety and inclusion initiatives have made it a positive place that offers students the resources they need to overcome

social and emotional challenges and lead happier, healthier lives," said the province, noting the impacts on engagement, visibility and leadership skills of students with mild intellectual disabilities."

For Principal Christopher Hilmer, receiving the honour for a second time was "significant" for the school.

"I think it really attests to the work the school does in order to create a safe and accepting environment for all students," he said.

Such programs were facilitated by Mr. Collins, alongside Debbie Hinton, a public health nurse with the Region of York. Ideas for initiatives have come out of conferences held by Public Health York Region and the York Regional Police that bring together students to share ideas. Going a step further, Ms. Hinton said one thing which made Williams students stand out from the crowd was going directly to the people they wanted to impact.

"These kids did a survey through the entire Grade 10s and from that we were able to identify some priorities they were interested in," she said. "Bullying and mental health has been a priority for the school."