

By Henry Bury
The Intelligencer

SIR JAMES WHITNEY is more than a place where the deaf come to learn.

It's a home away from home for deaf students from throughout northern and eastern Ontario.

The school has the programs, resources and qualified staff.

But the Dundas Street West school has its share of controversy too.

Indeed, Sir James Whitney is dealing with two issues that cast a shadow on the otherwise bright, bricked building.

Soaring costs and a declining enrolment at all three schools for the deaf in Ontario have prompted the Ministry of Education to consider closing at least one of the schools over the next several years.

The other issue is just a startling.

Four teachers are facing trial shortly on charges of sexual assault, for alleged incidents at the school dating back to the 1950s and the early 1980s. Three of the teachers hadn't been at the school for years when the charges were filed; the fourth was still employed at the time.

As well, a provincial review was held to investigate the December incident involving inappropriate sexual activity among some students in one of its dormitories.

No charges were laid after an initial investigation, but last week Belleville police reopened the case at the urging of the Hastings County Crown's office.

DESPITE THE CLOUD that looms, staff and students love their school. They proudly wear buttons professing that love. And they maintain a positive attitude inside the school. Their future, they say, demands it.

Students like Stacey Connor say they want to stay at the school.

Controversy shadows Sir James

Staff and students choose to ignore looming clouds and focus instead on the work expected of them

"I'm aware some things have happened here in the past but I'm not really bothered by them. I love the school too much. This is where I've grown up," said the Wawa, Ont native, who's been at the school 11 years and graduates next year.

Sarah Colbeck, an elementary school prime minister, agrees.

"I feel a bit angry about what's happening here," the Grade 8 student said through an interpreter. "This is a really good school and I'd like to continue learning here. We need to keep the school open to keep deaf culture alive."

Talk of closure, criminal charges against former staff and the dormitory incident in December anger Colbeck.

"I wish it never happened. It has had a negative effect on the school. But we must keep going in a positive way," Colbeck said.

OTHERS, LIKE TEACHER Ken Roberts, say the media is to blame for the negativism that has surrounded Sir James Whitney.

"I'm disappointed. We feel it's a concern (and) that it may affect the school's future."

Roberts is one of two deaf teachers at the provincial school and says he's a good role model for students.

As a youngster, he attended the school for the deaf in Louisiana "and that taught me the deaf can do anything but hear."

With more than 20 years teaching experience at Sir James Whitney, Pat Riley has seen a lot of changes in deaf education and has grown extremely fond of the school.

"The negative publicity isn't helping our cause in terms of influencing the government's decision to keep Whitney open...I refuse to think of us closing. We're all trying to keep morale up."

Riley was shocked to learn of the criminal charges against former staff; but she's refused to let that impact on how she teaches.

"The kids come first. We have to provide them with the best possible program and that's what we're doing," Riley said.

Elementary principal Craig Barnes, although frustrated with recent events, vows to fight for Whitney's survival.

"We're talking about the future of deaf students here...the school is a centre of culture in this area and to lose that will have a ripple effect throughout the community. Any closure would be tragic."

HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL Gary Gervis stresses there was no connection between the recent assault charges and the government's study into closing Whitney or two other provincial schools for the deaf.

With 30 years service at Whitney, Gervis believes closing the school would be a tragedy. Perhaps, he added, the government should investigate ways of making the school more economically viable.

"We have a reputation across North America of being one of the best schools for the deaf. We have a caring staff here and I'm proud of them. We're more than just a school."

Police investigation uncovers unthinkable

By Tom Gavey
The Intelligencer

IT BEGAN AS rumors.

And in the spring of 1992 those rumours became allegations from police that former teachers at Sir James Whitney School in Belleville had done the unthinkable sexually assaulted their students.

After Insp. Garnet Goodwin first confirmed his unit was conducting an investigation of allegations by former students, there came charges against three former teachers.

And later, a fourth teacher, still at the school, was charged.

ON THE HEELS of all that came information that a disabled student had been assaulted by some of his own peers last December.

This amid assurances from the Ministry of Education that safeguards were in place at the school to protect students.

Results of an investigation by the Ministry of the Solicitor General's advocacy office into the December assault have been withheld after police re-

Wild rumors turned into charges of sexual assault against four teachers at Sir James Whitney school

And trials are now pending for the four teachers charged with the alleged assaults of their students. The charges cover a time period from the mid-1950s to the 1980s.

Former students were the impetus behind the police investigation. Goodwin said when detectives began their look into the charges they were prompted by former students who came

forward with complaints.

The first charges were laid in the spring of 1992 against David Arthur Baker, 42, of Fonthill (near Niagara Falls). He faces nine counts of indecent

assault against male students who were between 11 and 13 at the time the offences were to have occurred. That was between September, 1971 and May, 1974.

Next, Harry Vernon Webb, 59, of Montreal was charged with seven counts of indecent assault on males and one of common assault. Three former male students told police they were assaulted between 1960 and 1962.

A THIRD FORMER teacher was charged with indecent assault against a female student, relating to a period between 1954 and 1959. Elgin Alexander Vader, 62, taught at what was then the Ontario School for the Deaf.

Finally, police charged 50-year-old Edward McDonald with sexual assault of a female student during a two-year period between 1983 and 1985.

Vader and Baker are to stand trial in Belleville May 31. Further court appearances are slated for Webb (June 8) and McDonald (April 8).

Police expect it to take several weeks before they complete their investigation of the Dec. 6 incident in which the autistic student was vio-

How police handled the case

□ March, 1992 — City police confirm there is an investigation surrounding former teachers at Sir James Whitney School.

□ April, 1992 — A detective with the force's Criminal Investigation Bureau is assigned full-time to the investigation.

□ Police make their first arrest. David Arthur Baker, 42, of Fonthill (in the Niagara Region) is charged with nine counts of indecent assault. The charges stem from incidents between September, 1971 and May, 1974 when Baker taught at the school.

□ A second former SJW teacher is charged. Nine counts of indecent assault and one of common assault are levied against Harry Vernon Webb, 58, of Montreal. He taught at the school between 1960 and

Alexander Vader, 62, of RR 1 Demorestville with two counts of indecent assault against a female. He taught at the school between 1954 and 1959.

□ One count of sexual assault is laid against teacher Edward McDonald. He's charged with sexually assaulting a female student over a two-year period between 1983 and 1985. McDonald, 50, is still teaching at the school when the charge is laid.

□ Police reopen their investigation of an incident Dec. 6, 1992 where a handicapped student at the school was sexually assaulted by his peers.

□ Court dates have been set for each of the former teachers. Vader and Baker are to stand trial in Belleville May 31. Webb will appear in court again June 8 while McDonald's next court appearance is