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NEWS

Student trustees association urges government to expand school mental health services

*Oakville trustee
discusses
student platform*

ANDREA GORDON

Ontario's student trustees believe the need for better mental health resources and training at schools is so great they hope to make it an issue in the provincial election this year.

With five months until voters go to the polls, members of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association (OSTA-AECO) have done their homework well before deadline.

Student well-being and mental health supports were a central part of the "student platform" they will roll out at Queen's Park Jan. 10 on behalf of the two million students they represent at Ontario's public and Catholic school boards.

"We hear students talking about it all the time," says association president Dasha Metropolitansky, a Grade 12 student at White Oaks Secondary School in Oakville. She is in her second term as a student trustee with the Halton public school board.

The platform, which includes 16 recommendations, calls on the government to mandate and fund suicide intervention and mental health training programs for high school staff and students across the province, at a time of unprecedented demand for services among children and youth.

Metropolitansky said the message trustees have been hearing on the ground was backed up by results of an OSTA survey conducted in November, in which three-quarters of the 8,230 student respondents from 62 Ontario boards rated their school's mental health resources as ineffective, while two-thirds said they were inac-



Chris So / Toronto Star

White Oaks Secondary School student Dasha Metropolitansky.

cessible.

The student platform is a new initiative "created by students for students" and trustees now hope major political parties will incorporate the 16 recommendations into their own education platforms during the campaign, she said.

The 22-page document draws on the November student survey, with recommendations focused on student well-being, equitable access to programs and the need to teach practical skills critical to 21st-century learning.

Recommendations also include:

- Giving students the right to form a well-being club or committee in every school, and providing mental health training programs for youth.

- Mandating and funding breakfast programs for all schools.

- Testing or screening all students in grades 1, 4 and 8 transition years to identify exceptional learning needs.

- More steps to ensure all students with the legal right to special education accommodations receive them.

- More funding for guidance counsellors, and requiring that all be trained in suicide intervention.

Themes of the platform echo some of the findings in the association's 2017 survey of students, parents and educators released in December, which raised alarm about the lack of mental health resources.

Youth also want training in other life skills that are relevant to any workplace, says Metropolitansky, which is why the platform calls for all students to receive training in technological literacy as well as basic CPR and First Aid, self-defence and conflict resolution.

It also recommends co-op credits that provide workplace exposure be changed from "open level" courses to "mixed level" so they are recognized as credits on post-secondary applications.

"The comment we hear from students and our peers is 'we feel like what we're learning is disconnected from real life and can't necessarily be applied outside the classroom,'" she said

— Torstar Network