

St. Max students, staff help break down stigma of financial need



The affordability crisis has hit everyone, from the rising costs of finding a home to putting food on the table ? but it's also keeping some York Region students from fully participating in, or even attending, class.

But, this past Thursday, students and staff at York Catholic District School Board (YCDSB) set out to do something to make a difference in the lives of youth who are experiencing financial distress.

October 17 marked the International Day for the Eradication of poverty and, as such, students who would ordinarily wear a uniform in the classroom, donated a loonie or a toonie to wear their 'civvies' to school.

Money collected through the initiative has been allocated to the YCDSB's Attendance Counselling Service team which will, in turn, provide individualised support to help students attend school regularly.

For Aurora's St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School community, it was both a chance to help the cause but also raise awareness about very real, sometimes hidden issues within the community.

'We have three amazing Attendance Counsellors at the YCDSB who work very closely with some of our most vulnerable students ? students who have difficulty finding their way either back to school or to school in general,' says Michelle Miranda, Principal at St. Max. 'Research shows one of the reasons that students are not attending school is because of the impoverished state in which they find themselves living.'

'Locally, I [think] people believe Aurora to be this very affluent community and I think, on the whole, many are and enjoy the wealth that we all do, but we have definitely seen more families asking for more support, even at the school level.'

This is an assessment students agreed with.

'It is very hidden,' says student Jayden Mathanrha. 'I feel like Aurora is this very 'put-together' community and it is kind of hard to ask for help in situations like this. I feel we, as Catholics, in our school, it's our duty to provide that [assistance] to people, especially if it is our own in the community of St. Max itself. Even if it is for the bus or a meal, or uniforms. It's good to provide the small things.'

That, says student Dabria Peta-Dragos, who serves as President of the York Secondary Presidents Council, is exactly what they are taught within the walls of the Wellington Street East school.

‘This is an opportunity to take action, help eradicate poverty and give back to families directly in our community first-hand and I think students love the opportunity to feel welcome in participating in that and just helping their friends, even if they don't know who they are helping.’

‘It's all about opening that discussion,’ Dabria continues. ‘We're bringing it up and I think what we can bring to our school is spreading awareness and opening up that conversation is just so important. We're all in this together and, as a Catholic community, we're family. We're always ready to give back and to lend a helping hand, working towards breaking that stigma [of asking for help] and creating an environment where everybody feels welcome.’

Miranda adds one of the pieces the St. Max community always works towards is fostering an environment where students can indeed come forward and discuss assistance with staff.

‘We don't want the fact that you can't pay an \$80 athletic fee stop you from trying out for a team,’ she says. ‘Call the Principal, call the Vice Principal, have the conversation and see what we can do.’

These are ‘delicate topics,’ notes Mark Brosans, Communications Manager for the YCDSB.

Students, he says, ‘shouldn't feel ashamed because the staff here is so welcoming and understanding.’

‘They shouldn't be worried to come forward with their problems; they should feel open and safe at our schools, which they do,’ he says. ‘The ask was for every one of our 103 schools in the YCDSB to participate in this in some way. There's an affordability crisis happening throughout Canada. A lot of people are having problems making ends meet. In York Region, poverty has always existed here, but it is more hidden. What you're seeing when you have rising inflation, rising cost of everything, it makes the [financial struggles] people are having more obvious. The Board wanted to do what we could to help our students make sure that they were going to have the support they needed to show up to school every day.’

For more information on the initiative, or to help support the cause, visit www.ycdsb.ca/fundraiser-international-day-for-the-eradication-of-poverty.

By Brock Weir