



Standing up to bullies

Students learn skills to combat bullying

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“You must be the change you want to see in the world.”

That famous Gandhi quote served as the theme for an anti-bullying conference hosted by the Halton Catholic District School Board and the Halton Region last Friday. Two students from each of the Catholic board's 47 elementary and secondary schools attended the event, formally called Be the Change! Youth Leadership and Action Day.

The focus of the conference was to give students the opportunity to learn new skills that could be used in the halls and classrooms to combat the age-old problem of bullying.

While they were picking up fresh ideas, students were also sharing initiatives already proving successful in their schools.

Danielle Walker, a Grade 6 student at St. Brigid Elementary School in Halton Hills, is a member of her school's Peace Team. The Peace Team program, which started last year, works by assigning a virtue to each month. When students around the school are seen practising that virtue, such as responsibility or respect, they are given a charm they can wear on a necklace or bracelet.

“It is all about helping others, like helping someone tie their shoelace,” Walker said. “Everybody is a person and you shouldn't treat people badly. Bullying makes them feel really bad about themselves. Some people can come up to you and call you names and you will think that you are a geek, which is bad.”

The conference featured hands-on workshops, with students working on projects like virtue necklaces and posters with antibullying slogans, as well as guest speakers addressing topics like online safety and cyber bullying.

One unique aspect of the event was that both elementary and secondary schools were represented, with students from Grades 6-12 taking part.

“We really stress to them to be the change you want to see in the world,” said Rosanna Bird, child and youth counsellor with the Catholic board. “If they are a high school student, model it, because elementary students will follow.”

Taylor DeClerico, a Grade 11 student at Notre Dame Secondary School in Burlington, said the older students were learning from the younger students. She added that bullying is a problem that affects students of all ages.

“Bullying is an issue, it has been since the beginning of time and it comes in all forms, physically and emotionally, and we have to stop it because school is a place for learning and should be a positive experience, not a negative one,” she said. “Students should be able to learn in a safe environment.”

Notre Dame has several anti-bullying initiatives, according to DeClerico. The school has an antibullying



BRAINSTORMING: Students (from left) Krysta Peralto, Taylor DeClerico, Jessica Novak and Danielle Walker brainstorm during the Be the Change! Youth Leadership and Action Day.

committee of staff and student members, with the student council and athletic association also developing anti-bullying events and strategies.

Students are also wearing and exchanging wristbands created by a pair of Oakville entrepreneurs that celebrate random acts of kindness.

This month's message at the school is It's Cool To Care, with students donning blue and white to show their support to stop bullying.

"Everyone from every different aspect of the school is really coming together and working on this project," DeClerico said.

A recent event showed that the students at Notre Dame are walking the talk. When a male student at the school was ridiculed for wearing a pink shirt to school, a group of senior students took a stand.

"The next day a bunch of Grade 12 students wore pink to school to show they supported him and standing up for what they believe in," DeClerico said. "I want people who are bullying, and you know who you are, to understand that we know they do it because they want to feel better about themselves, but it isn't right. For students who are being bullied, I want them not to worry, it will get better. People do care."

St. Marguerite d'Youville Elementary School in Oakville has a program called Growing Together in Character, in which students are nominated by teachers for taking anti-bullying actions. Each month, one student is recognized for their leadership.

Krysta Peralto, a Grade 7 student at the school, said she is also personally working to spread the message that standing up and making your voice heard is important.

"I've seen many people be bullied and it is really hard to watch — a few times I've had to step in and say, 'That's my friend, what are you doing?'" she said. "Bullying is becoming a greater problem and more people are getting hurt. We want people to feel good and safe at school, we don't want them to miss school because someone is bothering them. Everyone wants to feel good inside."

The effects of bullying, whether verbal, emotional or cyber, can be devastating.

Jessica Novak, a Grade 7 student at St. Anthony of Padua Elementary School in Milton, said that she has seen its effects on students around her.

"Lots of children are losing their self-esteem and their courage," she said. "People shouldn't bully others and if you are bullied, stand up for yourself and tell them to stop and that it isn't very nice."

The school hosts anti-bullying assemblies and does activities around the issue in the classrooms. Novak has also become personally involved in putting an end to bullying on the playground.

"Usually, bullies take it out on individuals that walk around the playground by themselves," she said. "Instead of letting them walk around by themselves, make a play-together group. Go to that person and ask them to play with you. I have done this. Also, if you see it, don't just stand by. Be the smarter person and be strong. When you are a bystander, you are helping the bully, not the victim."

Theresa Wilson, chief social worker with the Catholic board, said bullying is happening in schools and that students are being affected, making the conference and its messages relevant.

"It has a significant impact in a couple different areas, such as self-esteem, self-confidence; we often see it in school attendance and school avoidance, as well as school achievement," she said. "These kids are often affected on many levels, so we also see physical health problems. The concern I have is that the effects can continue long after the bullying has happened."

The conference will be held again next year, with a new group of students coming in to learn anti-bullying skills.

“We want to recognize the leadership of the students, so we bring them together and empower them to go back into their schools with new ideas and new strategies they can share at the school level and spread the wealth of information,” said Wilson.



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