

Statements on inclusion and equity aren't enough, say parents, students



As local teacher Dina D'Ascanio Mayr approached the podium at last week's meeting of the York Catholic School Board, she did not know what kind of reaction she would receive.

The mother of a transgender son, words shared by delegates in the same room on February 28, against the placement of Safe Space stickers featuring an image of the Progress Pride flag, still rang in her ears.

Messages that pushed back against inclusion for all members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community left her with a reaction she said was nothing less than "visceral."

"It made me physically ill to know that people think that way and that they claim they are the majority of parents, but I'm a parent and I'm also a teacher with the Board," she says. "My voice [at last Tuesday's meeting] was as a parent, but in the back of my head I'm thinking of my child but I'm also thinking of many students that I teach, that I know who are having a difficult time. My first thought was this can't be the last word on this, I can't let that voice be the voice that kids are hearing. They need to hear something else " and there was a lot I had to say."

As she took her place at the microphone, she says she felt a "buzz of support and positive energy," but as soon as she mentioned being the mother of a transgender child, heckles began in the audience.

"I started to get angry [and thought] you are displaying the essence of the problem here," she says she thought as she spoke. "You don't know me, you don't know my son, you don't know what we've been through, and you're judging me because I just said, 'transgender.' You made that judgement and you're heckling me. I'm an adult, do that to me if you want, I can take it, but they are kids."

Despite some initial boos, by the end of her delegation, applause from fellow parents and stakeholders in the Board room rang out and the YCDSB Board reiterated its position of being a place inclusive to all.

Last week's meeting of the York Catholic District School Board came on the heels of a session on February 28 in which members of the public reacted strongly to the distribution of Safe Space stickers by the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association.

Police had to be called to calm the raucous meeting following two delegations, including one by Sherree Di Vittorio who suggested that 2SLGBTQIA+ students not be allowed to attend Catholic School. Following the meeting, and, she claims, losing her job due to her comments, Di Vittorio retracted her comments in a letter to The Auroran, stating she "misspoke and it was not my intention to suggest that they are unwelcome. I meant to highlight that only Catholic students who share similar values and beliefs are accepted by Catholic school boards."

The controversy nevertheless continued into last week, with the Board and Director of Education Dominic Scuglia once again stating the YCDSB is an inclusive place.

The meeting began with a motion to "reaffirm" the Board's commitment to inclusion and fostering "a safe and caring environment and regrets any statements and the delegations from the public" that might have contributed to students and staff feeling unsafe at school."

Board Chair Frank Alexander said the stickers in question were not submitted to the Board of Trustees prior to their distribution throughout schools, noting that whether or not they were displayed was an operational matter that is ultimately up to the Director of Education and individual teachers.

"Since the February 28 Board Meeting, there have been a number of questions about the inclusion of 2SLGBTQIA+ students in Catholic schools," said Director Scuglia. "The YCDSB is involved in ongoing conversations with our community partners, but I feel and I must make a public statement tonight. Among the YCDSB's core values are Catholicity, inclusion, and equity. Those will always be some of our core values because they complement each other. We are all one in Christ. While Pope Francis does remind us that there are two genders, we're created male and female, he also calls us to love and care for 2SLGBTQIA+ people. There is no 'but' in that statement, there is only an 'and'. This is very deliberate language to reflect that the Pope calls us to include all of God's people into his embrace. The staff of York Catholic District School Board will continue to love, protect and care for all students and staff while sharing Christ's teachings with them.

"The Canadian Mental Health Association tells us that 2SLGBTQIA+ people have higher rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidality and substance use. An Ontario study showed that 77 per cent of trans youth have seriously considered suicide. For Catholics who believe that every life is sacred, those numbers are unacceptable. I have listened carefully to all the comments that have been made here tonight. I assure you that York Catholic District School Board will continue to provide all our students with a safe learning environment that nurtures their whole person."

Although D'Ascanio Mayr and students appreciated this reaffirmation, they believe the Board should go further to underscore its commitment.

In response to the initial meeting, YCDSB students in Aurora, Patrick Mikkelsen and Isio Emakpor started a petition calling on the YCDSB, one of the few Catholic Boards of Education that doesn't, to fly the Progress Pride Flag during June's Pride Month celebrations.

"During the 28 February 2023 board meeting, we as Catholics were challenged to question our values following speeches of homophobia, transphobia, and sexism," say the students in their petition. "As a result, many students, teachers, and parents have been harmed, and it is the duty of the YCDSB to create a safe and welcoming environment. We thank the OECTA York Catholic Teachers for their support and wholeheartedly support their new 'safe schools' stickers.

"The Catholic Social Teaching of Solidarity enables us to stand with 2SLGBTQ+ students and recognize their hardships. Displaying a pride flag inside schools is not only a method of support but also allows students who identify as part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community to feel safe and supported in their environment. The Catholic Social Teaching of Human Dignity also tells us to treat others with said dignity and respect, aligning with what is commonly known as the golden rule. "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

What the pride flag represents is undoubtedly something our Catholic community can stand by. It also means something greater. It represents a welcoming sense of safety for our entire student body, including all students. The colours on the flag each represent something different: red represents life, orange represents healing, yellow represents sunlight, green represents nature, blue represents harmony and peace, and violet represents spirit.

As both a parent and an educator, D'Ascanio Mayr agrees with the sentiment.

The [comments from the Board] were a bit wishy-washy [in that] 'We didn't know about these signs, it wasn't up to us,' but I feel they could have taken a stronger stand, like, 'We weren't aware of these signs but we fully support them' and I didn't feel that came across strong enough,' she says. 'If they really want to make amends for what happened at [February's] Board meeting, this would be a great way to do it'. Not just empty words, but, 'We're going to visibly show we support these kids'; let's put that pride flag up on our flag pole.'

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter