

March Student Trustee Report

Jeff Ferguson

At this time, Student Trustee J. Ferguson made the following remarks.

“Good evening, Mr. Chair, Mr. Director, Trustees, Staff, Ladies and Gentlemen.

This month marks a great achievement, an achievement that truly projects the leadership and initiative of students from across our great region. This month, from March 22nd through 25th, the York Region Presidents’ Council (YRPC) held its annual conference at Camp Trillium. The conference is an event held by students, for students. Over the course of the school year, the YRPC’s executive council has been working tirelessly towards this great goal. Whether it be booking busses, motivational speakers, the camp facility or collecting cheques from the over 135 delegates that attended (with the exception of the Board administrators that made sure we didn’t get ourselves into too much trouble) the entire conference was conceived and executed by students of the board. That is something to celebrate!

I would now like to shift to a topic that encompasses not only our board, but one that affects schools across the province, country, and other countries around the world. It is something that we have all seen, heard about, and dealt with.

Over the past several years the York Region District School Board has been commended for its positive role in the fight against bullying. Bullying is a problem that is not static to one grade, school level, or district. I am proud to be part of an organization that sends the definitive message that no matter what, no matter who, no matter where, in the York Region District School Board bullying is not tolerated. Period.

The fight against bullying is far from over; however, it is clear that this board has recognized its severity and has chosen to erase its presence.

Today we live in a shrinking world, one that gets smaller every day. What once took a highly skilled Ham Radio operator to talk to another person on the opposite side of the earth is now merely feasible by the click of a button by any nine year-old who knows how to use MSN Messenger. As the realm of technological communication grows the shift in complexity pertaining to bullying coincides. We now face a new type of internet bullying that is directed at students of all ages, and in some cases administrators. This is called “cyber bullying”.

According to Glenn Stutzky, a clinical instructor for the school of social work at Michigan State University, “cyber bullying is the use of modern communication technologies to embarrass, humiliate, threaten, or intimidate an individual in the attempt to gain power and control over them” (Stutzky). Stutzky continues by saying, “Bullying is all about power, the imbalance and abuse of power. Bullying is not a personality conflict-it’s abuse” (Stutzky).

“One of the hardest parts in the fight against cyber bullying is that it is not limited to time of day or geography and is visible on many fronts” (Stutzky). In addition, this problem is not limited to the internet. There are now cell phones with cameras, text messages, MP3 players, blackberries, palm pilots, and gaming equipment that can act as external hard-drives to play home made videos and videos illegally downloaded from the internet and believe it or not most students have at least one or more of the devices listed.

Students can post their own videos containing bullying and beatings on online video broadcasting sites such as YouTube. Students can also post derogatory comments against fellow students and school administrators on websites such as Facebook. In fact, in one of our neighboring boards, the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board, eleven students were suspended this past February for posting profane comments about a principal on Facebook. One of the greatest tragedies of cyber bullying is that websites such as Facebook and YouTube and devices such as cell phones that were created for a legitimate and just function; entertainment purposes, which have been painted with a tarnished brush. Nothing compares to the tragedy and pain that the victims of cyber bullying have been forced to endure.

At the last York Region Presidents’ Council (YRPC) meeting, Kimberly and I brought forth the topic of cyber bullying in an open discussion. To our surprise, we learned that there have been several suspensions throughout the Board that are the result of cyber bullying.

As we move forward in this technological age we are faced with new successes and problems; a time where change has forced new questions to be asked and answered. When it comes to the internet, how do we as administrators of a school board draw the line between school and home? How do we ensure that students have access to the strongest technologically engaged education we can muster, while also protecting students from the nefarious acts of others that technology itself has made possible? But most importantly, how do we as a school board, preemptively step forward to ensure that cyber bullying stops?

The York Region District School Board is renowned and commended for its leadership and role in the pursuit of literacy. One must choose between seeing cyber bullying as a problem, or as a puzzle of opportunity that is waiting to be solved. This is a school board that has paved the way for others with its leadership and initiative and I believe that this puzzle is but another chance for the Board to step forward and pave the way for others.

Thank you.”