

York Region students say #yeswewill to halting cyberbullying

By Brock Weir

Over 300 students from across York Region will descend on Aurora this Monday to say they have had enough of cyberbullying and they're not going to take it anymore.

The York Region District School Board and York Catholic District School Board are joining forces for the launch of #yeswewill, a hashtag that will bring awareness of cyberbullying right into the heart of the problem. The campaign kicks off Monday morning at Aurora High School and will be the first in a series of events designed to raise awareness of cyberbullying, decrease the number of incidents faced by students, and to form a network to 'change the culture' of cyberbullying.

According to Allan Hoyle, Superintendent of Schools (Operations) for the York Region District School Board (YRDSB), the #yeswewill campaign stems out of research that suggests traditional bullying, 'the one-on-one stuff,' has actually 'plateaued' in terms of the number of incidents. That does not mean, however, that students are having things any easier.

'Where the growth of bullying has been certainly over the last three years has been in the cybersphere,' says Mr. Hoyle. 'We know from our own work with children here in the Board that this is an issue here in schools and we felt it was something that needed to be addressed in a very concerted way.'

Both the YRDSB and the YCDSB have worked diligently to put this response together. 'They are all our kids,' says Mr. Hoyle of the collaboration, and it is important for both boards to move together in the same direction, along with partners from the York Regional Police (YRP).

'We are all aware of tragedies that have occurred across the country, and the names of children like Rahteah Parsons, Jamie Hubley, and Amanda Todd, and recognizing cyber bullying is on the rise, children have access to technology much more than they did in the past,' he says. 'I know that sounds like a truism, but it is a truism, and we felt this was something we needed to focus on.'

In addition to the YRP, the Boards also worked with the Bully Free Community Alliance of York Region to develop their plan of action. While Monday's event will launch the hashtag in style, the campaign doesn't end there. Ongoing work and resources will be provided to help support students, parents, and school staff moving forward. But, for many in the school board 'and indeed the home' tackling cyberbullying might be uncharted territory.

'It is critical that if we're going to make a difference, you have to do it at the level of students,' says Hoyle. 'A student voice, student leadership and student participation are absolutely critical and the answer to what we need in this particular sphere as much as it is anywhere. To use another old phrase, they are digital natives. They understand this technology, or at least how to use it. We certainly had support from students in terms of that.'

'It is perhaps difficult for us as adults when we aren't as well-versed with it. Some people are very well-versed in it, but students live in it. We have to do whatever we can to help them understand the appropriate ways to deal with it.'

Over the course of the campaign, the Boards will be monitoring the hashtag as it spreads within schools, with an emphasis on secondary schools, the number of hits it receives, and the campaign will evolve from there.

This is not the first time the YRDSB has delved into the world of online bullying and abuse. Two years ago they launched 'Report It!', an online feature which allows students to report incidents of bullying and other abuse anonymously to schools and the board itself. That too was a student-driven initiative, stemming out the Board's annual Our Voice conference, where students said they didn't feel they had a way to report bullying and not put themselves out there.