

# Parents scratching heads over lice invasion

**Infestations out of control at York Region schools; parents demand answers, boards say deal with it at home.**

**JENNIFER BROWN**  
Staff Reporter

A group of Keswick parents wants the public school board to review its policy on head lice — a problem they say isn't being controlled in some York Region schools.

In fact, R.L. Graham parents Debbie Gordon and Yvonne MacKinnon believe infestations are on the rise as the pesky bugs

become resistant to treatments.

"We have found no consistency in the handling of outbreaks in head lice cases," Gordon told the school board during a presentation Monday night.

At R.L. Graham there have been 19 cases of head lice since November, and out of 11 schools in Georgina there have been over 100 cases discovered since the March break.

Gordon told trustees that the group of 10

parents who check for lice at R.L. Graham were able to examine the hair of 650 kids in two hours.

And since they began checking every five weeks, outbreaks have dropped dramatically.

"But this is not just a Georgina problem," warns Gordon who wants the board to produce a brochure instructing people how to check for head lice.

"Head lice takes its toll on a child's self-esteem. There's a stigma attached to it," she said, explaining that her own daughter had an infestation last fall. "The children are shunned by their classmates. If a child has chronic head lice they miss many days of school. Anytime I see anything that causes children to weep with sorrow it breaks my heart."

The issue is one that hits close to home for Gordon whose three children had lice at the same time last fall.

"Every day I was picking because every day the eggs mature and the shampoos don't kill freshly laid eggs."

Many children end up missing several days of school because they can't get rid of the lice. It also means they have repeatedly been exposed to pesticide treatments.

All public and separate schools in Georgina have been contacted by Gordon and MacKinnon to coordinate checks because the children interact with each other after school hours. Students are also re-checked before they are admitted back to class. The parents who examine students will remove up to five nits but if they find more than five or a live bug, students are sent home until they are nit free.

During a recent re-check at R.L. Graham, out of nine children two still had live bugs 10 days later.

Gordon wants the board to insist all schools check their students the first week of September, after Christmas break and after March break. She is also asking they produce a brochure to educate school councils on how to get checks done.

But the board and public health department insist head lice is a problem that must be controlled at home.

Until a decade ago, public health nurses were responsible for checking head lice in Ontario. Schools were then left with the responsibility.

And even though the board has a "no nit policy," meaning children found to have lice are sent home for treatment, their role in prevention isn't large enough, said Gordon.

Associate director Joe Allin said the board will make sure the information and process developed by the R.L. Graham parents will be shared with other schools, but beyond that, the nagging problem may persist.

"The package from R.L. Graham is wonderful," said Allin. "What we are able to do is make sure the kinds of programs already in our schools are shared with other schools."

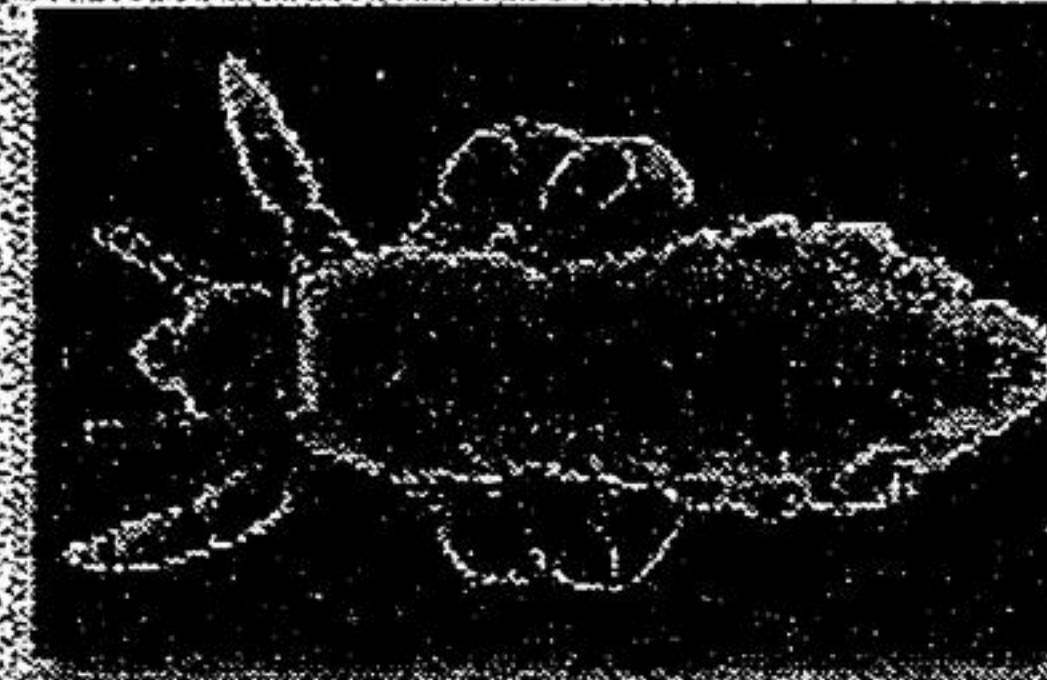
He said a video put together by a secretary at Jersey Public School in Keswick has been shared with other schools. Ultimately, though, the board does not want to get into the nit-picking business.

"The folks cursed with this are always looking for us to enforce something but we can't go into people's homes," said Allin, adding if a child receives proper treatment, he should be able to return to school within 24 hours.

"We can't control what happens at home. The bedding should be bagged and washed in a solution with the potency to kill the nits. We know that for the kids who are sent home multiple times because they have seemingly been re-infested it is a huge frustration for parents."

In some schools, principals and secretaries have taken on the job of checking for lice, but unless a vigilant approach is adopted, Gordon warned the problem won't improve.

"I know public health and this board have huge concerns in other areas right now but I feel we are overlooking children in a way that we might someday look back and wish we had addressed the issue sooner."



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