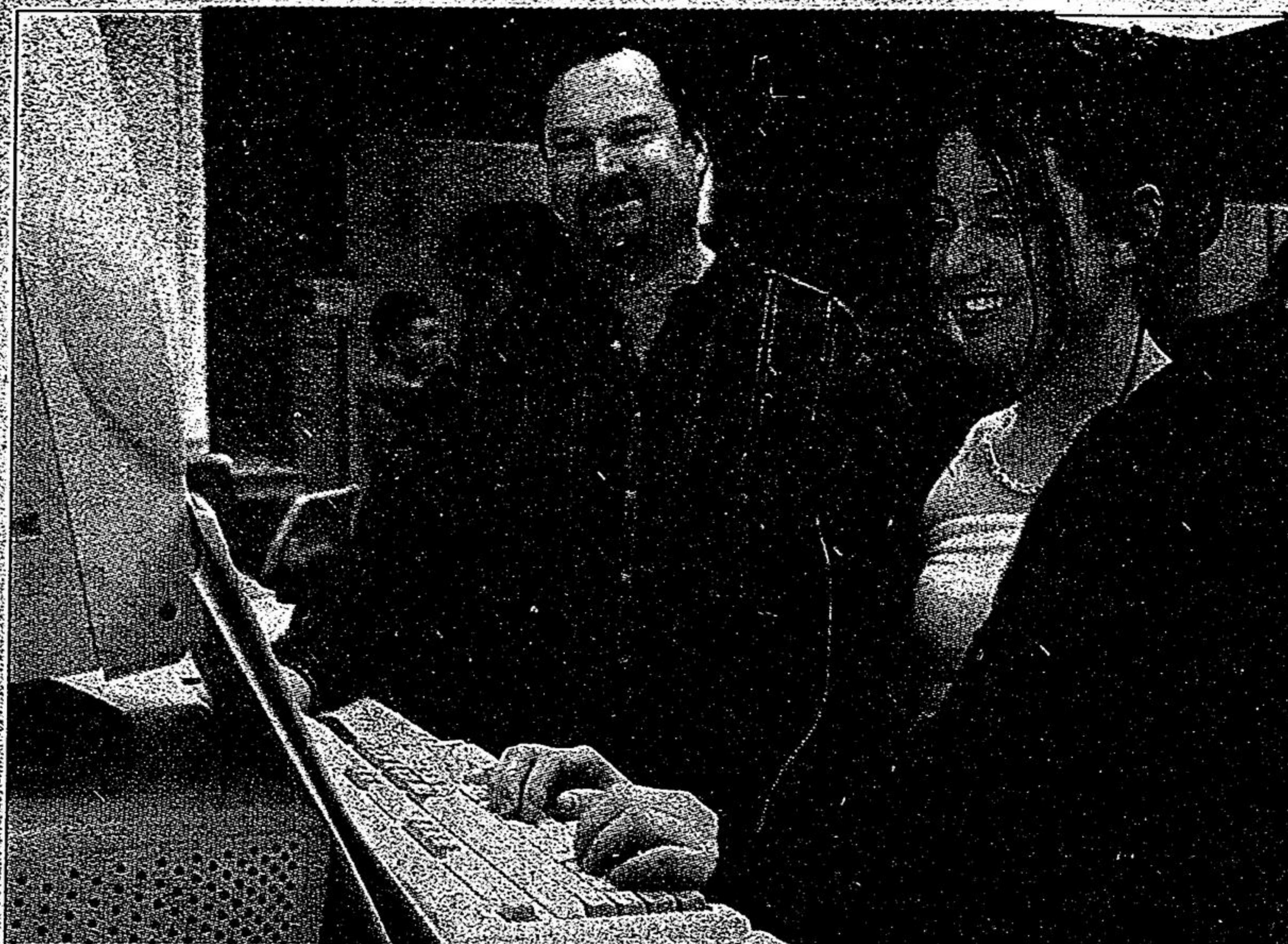


Discipline is a good TIP for students



Thornlea Secondary School teacher Richard Cherry (left) assists student Lisa Loreface in improving her computer skills in the Thornlea Intensive Program, a series of special classes aimed at instilling a sense of discipline in students.

STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

An intensive educational program helps students who may be close to dropping out

BY GIANNI COLAVECCHIA
Staff Writer

Mike Levitt looks forward to the day when he can make a million bucks.

Intelligent and articulate, the 18-year-old budding entrepreneur admits he often skipped classes and missed homework in the past.

So he volunteered to go into the Thornlea Intensive Program (TIP), a series of special classes that aim to instill discipline in students and give them a second chance at success.

TIP is one of several reasons many people in the York Region educational system, Levitt included, say the proposed province-wide code of conduct isn't needed here.

Levitt says TIP has made a difference through its abbreviated but busy schedule and its strict rules on attending class.

"It forces you to be self-disciplined because there's not much leniency," he said. "Basically, you get warned and you're out."

Saying they want a system that will eliminate excuses for unacceptable behaviour and unclear rules for students, Premier Mike Harris and Education Minister Janet Ecker have announced they will enact a code of conduct by September.

Unlike the current system, which allows hearings to be held before students are expelled, the code would automatically kick students out of school for weapons and other offences. Under the code, officials could send problem students to classes that are stricter than those in the traditional system.

Students who are expelled would be sent

to "strict discipline" schools with tougher rules. Parents of troubled teens could apply to have their children sent there.

But Richard Cherry, a teacher with TIP, was quick to note his program, despite its strict rules, isn't a form of punishment.

The focus of TIP is to be aware of the needs of students while instilling a sense of discipline in them.

A student-parent handbook clearly spells out expectations. One rule states, "Any absence that is not validated will be considered truancy. Truancy is grounds for removal from the program."

Cherry said he often stands in the school's hallway to make sure his students — many of whom were truants and failed their courses — get to class on time.

"They are essentially close to being dropouts and this is a second chance for them. The most important thing they learn is to be reliable, consistent and dependable," he said.

"If they start to have difficulties, we will sit them down and talk to them."

Cherry takes a break from the interview to talk with a student who has walked through a doorway with reddened eyes.

"We're very sensitive to the whole student," said Cherry, who is also Thornlea's head of alternative education.

"I think at the end of the day, she realizes we support her."

Cherry credited solid facilities and a favourable student-to-teacher ratio in helping TIP's 64 students achieve their academic goals.

The proof, he said, is in the fact 94 per cent

of students get the credits they're after while in TIP. They typically have 25 per cent of the credits they need before entering the program, he added.

Bill Crothers, chairperson of the York Region District School Board, said the proposed code of conduct is "absolutely" redundant in York Region.

"It forces you to be self-disciplined because there's not much leniency. Basically, you get warned and you're out."

"We already have, in a sense, a code of conduct," he said.

"I would expect that it (a province-wide code) would be relatively consistent with what we've already done."

A safe schools policy, he explained, already deals with weapons and drugs on school property.

Any student caught with a weapon is immediately suspended for 20 days and recommended for expulsion, he added.

Although earlier this week, rumours about gunplay kept more than 700 students off the grounds of Sutton District High School, Crothers said his board's behaviour guidelines are clear.

He cautioned against establishing rules that are too rigid.

Elizabeth Crowe, chairperson of the York Catholic District School Board, said the very

issues the province wants to deal with are already covered in her board by an alternative education program, a safe schools policy and codes of conduct for each school.

"I feel confident that our policy is quite comprehensive," she said, noting a variety of officials, including police officers, have helped the board draft its rules.

Gerry Harrison, president of the York Region branch of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, said safe school policies cover much of what the province wants to tackle.

"A lot of issues that the government wants to address, we have addressed," he said.

