

Students remain hopeful about raising Pride flag at YCDSB



Students pushing for the York Catholic District School Board to raise the Progress Pride flag at all area Catholic schools next month remain hopeful it will happen after another meeting of the Board last Tuesday resulted in a police call.

At the third meeting in as many months to be disrupted by parents and other members of the YCDSB community, students Isio Emakpor and Patrick Mikkelsen implored leaders to fly the Progress Pride flag in a formal delegation to the Board of Trustees at which they presented their petition to do just that? one which collected the signatures of over 1,000 students, staff, alumni, and community members.

?Egale Canada reported that almost 2/3 or 64 per cent of LGBT+ students and 61 per cent of students with LGBTQ+ parents reported feeling unsafe in their schools,? said Mikkelsen. ?To quote one of the signatories on our petition, ?I cannot tell you how dispiriting, how disappointing, and how unsupported I feel when I walk into my community and see my community centres, public schools and other institutions fly the pride flag and be reminded that my school, the place I go to every single day does not fly the pride flag in the month of June.' As a queer student during my time here, I have felt unrepresented and last year I considered leaving the YCDSB in search of a community where I can feel supported. My decision to stay came after my teachers, friends and community rallied around me to prove that hate has no home in YCDSB schools.?

Isio added that she had never felt ?uplifted and supported? over their last 14 years as a student in the Board and referenced one of the petition's signatories who wrote, ?As a graduate, I feel as though I was not seen or heard during my time in school. I felt erased while being told our pride events and displays can't be directly related to the 2SLGBTQ+ community. I want change for the queer students who are attending these schools in my footsteps.?

?This feeling of erasure is something shared by many queer students, including myself,? said Emakpor. ?We have been continuously shunned, dehumanized and told that we do not belong, and I just want to tell every Queer student listening that you DO belong. We should not be afraid to go to school, we should not have to endure listening to hateful rhetoric in a place that is supposed to support us and protect us. Queer students deserve to be uplifted and treated just the same as those outside of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. We are not asking for special treatment, we're just asking to feel safe and to be treated the same as our peers.?

Their ask to raise the flag at YCDSB buildings in June would be ?meaningful action? for the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

?These are your students who are speaking with you,? Isio concluded. ?These are your community members, students, staff, and

alumni that believe raising the Progress Pride flag during the month of June would be beneficial to the representation and inclusion of 2SLGBTQ+ students.?

Shouts from the audience engulfed the room before and after the delegation as people on all sides of the issue made their feelings known. Despite the Board Chair asking security to remove the hecklers, and then to remove the hecklers if they shouted again, the verbal sparring was largely confined to the Board Building's foyer, disrupting the meeting every time doors to the Chamber were opened.

Despite this, the YCDSB took no action on the students' request.

?It was a little scary because we had to get taken out a side door,? Emakpor told The Auroran following the meeting. ?We weren't able to leave through the main hall, so having to be ushered out was a little freaky and you could hear all the parents outside yelling at us. We had to go through the atrium at one point and when they saw us, they started yelling at us, so it was a little scary.?

Added Mikkelsen: ?We were scared but, of course, it was difficult for us to witness such hateful rhetoric and to see such disdain for our community and have that be directed at us, especially as students. I don't think adults, especially who are coming to a meeting, or parents of students in the Board, should be targeting students in that way or be speaking with students in that way.?

Despite the reception they received at the Board Office last week, both agree that they have had a ?really great reception? from their peers on an issue that is so important to them ? and that the ball is now in the Board's court.

?We're still waiting and we're hopeful that the Board will do the right thing and they will take steps in the right direction towards progress, towards representation, including and equity and making sure all their students feel safe,? said Mikkelsen.

Added Emakpor: ?We're lucky to have a school community where our teachers support us and our peers support us, but some students may not have that and they're not protected by the Board in case something negative happens in the school community.?

As such, Pflag York Region released a statement following last week's meeting that the organization was considering listing the Board as ?Unsafe for the LGBTQ2IA+ Community of York Region.?

Pflag York Region President Tristan Coolman said in a statement that what he saw at the meeting was ?deeply disturbing on a number of levels.?

?My first impression was admittedly a positive one. I saw parents, allies and queer members of our community dress like it was Pride season?. The atmosphere was at first very welcoming and it was incredible to see the community come out to support. I was also incredibly pleased with the prayers shared at the start of the board meeting as well. They were words that reflected the values I expect from religion and faith, promoting a welcoming environment for all and encouraging others to heed these words within and outside of the space. It would all end there. ?This incident, along with the treatment of the students, parents and allies in attendance has proven this Board lacks the decision quality and expertise to create a truly inclusive, equitable, and safe public space for these meetings?. I sat close to two women who had their smart phones open, directed at Patrick and Isio who had just sat down after their deputation. The women were yelling obscenities at them, two adult women to two students. These behaviours were shared by many others in attendance.?

Police, said Coolman, should have attended the meeting from the start and the people in question should be removed from the building ?immediately? rather than simply being asked to leave the Chamber.

?I commend staff and others in attendance for their action to keep the group outside the space, and for checking in with the community within the space. All of these actions would not have been necessary if the Board had learned its lessons from the last two months. We have written to you for years with no response. Your students and educators leave because they feel unsafe. You have failed to learn your lessons and the disrespect displayed tonight to two of your students, an educator, the two parents of another

delegation and our community at large is not befitting an institution which receives taxpayer dollars. Your institution currently lacks the humility and community collaboration needed to truly change from within. The issue is systemic and you owe it to the community to admit it before you can begin true meaningful action.?

Following the meeting, the YCDSB acknowledged the incident in a statement, noting at the same time the Pride flag issue is not closed.

?At the end of the first delegation on this issue, a number of members of the public gallery became disruptive,? said the Board. ?When these individuals would not come to order, they were asked to leave the Board Room. Many members of the public then remained in the atrium of the Board Office, where the situation required the police to attend to ensure the safety of all members of the public. When the police arrived, many individuals left the Board Office without being asked to do so. The York Catholic District School Board monitors for any possible disruption that could happen before a Board Meeting and works proactively with security and the police to ensure the safety of all those who attend our meetings.

?The York Catholic District School Board is involved in ongoing conversations with a number of stakeholders about whether or not to fly the Progress Pride Flag at their central office in June. There was no motion on the table last night for voting and there has not yet been a decision on flying the Pride Flag at the YCDSB. The York Catholic District School Board is committed to our Catholic faith and to the well-being of our students and staff. The YCDSB believes that 2SLGBTQIA+ students are loved by God and are valued members of our school communities.?

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