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DEADLINE JUNE 10, 2012

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Students come together over bullying, while adults disagree

BY KIM ZARZOUR
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Ontario may have shown strong leadership in passing anti-bullying legislation Bill 13 this week, but Bill Belsey, founder of one of the world's top anti-bully organizations, says that's not enough.

"The government of Ontario could come along and write a cheque to York Region for a million dollars, but that by itself won't change anything. In addressing bullying, small is big. It's the small stuff that makes a difference."

And by small stuff, he means students not politicians — those on the front lines of the bully battle, the ones who can make little day-to-day changes in behaviour, can think before they speak, can stand up for victims and spread the word that bullying is not the norm.

Mr. Belsey, a Calgary middle school teacher and founder of the internationally recognized bullying.org website, was the keynote speaker at yesterday morning's Our Voice student-led conference in Richmond Hill, bringing together more than 500 students from 197 York public schools.

While the rest of the province was distracted by controversy over the passing of Bill 13 and the ensuing debate over Catholic funding and gay-straight alliances in schools, these students were talking about what's really happening and what they think can be done about it.

The students, chosen because they have had direct experience with bullying, spent the day in workshops at the Richmond Hill conference offering suggestions for the school board's anti-bullying strategy.

Despite the media headlines focusing on gay victims, these students came from all walks of life, many bullied for a variety of reasons — for learning or physical disabilities, size, hair colour, glasses, braces, social skills and gender identity.

Director Ken Thurston, wearing a symbolic pink shirt along with one of the pink bracelets distributed to participants, told the students they are a "major force of change."

"As students you have an essential perspective to share. I know that you are full of the big ideas."

Students were encouraged to switch on their digital devices during the conference to tweet their thoughts into cyberspace because, as Mr. Belsey said, "we want movement and momentum and a critical mass of like-minded people and that means we need to share the conversation beyond the walls of this room".

Most bullying — about 85 per cent — occurs when adults are not around, Mr. Belsey said. "That's why symposiums like this are so important. Students are on the front lines. That's where the rubber hits the road."

But, he added, it takes guts to stand up to bullying.

James Koehler and Shahram Aghar, two participants from Langstaff Secondary School, who spoke to York Region Media during a break, agreed.

They were one of several witnesses who watched a student being bullied at the local basketball court over a bus ticket recently. They did not intervene, even though they wanted to. They're not sure now why they didn't speak up — maybe, they said, they were afraid they'd be bullied, too, or thought someone else would step in.

Emma Huang, who was bullied through social isolation during Grades 7 and 8, told The Liberal stopping bullying takes courage. Now a student at Langstaff, she said she was alone against a group of bullies in elementary school, but if a few strong classmates had come to her aid, that balance of power could have shifted.

Mr. Belsey said all school staff need to be trained in dealing with the problem. His own four years of teacher training at the well-respected Queens University did not include one class in bully training.

"It's like having nurses and doctors who aren't trained to help you with the flu."

Making students feel safe and welcome, should be schools' top priority, he said, and it begins with listening to students — students such as Shabbir Kanchwala, who has seen the issue from both sides.

The Richmond Hill teen, who has been both aggressor and victim, took part in yesterday's event because, he said, adults need to "get a feel for what's happening, to get into students' heads. Even the smallest voice makes a difference."

But as the region's youth were coming together over the issue, adults elsewhere remained deeply divided over the recently passed Bill 13, the Accepting Schools Act.

Debate over the best way to stop bullying was derailed in recent weeks by a debate over students' right to form gay-straight alliances, which the new bill mandates.

Family and faith-based groups argued it took power away from parents, while anti-bullying coalitions said it put a special focus on one group of targeted kids at the expense of others.

for more on this story, go to yorkregion.com

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