

Safeguards already in place in York Region

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But the boards responded to those incidents.

Joe Allin, associate director of education with the public board, said the board offers teachers abuse detection training and has policies that ensure no one can be punished for accusing any employee — even the director of education — of sexual abuse.

"I'd like to think that if a principal were suspected of misbehaviour, we would hear from a teacher," he said.

Officials brought in mandatory criminal record checks for board

employees four years ago.

"Why did it take us so long?" Allin asked rhetorically. "I guess it wasn't a community concern earlier."

Under the Child Welfare Act, teachers are required to report suspected cases of abuse and face fines or criminal charges if they do not do so, Allin said.

Sharon Craigen, superintendent of curriculum and instructional services, said the biggest deterrent to sexual abuse is the culture of schools itself.

"People are constantly looking out for the best interests of children. That may seem like a bit of an ideal-

istic view, but it is what I believe to be the most powerful force acting on behalf of kids," she said.

But she said there's still a chance a predator could slip through the cracks.

"Anything is possible. But I think it is crucial parents teach children the rights we have with our own bodies," she said.

Chris Cable, spokesperson for the Catholic board, also conceded the system isn't foolproof.

"In any walk of life, you can't say, 'never,'" she said. "It's not a widespread problem. We go through absolute hoops to ensure students' safety."

Every teacher and volunteer in the board who works with children must undergo a criminal record check. Student leaders are offered workshops about detecting signs of inappropriate sexual conduct and pass tips to students.

Anyone complaining about an alleged offender is protected from reprisals under school policy.

Any teacher or volunteer accused of an offence is immediately removed from the classroom, Cable said.

People convicted of sexual misconduct are barred from volunteer or teaching positions.

York Regional Police Det. Gerry

Milne noted parents can encourage children to report abuse by genuinely listening to them and letting them know about potential dangers.

By putting on plays and giving presentations, the non-profit York Region Abuse Program (YRAP) also encourages children to disclose abuse.

In 1997-'98, YRAP reached nearly 9,000 students from junior kindergarten to Grade 8.

According to employee Carolyn Crosby, "On average, one child per school discloses abuse the day of the performance — followed by two more in the weeks thereafter."

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