Harrison also said parents expect appeals mechanisms to be in place for students facing expulsion.

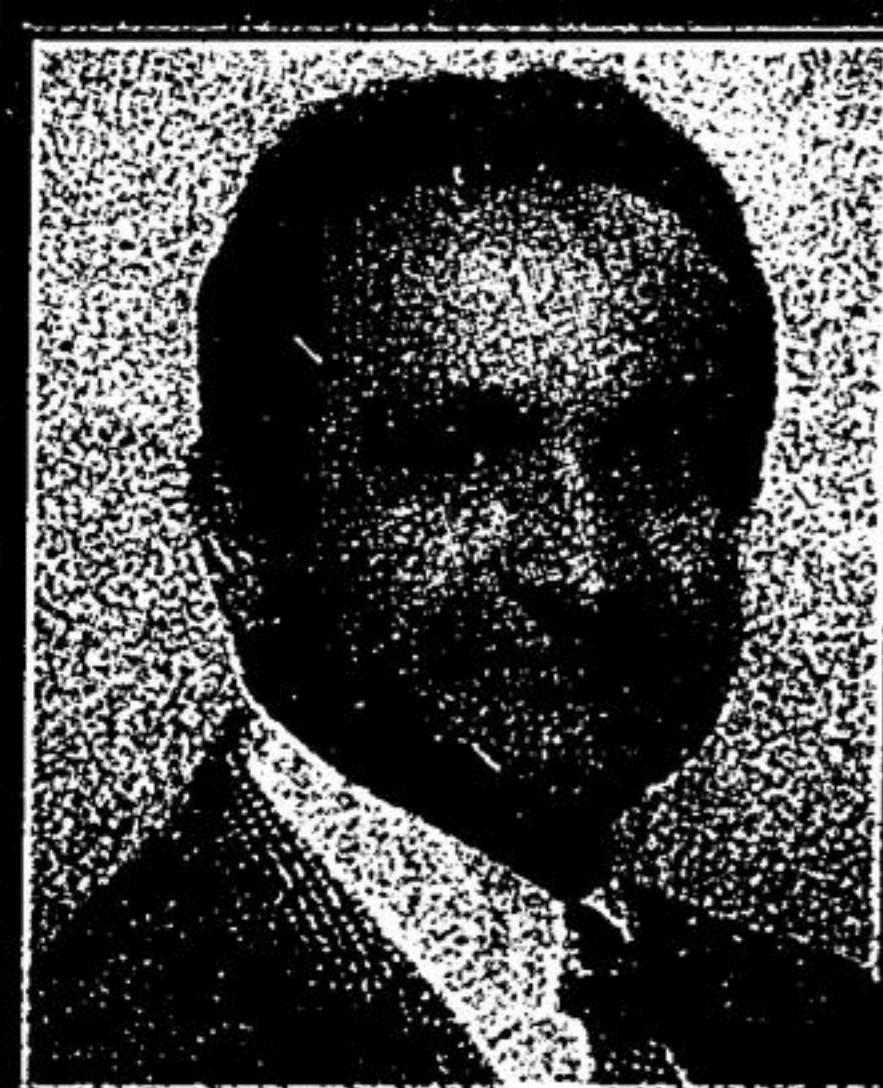
The province is addressing grey issues with a black-and-white approach and playing upon the public's worries about violence in schools, he added.

But Ministry of Education spokesperson Rob Savage said all the province wants to do is make sure safety and respect are vital parts of school life.

"Those are two key components we need to have in all our schools," he said.

A provincial code will make sure all rules are clear and provide a standard of behaviour for every student in Ontario, he noted.

Savage acknowledged many schools may already have clear rules, but said the province wants to make sure they are enforced. Officials are still determining how they intend to enforce the rules, he added.



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Opticians are trained technicians graduated from a non-university community college who sell eyeglasses and contact lenses as prescribed by either an optometrist or an ophthalmologist.

