

BULLYING KEEPS GIRL FROM SCHOOL

BY ROGER VARLEY
Staff Writer

Irena has been bullied at school for the past three years.

The bullying hasn't left any bruises or scars — at least, none on the outside — but it has been enough to cause her to miss the last four weeks of school.

"I really can't go back till something is done," the 11-year-old said as she sat on a couch in her parents' Richmond Hill home. "It's really hard for me."

For Irena, it has been psychologically and emotionally hurtful. And counsellors say this type of verbal harassment isn't always as easy to deal with as traditional bullying.

You don't want to ignore the victim, but on the other hand, you don't want to accuse anyone without proof.

Dr. Glen Di Pasquale, a psychologist with the York Region District School Board, said such cases can create numerous obstacles for educators.

"On the one hand, you don't want to ignore the victim, but on the other hand, you don't want to accuse anyone without proof," he said. "Very often, it doesn't get resolved, quite frankly."

Irena's parents, Vesna and Laza Lazarevic, claim they have been trying to have something done, without success.

But when the Lazarevics met with school principal Robert Dunn and school superintendent Lyn Sharrett on May 25 to discuss the issue, they walked out in frustration when, according to Vesna Lazarevic, the principal said he had no evidence of bullying other than a child admitting cheese had been slipped into Irena's sandwich. Irena is allergic to dairy products.

Di Pasquale said Irena's complaints — as described to him by The Liberal — were "textbook, typical of girls."

"It's much tougher to identify (than physical bullying) and often adults are not aware it's going on," he said. "It's difficult to catch and teachers are reluctant to act without proof. Proof is hard to get with this type of bullying."

Di Pasquale said research shows such bullying doesn't stop until a strong stance is taken.

"Parents (of victims) have to persist," he said. "It can help to get a third party involved, like me or one of my staff."

The Lazarevics say they're mak-

ing their daughter's plight public as a last resort.

The bullying began two years ago, when the Grade 6 student started the gifted program at Crosby Heights Public School in Richmond Hill.

Irena said a group of girls have called her names, made fun of her looks, excluded her from group work, ignored her, taken her possessions and even put food in her sandwich that could've prompted an allergic reaction.

In a list of things she says have been done to her, Irena wrote: "Make fun of how I look (big nose, big floppy ears, big gums)."

She doesn't have a big nose or big ears. But like many girls her age, she appears to be self-conscious of the braces she wears on her teeth.

Vesna Lazarevic said Dunn had told her students he can suspend for continually teasing and harassing other students.

"(But) the way they see resolving the problem is that Irena needs counselling," she said. "They're always making it Irena's problem."

"How about the bullies?" interjected Laza Lazarevic. "Don't they need counselling?"

Dunn said he was unable to talk about individual cases, notwithstanding the victim's parents' decision to go public.

"We have a clear policy to ensure children are safe and free from intimidation," he said. "We have a commitment to make sure children are safe."

"We absolutely have been thorough in the process of getting information in this case," he added. "We are presenting some options to (the Lazarevics) and they have some personal decisions to make. Our keen desire is that Irena is back in school."

Sharrett, an area superintendent, echoed Dunn's position.

"The stance the school board has taken is to protect the student," she said. "We take bullying seriously."

But she also declined to comment on Irena's case.

"If the parents choose to talk openly, that's their right," she said. "We can't divulge things that we consider private."

The Lazarevics said Irena entered the gifted student program because she wanted a challenge.

"She loved it," she adored her teachers," said Vesna, noting her daughter earned mostly A grades.

But the bullying has affected her grades, Irena said.

"My marks are not hugely worse, but my grades have been going down," she said. "Now, I'm missing school and I'm feeling resentful."

