

School violence on the increase in Ontario

By LISA BOONSTOPPEL-POT
The Herald

School violence is increasing in Halton, say regional principals, teachers and education administrators following the release of an Ontario Teacher's Federation survey which revealed physical and verbal assaults in Ontario's schools is rising at an alarming rate.

"I think the increase of violence in our schools is the key issue that faces teachers and teacher's organizations," said the president of the Ontario Secondary School Teacher's Association (OSSTF) Halton District, Sally Rewbotham.

"I hope our schools won't turn into some American schools where police guard the halls and there are chain-linked fences," she said. "But I'm not confident we'll be able to escape that even in Halton."

From talking with teachers, Ms. Rewbotham believes violence is on the increase in schools as does school trustee, Arlene Bruce.

"I've heard about incidences of violence all the way down the line

from principals, teachers, youth care workers and guidance counsellors," she said.

Although they don't have the statistics to prove violence is increasing in the schools, they were not surprised by the findings of the OTF survey which was released at OTF's annual general meeting in August.

Of the 881 schools responding to the survey (about one in five Ontario schools), 441 major incidents of assault and 6,342 minor incidents were reported, stated an OTF press release.

Types of major abuse reported ranged from biting, kicking and punching to the use of knives and firearms, read the press release.

The OTF stated major assault incidences have increased by 150 per cent and minor by 50 per cent over the period 1987 to 1990.

"The Federation is deeply concerned that its members are being threatened and in some cases, their property damaged," said Guill Archambault, president of OTF. "We are also dismayed that we can no longer assume that the school environment is a safe place for our children."

OTF wants the Ministry to produce a manual to help teachers in identifying and dealing with aggressive behavior as well as provide funding for appropriate training, stated the press release.

In Halton, steps have already been taken by the Halton Board of Education to deal with school violence.

Following an incident at General Brock High School in Burlington in February of last year, where three teenagers were wounded by a gunman, Halton director of education, Bob Williams formed a five-member committee of principals and board administrators to gather information about violence in schools.

Mr. Williams's executive assistant, Peter Gnish chaired the committee and said the committee has concluded their findings with an internal report to the director recommending he establish a 'Safe Schools Committee' to develop a crisis communication plan and safety practices teachers can utilize when faced with a violent situation.

"We're seeing more incidences of violence against students and teachers and we need to put practices into place to deal with these incidences," he said.

"The school staff should be taught operating procedures so they know what steps to take in case a violent crisis emerges," he said.

From the principals he surveyed about school violence he learned one area of concern for school staff is the number of students carrying weapons to school, mostly knives. The principals indicated the knives weren't being used, but were being taken to school, said Mr. Gnish.

Ms. Rewbotham said education may be the key to preventing further violence.

"We need to educate students and teachers about the value of human beings in respect to race, age, color and sex," she said. "We have to teach them that other people have value - we live in a world where that is far too often forgotten."

Trustee Bruce suggested school boards go right to the source - parents.

"The only way to approach the

problem is to look at the source," she said. "There are many sources such as violence in society in general, peer pressure and lack of parental authority."

"I personally think parents should be involved in parenting groups right from when the woman first becomes pregnant," she said. "I'd like to see someone say to a parent if their child's going to attend school, they should take a parenting course."

She said the school board does occasionally offer parenting courses for interested parents.

"The Minister of Education, Marion Boyd, has also recently indicated a desire to eliminate the threat of violence in schools."

"I'm deeply concerned about violence in our schools and society in general," stated Ms. Boyd in a press release. "The Ontario Federation of Teachers can count on my Ministry to help eliminate the threat of violence against teachers."

The press release stated the Ministry of Education intends to meet with the OTF to discuss its survey and recommendations.

Special task group will help students

By LISA BOONSTOPPEL-POT
The Herald

To help protect Halton's students from violence, Halton Board of Education Director, Bob Williams has announced a special task group on violence will be developed.

"Our Halton community was saddened and shocked by the violent deaths of Leslie Mahaffy and Nina De Villiers this summer," said Mr. Williams. "I have personally talked to a number of women in Burlington who now say they won't go out for a walk during the day - they're too afraid of what might happen."

