

Free speech protest held outside Acton High School

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A crowd of protesters cheered, holding colourful signs as cars slowly come and go, honking at them.

The group was protesting the administration of Acton High School and its decision to suspend a student following an incident in which two students were talking about abortion.

Reports say the students were talking about a hypothetical situation, about what they would do if they were pregnant with a child that would have disabilities.

One student told another, who has a disability, that they would abort such child.

Offended and hurt by the harsh comments, the student went to the office and the other student was subsequently suspended for bullying.

Both students involved in the situation declined to

comment. However, one individual close to the situation has said, on the condition of anonymity, that the individual that staff say was being bullied in the conversation had a disability, and the individuals were talking about a hypothetical situation.

"We're out here because we're supporting our friends and freedom of speech," said Chelsie Rouse, a grade 9 student at the school. She and other protesters argue that when the school disciplined the girl for her remarks to the other student, they infringed on her freedom of expression.

After the incident, others wore shirts promoting free speech, which staff say built on the bullying of the student and they too were suspended or sent home to change their shirts.

"The vice-principal said that it's emotionally abusive," said Rouse. "He's choosing one student's edu-



Alexandra Heck/Metroland

Chelsie Rouse is a Grade 9 student at Acton High School and says that staff would not allow students leaving to protest to return to class later Friday.

cation over the other."

Superintendent Scott Podrebarac says that there are limits to free speech and that, when that line is crossed and it hurts another individual, this qualifies as bullying.

"If free speech harms

someone, then there is a toll. There are limits to free speech when it harms an individual," said Podrebarac.

The Halton District School Board has a set policy on suspending students, which is available on their website. It takes into con-

sideration "whether the infraction for which the student might be disciplined was related to any harassment of the student because of race, colour, ethnic origin, place of origin, religion, creed, disability, gender or gender identity, sex-

ual orientation or harassment for any other reason."

The policy states that a student can be suspended for "disorderly conduct, persistent opposition to authority, conduct injurious to the moral tone of the school or to the physical or mental well being of others in the school."

Rouse and other students skipped class to protest and say that staff do not want them returning to school for the day if they are leaving to protest.

"Once we walk out of the school and come over here, we're not allowed to go back," said Rouse.

Students who entered the school with T-shirts and signs were escorted out by a police officer on site.

Jerry Marshall came out to protest with his daughter and said that he stands behind her decision to come out.

"As soon as I heard the story I was upset from the get-go," said Marshall.



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