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DALTON MCGUINTY: Liberal leader spoke to senior high school students about local character initiative.

Liberal leader wants to spread the character message

*Students should attack bullying
'like drinking and driving'*

BY ROGER VARLEY
Staff Writer

Ontario Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty said Thursday he wants to expand the York Region District School Board's character education program across the province.

Speaking to about 80 senior students at Bayview Secondary School, Mr. McGuinty said some of his proposed Safe Schools plan is modelled after the York Region initiative.

"I want you to be people of good character," he told the students. "There are rules and values we have to share."

Under his proposed plan, all publicly funded schools in Ontario would institute character education, teaching values such as respect, responsibility, honesty, courage and optimism as part of the curriculum.

But the plan would also address safety in schools, he said.

Referring to recent incidents of intruders being found in girls' washrooms at Toronto-area schools, he said students have the right to go to school in a safe environment.

"The government should make money available for schools that want video surveillance," Mr. McGuinty said, noting some older schools cannot even monitor people coming in the main doors.

He also would make an anti-bullying program mandatory for every school.

He challenged students to do their part in attacking bullying the way they have campaigned against drinking and driving.

"Over the last 20 years, we've changed the culture and decided drinking and driving is wrong," he said. "Three young people have committed suicide after being bullied, after constant tormenting."

"Three young people ... committed suicide after being bullied."

Alluding to the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., and W.R. Myers High School in Taber, Alta., Mr. McGuinty said many people wondered "how could you miss all the signals" the youths involved were troubled.

To avoid similar incidents in the future, his plan calls for creation of a school safety hotline, which would allow students and parents to report their concerns, anonymously if they prefer, about potentially violent situations.

The Liberal leader also suggested most youth crime is related to the school system.

"Close to 90 per cent of young offenders suffer some form of learning disability," he said. "That's not an excuse for crime (but) there have to be ways to prevent it in the first place."

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