

Private school pushes morality as much as mathematics

BY GIANNI COLAVECCHIA
Staff Writer

In a world where some schools guard against gunplay by requiring their students to pass through metal detectors, one group of educators is trying to start a new trend in education.

Officials are looking to form the first Sathya Sai School in Canada and are setting their sights on Markham.

Named after Sathya Sai Baba, a resident of India who followers describe as a renowned educator and spiritual leader, the school is to become part of a worldwide institution that tries to impart brotherly love and human dignity as much as mathematics and geography.

"What is happening in the education system is it is all geared to pumping information into one's head," according to Satya Poddar, one of 11 trustees slated to run the school. "Everybody is craving for character development to be introduced into the education system."

The school plans to base a significant portion of its curriculum on the non-denominational Education in Human Values Program developed by Baba, the chancellor of India's Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning.

The program focuses on five basic values: truth, right conduct, peace, love and non-violence. Those values, the theory suggests, will develop children's character.

But with the large influences of

genetics and environment, is it possible to "teach" character development?

For Poddar, a senior vice-president with Ernst and Young's Toronto office, the answer is a resounding, Yes.

"All human beings have cravings for love and peace," he said. "But if you don't have the right environment and values, that can get clouded."

Teachers have "nothing special" in their qualifications that allows them to foster a secure environment for a child, Poddar admitted. But they succeed because they must subscribe to Babas values to teach at any of his schools, he added.

Much like their counterparts in the local Catholic and public school boards, teachers will also impart beneficial values through inspirational stories about history's greatest figures.

Poddar claims students will learn the right values even through the positive vibes teachers feel.

"Those thoughts and feelings talk to the students before they enter the room," he said.

Hundreds of Sathya Sai Schools exist in dozens of countries, including India, Zambia and England.

Followers point to a United Nations education and values conference, to be hosted by Baba and attended by representatives from 140 countries next September, in backing their contention the schools consistently churn out well-

behaved children.

None of the 1,000 Toronto students who attend weekly classes based on Babas teachings, those followers claim, are involved with drugs or similar influences.

One of the major obstacles the Markham school must overcome is a potential lack of funds.

Baba has long insisted not one taxpayer, tuition-based or fundraised dollar will go into his schools. Cash to operate the facilities, which can cost \$6 million to build, is to come entirely from donations.

Poddar said he and the other trustees recently bought a \$1-million plot of land near the Ninth Line and Steeles Avenue in Markham. Donors came up with the cash, he said.

Poddar admitted he's not entirely sure how the schools are able to function.

"We have never seen any projects starve for funds. We don't know how, but we have faith," he said.

The schools have a "limited" number of extracurricular activities, he added.

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