

Teens accused of school assault released on bail

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CTV.ca News Staff

Bail has been granted to a group of Toronto teenagers charged with the alleged harassment and sexual assault of one of their classmates.

The students were chained to one another for Tuesday's bail hearing. They sat in the prisoner's box wearing their school uniforms. The students will return to court later this month to set a trial date.

The accused can't be identified under the Youth Criminal Justice Act.

The 15 teens granted bail Tuesday are accused of bullying a 16-year-old girl over an 18-month long period.

One other teen arrested in the case was granted bail last week.

The teens released on Tuesday have been ordered to stay at least 500 metres away from the girl, two of her friends, a teacher, and the school. The students are also banned from talking to one another or using cellphones, pagers, or the Internet.

Each of them was placed on house arrest on \$1,500 bail, except for one boy who put up \$2,000 bail.

On Monday, Toronto Police charged 12 boys at the girl's school with criminal harassment, and two females with threatening bodily harm.

As well, a 15-year-old boy was charged last week with sexual assault, criminal harassment, and forcible confinement. A 17-year-old was also charged with sexual assault, assault, forcible confinement, and failure to comply with probation.

All of the charges stem from alleged assaults on the girl at James Cardinal McGuigan Catholic Secondary School in the area of North York.

The arrests were made following an incident last Wednesday. The girl told a school staff member, who then called police.

Tense moments outside court

Parents expressed anger outside Tuesday's bail hearing. Many accused police of racism, noting that the alleged victim is white and most of those arrested are black.

"These conditions, especially the house arrest, this is a conviction," a parent of one of the accused told reporters outside the police station. "This is all alleged, nothing has been confirmed."

There were tense moments inside the court as angry parents levelled accusations of racism against police and school officials. At one point the parents jeered a crown prosecutor who referred to their children as prisoners.

One parent has already started a petition to get at least one staff member at the school fired.

"I think there's a pattern of racism against black students," explained one of the petition's supporters.

Det. Peter Duncan from the Toronto Street Crimes Unit says those kinds of allegations are not surprising.

"It's not a new thing for a police officer to hear that," he told Canada AM. "We simply deal with the conduct. We deal with what's put before us and don't deal with skin colour."

On release from prison, many of the accused used their own racial slurs to describe the white complainant to reporters and camera crews.

The case is becoming more than a straightforward criminal proceeding. It's now a lightning rod for discontent in the school and neighbourhood.

The school where the alleged assaults happened had a video security system, which police say has provided them with some evidence.

"There's this grey cloud over our school right now," the school's student council president Samantha Tavares told reporters on Tuesday.

Students at the school have few facts, but many opinions. They were pulled out of classes Tuesday for assemblies and sessions with a counsellor to explain the charges.

Some of the students are angry and are pointing fingers at the alleged victim, but others are wondering about her future.

"It's very devastating for her," a male student told CTV News. "I can understand what she's going through right now. I heard she has plans to come back to school. To tell you the truth, it's not a good idea at all."

"I wouldn't feel comfortable here after everybody knows everything," said a female who attends the school.

"People are going to start a lot of rumours, and people aren't going to take it the right way," another student told CTV News.

"They're going to start doing more stuff to her because she ratted people out, and they have a lot of friends in the community."

School board officials admit the negative reaction from other students sends a bad message to anyone else who might find themselves being victimized.

"It certainly would cause someone to think twice before coming forward," admitted Mary Jo Deighan, of the Toronto Catholic District School Board to reporters on Tuesday.

"The bottom line people have to understand that when they're in trouble come forward, and we'll be supportive, and there will be those that have difference of opinions."

The school board also says it has an obligation to educate all 16 students charged in this incident. The court has ordered them to stay away from the school, but the board says it will find alternative programs for them.

Bullying experts stunned

Experts in teen bullying who have looked at the situation say they are stunned that the girl felt too scared to come forward sooner.

Stu Auty, the president of the Canadian Safe School Network, a charitable organization dedicated to reducing youth violence, says he's saddened that the girl did not come forward sooner.

"The reality is there's a massive code of silence here for this to continue on for a year-and-a-half with nobody apparently knowing," he commented to Canada AM Tuesday.

"Or if those that did know didn't come forward, that in itself is a statement."

"What friends of this girl knew about this and didn't talk to people? Why didn't the girl talk to her own parents? Why didn't the girl talk to some of the teachers? So there was this lack of trust, apparently, that's going on here, that the victim simply could not feel confident enough -- or was intimidated for whatever reason -- but simply couldn't come forward."