

Catholic school officials forced to 'unlearn' Safe Schools Act

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Special to The IFP

Between now and Feb. 1, 2008, administrators at the Halton Catholic District School Board are busy 'unlearning' the seven-year-old Safe Schools Act.

Revisions to the Act, contained in Bill 212, "are a somewhat radical change," said John Langill, who is Assistant Superintendent of Education with the board.

The general intent of the bill, called the *Progressive Discipline and School Safety Act*, promotes a more gradual and constructive approach to student discipline.

He told trustees at last week's board meeting that "a great deal of work" is ahead for administrators, parents and students who need to be made aware of the changes.

The biggest change is that principals no longer have the sole right to expel students, only to recommend it in a written investigation report, to a committee of the board (comprised of no fewer than three trustees).

And there is no such thing as mandatory expulsion anymore, said Langill.

The board's Safe Schools Action Team—composed of principals, vice-principals, senior staff, trustees and teachers— among other tasks, must set up a site where students suspended (for more than five days) or those expelled can get academic and counseling support.

"It takes a great deal of work to put together a program like this," said Langill.

The voluntary program will likely run in conjunction with the Halton District School

Board and be located in North Burlington and Oakville, he added.

According to the board's Director of Education, Lou Piovesan, programs already set up in Toronto and Dufferin boards attract 90 per cent of the students facing such consequences.

The latest statistics available reveal that in the 2003-2004 school year 1,385 students (5.2 per cent) attending Halton's Catholic schools were suspended and 10 (0.038) were expelled.

Within the Act is a grey area called 'mitigating factors' that now takes into consideration the age of the student, discipline history, ability to control their behaviour, or understand consequences of bad behaviour, their risk to self or others, whether racial or harassment was a factor in the student's behaviour, or whether the circumstances can be attributed to their disability.

There was a perception that the previous bill disproportionately impacted on males, students of colour, Aboriginal students and special needs students, according to the findings of the province's Safe Schools Action Team that visited communities across Ontario to examine school safety.

The Ministry of Education is giving a "healthy" allotment of funds to the Halton Catholic board including: \$235,000 for staffing, training and resources to use for programs for expelled and suspended students; and another \$124,000 to hire a social worker and/or child and youth counsellor to support bullying prevention initiatives as well as for monitoring attendance and supporting programs for expelled students.



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