

Teachers give alternating viewpoints on what inclusivity means at YCDSB

The distribution of Safe Space stickers within the York Catholic District School Board has been a hot-button issue for area parents since a raucous meeting of the YCDSB in February, but educators within the Board shared somewhat differing viewpoints at a session last Tuesday.

The March 28 meeting of the YCDSB was intended by the Board to draw a line under the issue, with the Chair stating last week's meeting would be the last time they would entertain delegations on the matter.

But, if it was the final chapter on the issue, educators provided different perspectives on inclusion and how to achieve it.

First to speak was teacher Cinzia DeFrancesco who said she and her husband, Frank, were also parents within the Board's catchment area.

'I was at last month's Board meeting and I was not pleased with what I observed,' she said. 'What I saw was great unrest and division. From this, we cannot move forward effectively and support each other for the betterment of our children and students. We need to all recognize and remember the reason why we are here. We are here because we want the best for our children; the child needs to be the focus.'

She called for the Board and stakeholders to 'come together to initiate a plan of action in which we can all feel comfortable.'

'In this way we can foster positive bonds between community, school, parish and family. My main concern here is this: I truly believe the word 'inclusion' should be understood to be a verb and not an adjective. Inclusion is an action word and to bring this word to life, we need to build the necessary infrastructure to support inclusion within our schools. There needs to be a solid foundation in place to support all members within our teaching and learning community and this is not done through the silent and overnight distribution of stickers.

'This becomes evident when many teachers ask upon receiving these stickers in their mailbox, 'Why did we get these? What are we supposed to do with these?' When I speak to teachers from various schools and ask how the stickers were received, the feedback is, 'I just put it up because everyone else did.' I also hear, 'I am not sure I am comfortable with dealing with such an intimate and sensitive matter as it relates to my students.' I often enquire with students if they know what the updated Progress Pride flag means. For example, what the colours represent and the response I receive is, 'Nope, not at all. It keeps changing, I have no idea.' These responses do not represent confidence and understanding and does not show me that we're prepared, nor have the foundation in place to deal with such matters effectively.'

Supporting inclusion, she said, begins with 'acknowledging first and foremost that an essential learning tool does not rely solely on technology in the classrooms; we incorporate more field trips into our teaching practice and encourage competition. We have sleep-a-thons and play days. We bring back the arts in their full glory. We bring students back into their community by having them physically give back to their community members' and through this we can support the bonds between community, school, parish, and family. This is how we make a word into a verb and actively build bonds and support our students fully. By doing this we build a positive and supportive environment where the school as a whole is a safe space for our students. All students. In this way we can support each child and their overall educational development, their social and emotional development, and their spiritual development.'

An alternate view was offered by fellow teacher Dina D'Ascanio-Mayr.

Beginning her delegation stating she was 'the proud mother of three amazing children,' some of those in attendance began heckling when she referred to her transgender son. She said she found it 'incredibly difficult to comprehend' how the distribution of stickers, 'a gesture intended to show respect, to show love, and to protect those who are desperately in need of our protection, the very

essence of Christianity, has been met with such vitriol and condemnation.?

?It has shaken me to the core, so I can only imagine the affect that hearing these words of contempt and hate has had on students who are struggling and, in some cases, are questioning their very right to exist,? she said. ?Are we really a community that feels justified in doing this to another human being? It's unconscionable.?

?I could point out that the Catholic school system is publicly funded and as such must adhere to the human rights code. I can show you the horrifying statistics of suicide rates among LGBTQ youth, but I am acutely aware that these attempts will often fall on deaf ears. They are dismissed with the wave of a hand and pronouncements of Catholic values. And yet, the Canadian conference of Catholic Bishops in their letter on pastoral ministry to young people with same-sex attraction has stated the following: ?In the eyes of the church, every human person is a unique and irreplicable gift created by our loving God, in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by the blood of Christ.'

?The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that homosexual persons must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. In addition, the institute for Catholic Education states that Catholic Teachers are to teach commitment to the dignity of the human person and zero tolerance for harassment of and discrimination towards students who identify as transgender. These words are a stark contrast to some of the comments made at the most YCDSB meeting and unfortunately which have been echoed by board meetings?across the province.?

Addressing 2SLGBTQIA+ students listening to her words, she said she wanted to assure them that ?those voices do not speak for the majority of the parents in this community.?

?You are loved and you belong,? she said. ?At that Board meeting it was stated among other things that allowing transgender students to access the gendered bathroom with which they identify would lead to increased instances of assault.I don't disagree with that statement. Unfortunately, the numbers would suggest that it is the transgender student who is far more likely to be the victim of that assault and sadly more so in a Catholic school. The 2021 School Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia in Canadian Schools states that 2SLGBTQIA+ attending Catholic schools reported more incidents of harassments, especially in relation to sexual and gender identity and were less likely to disclose those occurrences to school staff. They are significantly more likely to indicate that they have been prevented from writing on or discussing 2SLGBTQ topics. If there is anything that we, as a Catholic school should be ashamed of, it is that.

?The argument was also made that any promotion of safe spaces for LGBTQ students is discriminatory because it gives preferential treatment to only one group of students, which ironically was followed with the argument that LGBTQ students should not be allowed to attend Catholic elementary schools. Preferential treatment indeed. After all, don't all students deserve to be safe? Yes, they do! And that is exactly the point. Yet many students like my son are not safe. I have been told that safe space stickers are inappropriate in our schools because we are Catholic. If that is true, then we need to be comfortable with the fact that because we are Catholic, LGBTQ students are often afraid to attend school or have had to transfer to other schools because of the incessant bullying, and because we are Catholic LGBTQ students are less safe in our schools. I submit to you that it is precisely because we are Catholic that we must do better and we need to see more of this.?

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