"We have to view this kind of violence as simply unacceptable in a society that should have a tremendous reverence for the value of life."

Mr. Williams said he's asked the board's new Project Consultant for Race and Ethnocultural Equity, Bryce Leggatt, to coor-

dinate the work of a special task group to develop long-range strategies to ensure the safety of Halton's students.

He said the group will go beyond street-proofing, they will go deeper to the curriculum in school's.

"We have to help our students develop an essential understanding of the sanctity of human life," he said.

He admits he's given Mr. Leggatt "no small order."

"We live in a violent society. But people have to realize violence begets violence. People have to examine the consequences of their action," he said.

The new task group is still in the process of being formed said Mr. Williams, who added the group will involve interested and relevant members of the community to contribute their feelings and ideas on the issue of violence.



Terry Fox Run

Georgetown and Acton residents laced up their sneakers and oiled up their bicycles for this year's

annual Terry Fox Run Sunday. The Acton run raised \$24,300 and the Georgetown run raised \$3,500.

Mental health program available for students

By LISA BOONSTOPPEL-POT
The Herald

This summer was a season of student tragedies in Halton Region and North Halton's Mental Health Liaison Nurse, Debbie Bang, wants students to know she's available for crisis counselling at all of the North Halton high schools.

For the past 15 years, the Halton Regional Health Department has offered a Mental Health program to provide students with an opportunity to express their feelings and learn how to identify their strengths in order to develop strategies to manage their stress said Ms. Bang who provides counselling for all five secondary schools in Georgetown, Acton and Milton.

"We really want to de-mystify mental health," she said. "There are times in our lives when our internal resources can't deal with outside stressors like when there is a tragedy or problems at home. We try to help people look towards their internal resources to cope with what is happening."

Ms. Bang also provides mental health assessments, counselling, mental health promotion, acts as a liaison with health and psychiatric services and provides referrals to community services and consultation to school personnel and community agencies.

Last year, the mental health

program served approximately 250 students who can be referred to the mental health nurse by parents, family physicians, psychiatrists, community agencies and the students themselves.

"If you see someone who is depressed, down, not able to shake a lousy feeling or is even suicidal, we would like you to refer that person," said Ms. Bang. But if the student doesn't wish to see Ms. Bang, he or she doesn't have to.

"We don't do anything behind anybody's back," she said. "The program has been successful because the meetings are one-on-one with the students and they are confidential meetings. It's up to the students what we do. If they want us to talk to their teachers to explain the problems they're having so they can have a few more minutes to write a test or be left alone in class, we will but otherwise we won't."

Appointments with Ms. Bang are made in advance and Ms. Bang travels to Georgetown District High School, Acton High School and the high schools in Milton based on need.

Flexible appointments are made and students are seen at school, through home visits or in other appropriate settings said Ms. Bang.

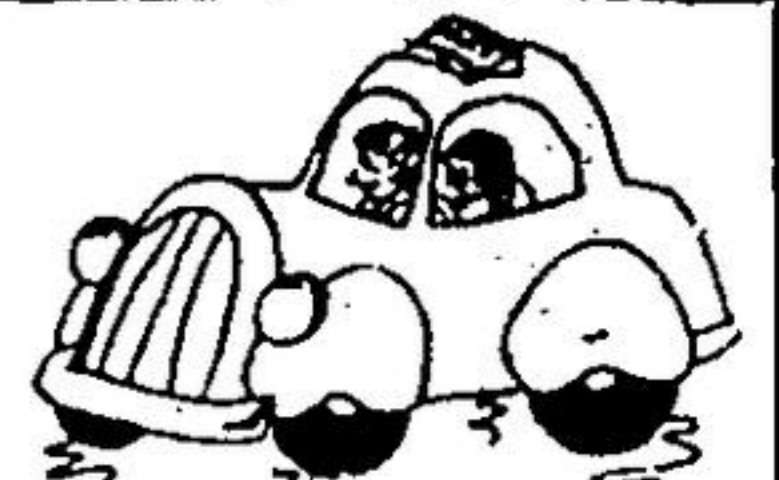
To contact Ms. Bang, call 877-2238.

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