She said she doesn't want to con-

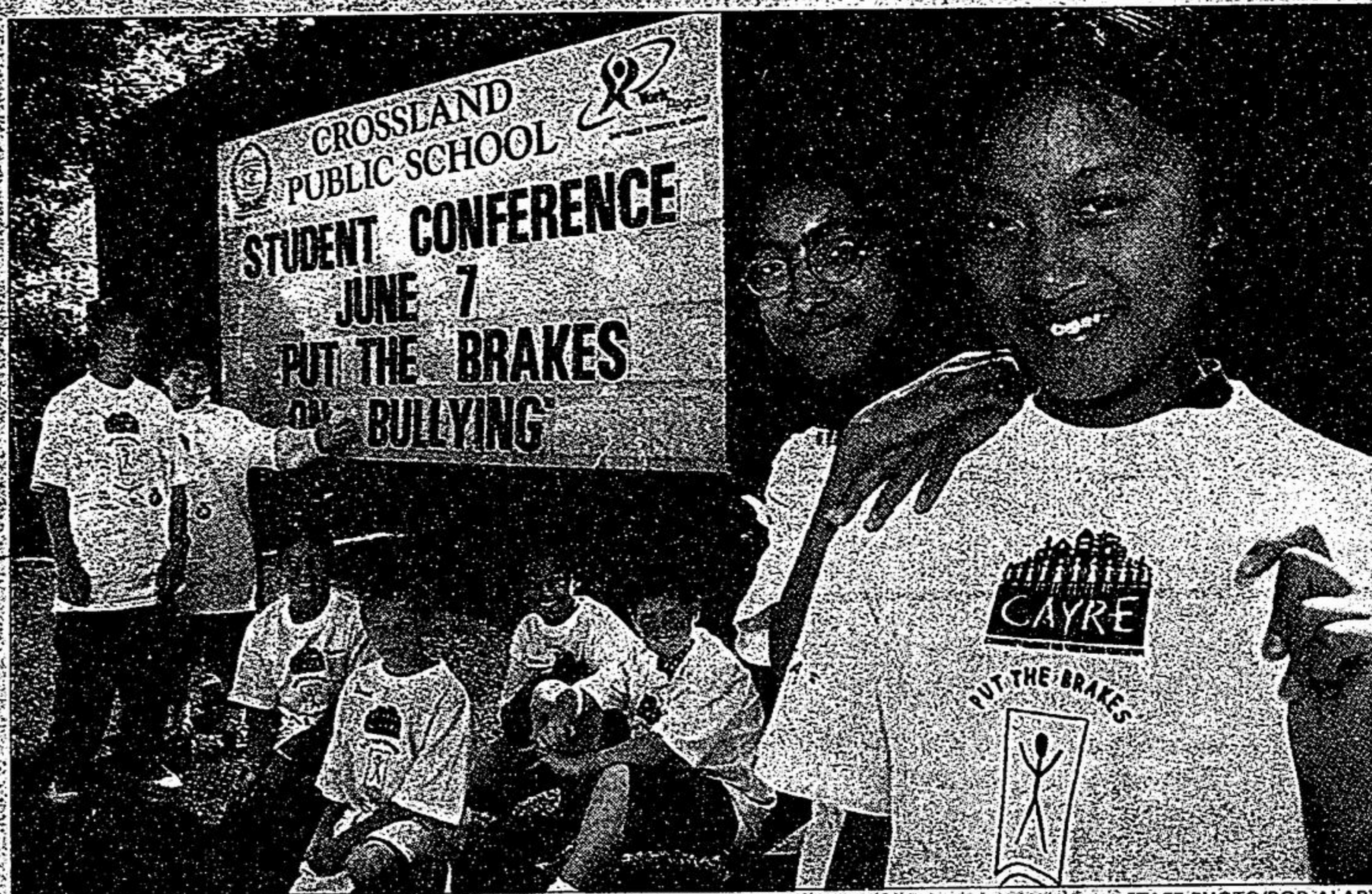
sider avoiding her tormentors by returning to a regular school program.

"It's not challenging enough." Her father agreed, saying that would be punishing the victim.

"What's the result?" he asked. "She's the one punished."

Joanne Cummings of CAYRE (Community Alliance for York Region Education) said bullying doesn't have to involve physical vio-

lence. "Bullying can be indirect," she said. "Spreading rumours, interfering with friendships and exclusion are forms of bullying, and they tend to be more common among girls."



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Crossland students (from right) Eva Chan, Zehra Kamini, Matt Elmer, Naomi Burnham, Daniel Holborn, Justin Clark, Gavan Spence and Grant Burke are helping Put the Brakes on Bullying, a conference sponsored by Community Alliance for York Region Education.

Learning to intervene

BY STEFANIA RIZZI
Staff Writer

Last year, Laura Ingram had to give up a sport at which she excelled.

Not because she didn't love soccer anymore or because practices were keeping her away from her studies.

Several of the bigger girls on the team were bullying her and two other girls because of their size and she couldn't take the abuse any longer.

"They kept saying 'Why are you playing? You're not big or strong'," said Ingram, one of nearly 70 grades 6 and 7 students from around the region who attended an anti-bullying symposium Thursday at Newmarket's Crossland Public School.

"What we ended up doing was ignoring them and they eventually stopped," she explained. "They stopped doing it because they weren't getting a reaction from us anymore."

The Put the Brakes on Bullying symposium, organized by

Community Alliance for York Region Education, was an opportunity to inform students about the different forms of bullying and have them develop effective anti-bullying strategies.

When observational research shows one in seven or 15 per cent of children are terrorized by bullies, it is important to reach out to students in the younger grades to prevent future incidents, according to Joanne Cummings from York University's LaMarsh Centre for Research on Violence and Conflict Resolution.

"We wanted to reach out to the grades 6 and 7s because they'll be in effective leadership positions next year," she said. "They'll have a lot of credibility next year... They'll be the role models and set an example for the younger students."

But to do that, Cummings said, the students have to be willing to intervene when one of their peers is being harassed.

"(Students) find it interesting to watch someone put someone down and pay a lot of attention to (the bully's) behaviour so it becomes

reinforced," she said.

Matt Elmer said he doesn't believe bullying is a problem at his Newmarket school.

"I've never seen anyone punch or say something mean to anyone," said the Mazo de la Roche Public School student.

"It doesn't even happen with the younger kids."

"I think most of us learned there's no point in doing it," he said.

But Crossland's Jon LeFave believes bullying takes place in some form or other at most schools.

LeFave said the problem at his school escalated to such extremes a class trip was cancelled.

In the past, it was assumed the majority of bullying was done by males. However, research shows more females are verbally tormenting peers.

That comes as no surprise to Deer Park Public School bullying victim Jesse Feitler.

"I was upset my friends would do that behind my back," she said.

"Bullying lowers other people's self-esteem and no one deserves to have it done to them."

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