

YCDSB reaffirms commitment to 'equity' after heated meeting

The York Catholic District School Board has reaffirmed its commitment to equity after police were called to its February 28 meeting.

At issue was the display of stickers denoting some classrooms as 'Safe Spaces' for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Several delegates came forward to voice their opposition to teachers displaying these stickers, with one parent going as far as to suggest that 2SLGBTQIA+ students should be barred from attending Catholic school.

Three days after the meeting, YCDSB Director of Education Dominic Scuglia said many members of the York Catholic community reached out to the board to say 'the delegations caused hurt' and conceded there was a violation of the Board's Code of Conduct in 'that the delegations did not treat all members of our community with dignity and respect at all times.'

'As a Catholic learning community, we believe that Jesus taught us that every person is a child of God and is worthy of love, dignity and respect,' said Scuglia in a statement. 'Sharing the Gospel message and promoting equity are at the core of our work because we see these priorities as one and the same. We are committed to ensuring that we provide a place where those who feel excluded, bullied or struggling with their sense of belonging can gather in support of one another with Jesus Christ as our role model. This is why all our schools display the message, 'We are diverse. We are one in Christ.'

'Our partners at the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) recently distributed stickers to their members that feature a Progress Pride Flag and the text, 'Safe Space.' The Board of Trustees is not typically asked to approve operational matters and they did not know of or approve these stickers before they were produced and distributed. The leadership of the YCDSB feels that the message of 'Safe Spaces' is consistent with our core Catholic values. Pope Francis has repeatedly discussed how the 2SLGBTQIA+ community should not be marginalized but should be welcomed with respect and sensitivity. Therefore, the YCDSB has encouraged teachers to display or not display these stickers based on their personal beliefs.

'We acknowledge that this has been a difficult time for many members of our community. We also recognize that there are differences of opinion on whether the stickers should be displayed in our schools. I ask all members of the York Catholic community to refer to our Code of Conduct which guides us in maintaining a safe, inclusive and accepting school climate.'

Several delegates approached the podium in-person and virtually last week at the YCDSB's Aurora headquarters to speak out against the stickers, stating that the words of the Bible 'supersede' the views and teachings of Pope Francis.

'If homosexuality is taught in elementary schools, it would very easily become part of the curriculum,' said Sheree Di Vittorio, who delegated virtually to last Tuesday's meeting. 'This is inappropriate at a Catholic school because it would be contradicting the Catholic beliefs of the school. The introduction [of such topics] could lead to harmful consequences for the children. There is absolutely no need to have such an aggressive campaign all around schools exposing younger children like my nine-year-old to sexual ideologies and indoctrinations that she's far too young to understand. Where does this kind of behaviour end if we're now bending scripture in the name of inclusion?'

'Inclusive education,' she said, means that 'all students are supported and included in all aspects of their education regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity' and viewing all students as 'equals' is imperative. Creating a 'safe space' for one group, she added, could lead to the 'exclusion' of another and even the 'preferential treatment' of some.

'All students should have access to an environment where they can feel safe and comfortable; while that is especially important for marginalized groups that doesn't necessary mean we must focus only on them,' she continued. 'When any child experiences discrimination and hate in any form it can be incredibly harmful. It can lead to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem. It can also lead to physical and mental health problems. This is not the message that is being promoted by the stickers in question. While I have nothing against the gay community, homosexuality is still considered a sin. It is a transgression against the will of God, an act that

that robs people of their natural heterosexuality and the ability to create a traditional family.

‘There are Biblical reasons why homosexuality is considered a sin and regardless of what Pope Francis may think, the Bible and its teaching supersede his ideas of how we need to handle this issue’. Catholic schools should not allow transgender or LGBT students to attend. We don’t even allow non-Catholic denominations to attend our Catholic schools.’

Similar views were expressed earlier in the evening by parent Carlo Ravenna who said Board members should be ‘ashamed’ of themselves for ‘turning their backs’ on the word of the Bible.

‘The trustees are here because we put you here. As taxpaying citizens who pay your wages. We expect that you have our children’s best interests at heart. As Catholics, our expectation is the words of the Lord are being preached and instilled in the minds of our children to coincide with the faith we practice at home,’ he said. ‘The Safe Place stickers that were secretly plastered all over our schools without our consent and our knowledge, they shouldn’t say ‘safe space,’ they should say ‘danger zone.’ We need all you members here to understand that we are awakened to what’s happening and we will no longer accept this abuse and brainwashing that is being pushed to our children.’

Following the meeting, Pflag York Region voiced its support for the use of ‘Safe Space’ stickers in the classroom, pushing back on the ‘danger zone’ claim.

‘The reality is, the danger zone queer youth face on a daily basis is largely invisible and unfortunately, clearly includes spaces like their homes and their caregivers who ought to know better,’ said Tristan Coolman, President of Pflag York Region in a statement. ‘These parents and caregivers, who made no attempt to support the queer identifies of their children are failing their duty. For 29 years, Pflag Canada York Region has offered spaces for families and caregivers to discuss their concerns with other members of our community to better discover how to support their queer loved ones and we will continue to offer that space to anyone.

‘We believe faith and queerness do not need to live in opposition of one another. At times faith is used as a shield for hate speech and hate crimes. The actions of the parents at these meetings, or anyone else in opposition to these safe space stickers are not fuelled by faith, they are fuelled by hate.’

By Brock Weir
Editor
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter