

BR student suspended for refusing religion class

By KIM ARNOTT

Special to The Champion

A Halton student who declared he was no longer a Roman Catholic in order to avoid compulsory religious education has been suspended for refusing to participate in his religion class.

Marcus Dagenais, a grade 11 student at Bishop Reding Secondary School, renounced his religion earlier this year and

asked the Halton Catholic District School Board to exempt him from a required religious studies course.

"That was sort of the last straw. We got to the point where enough is enough."

FRED SWEENEY

In February, the board refused his request, stating that he remained a Catholic in their eyes. It also told him that he must attend his religion course or be suspended.

Over the last two months, according to his father Don Dagenais, Marcus has been attending the course, but refusing to do any work. "We've instructed him not to. It's a protest."

The matter came to a head last week when Marcus, who has a mark of 26 per cent in his religion course, refused to go on a field trip to a synagogue with the class.

As a result, the school suspended him for 10 days.

"That was sort of the last straw," said Fred Sweeney, director of education for the board. "We got to the point where enough is enough."

Mr. Dagenais said Marcus refused because he has recently missed a month of school due to illness and couldn't afford any more time away from class.

He also said he believes the school board is trying to make a political point at the expense of his son's education. "You get suspended for five days for having dope in school. They're absolutely rabid (at the board office)."

Mr. Sweeney admitted that most suspensions are only for three to five days, but said drug infractions would result in either a 20-day suspension or an expulsion.

He added that Marcus' unwillingness to take part in the required course was disruptive to other students and could set a dangerous precedent if ignored by the board.

Mr. Sweeney said the suspension will be lifted if the student agrees to return to class, catch up on all of his assignments and participate fully in the course.

"If the parents are prepared to cooperate and (Marcus) is prepared to cooperate, we're prepared to lift the suspension," he said.

The board and the family had plans to meet over the issue. Marcus, 17, had originally asked for an exemption from the religion class in order to take an advanced weight training course, which he said he required for his interest in competitive downhill mountain biking.

When the board refused his request, the Georgetown resident renounced his religion and requested an exemption on the basis that he wasn't Catholic.

While the Education Act gives Catholic school boards the right to compel Catholic students to take part in religious studies, it also states non-Catholic students who request exemptions shall not be required to take the courses.

In February, school board Chair Jim Sherlock told Mr. Dagenais that Marcus was originally enrolled as a Roman Catholic student, so the board would not accept his renunciation of his religion. He added that it is the board's position that all Catholic secondary students must take religious education classes.

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