

SABRINA'S LAW

AN INTERVIEW WITH MPP DAVE LEVAC (BRANT)



As an educator, Dave Levac had directly experienced the trauma of a child in severe anaphylaxis distress while on a field trip. He also knew the Education Act was silent on such life-threatening issues and that not all boards had policies on anaphylaxis in spite of its increasing incidence. Even among those boards that did have policies, in some jurisdictions the implementation was inconsistent from school to school. In other boards the policies were inadequate, paying only lip service to the problem.

As an MPP Dave had parents in his riding who came to him for assistance because the principal in their local school did not understand what needed to be done for their two severely allergic children. He was also aware of a case in Ottawa in which an allergic child was suspended from school with the support of the superintendent because the child was anaphylactic.

Although Dave's draft bill had not passed when he was in opposition, it became part of the Liberal platform in the 2003 election. Shortly after, Dave reintroduced it as a private member's bill.

Although most members of the legislature were supportive, some had concerns about liability. Teachers' federations and principals' associations had some issues around language and responsibilities but there was agreement in principle. With minor modifications all stakeholders came onside. On May 16, 2005 Private Member's Bill 3, better known as Sabrina's Law, was passed unanimously by all members of the provincial legislature – a rarity in Canadian politics.

The law was named for 13-year-old Sabrina Shannon, a Pembroke student who died in 2003 after eating french fries in her school cafeteria that were served with tongs suspected of being in contact with cheese. Sabrina had a severe allergy to dairy products.

Sabrina's Law takes effect in January 2006. In essence the bill says school boards have to take the steps that are necessary to best solve the problem. It is prescriptive, requiring all school boards to develop policies to deal with potentially life-threatening allergic reactions and to train staff to administer the life-saving Epi-pens.

It is estimated that there are 60,000 Canadians who have severe allergies that could result in anaphylaxis. Statistically it is likely that most schools have several students or staff members who suffer from such severe allergies. It is not a problem that can be ignored.

MPP Dave Levac was first elected to the Ontario legislature in 1999 but he has not forgotten his roots as a Catholic school principal. In addition to serving as the chief government whip, he is also vice-chair of the Cabinet for the Education Committee.

Levac has strong views on leadership. Growing up as one of seven children who were given a lot of responsibility, he internalized the expectation that "you do not leave anyone behind." This lesson in leadership stayed with him throughout his years as a teacher and principal. He became passionate about how leadership should be done and, in response to the "harshness of leadership" of the previous provincial government, decided it was time to put his name forward as a Liberal candidate in the 1999 election. He was successful and as a member of the opposition he first presented his draft bill on anaphylaxis in 2001.

Although initially unsuccessful (it failed three times with the previous government) Dave Levac's persistence made politicians on both sides of the legislature more aware of the problems severe allergic reactions can cause. He explained the facts: that the incidence of anaphylaxis has increased exponentially over the years; that these reactions can be fatal if treatment is not immediate; and since 1986 there have been 63 deaths from anaphylaxis with 32 being food-related, 21 due to bee stings and 10 related to medication.

Speaking more as a principal than an MPP, Dave Levac has some practical suggestions for schools. As a preventative measure he asks principals to move the garbage pails well away from the doors to the school in order to prevent bees from swarming near the entrances. To those who say no one in the school has an allergy to bee stings, he asks, "How do you know until you've been stung?"

Another suggestion is to have everyone wash their hands when they come into the building in order to prevent cross contamination of substances that can cause a problem. Above all, he underlines the importance of training for staff and ongoing dialogue with the local public health nurse.

To those who see the requirements of Sabrina's Law as adding more to their already overloaded plates he asks, "What is more important than the life or death of a child? Your first and foremost responsibility is the life and death of your kids."

As an experienced principal, Dave Levac understands the demands on principals and has some general suggestions as the school year begins, especially for new principals. He encourages principals to "get out of your office" and "to learn every kid's name and every teacher's quirks." A great way to accomplish this is to do recess and lunchtime duties.

He calls on principals to "know your neighbourhood" and get to know where the kids hang out. Form relationships with the parish, the teachers and the students. Start building bridges by inviting the community in. Schools should never be isolated.

And above all, "Give the highest priority to matters that involve the possible life and death of your students" for, in the final analysis, it's all about kids.

Further information and resources regarding bullying are available at the [bullying.ca](http://www.bullying.ca/english/index.htm) site at <http://www.bullying.ca/english/index.htm>. See the Ministry of Education site for further information on the Safe Schools Action Team at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/healthsafeschools/actionTeam/index.html>.

Information on anaphylaxis can be obtained through Anaphylaxis Canada <http://www.gosafe.ca/>.

More details about Sabrina's Law are available at <http://www.ottawaasg.com/media/Sabrina-Citizen.pdf> or <http://www.ottawaasg.com/media/Sabrina-Wire1.pdf> and many other Internet sites.

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November 12, 2005 **London**, Four Points Sheraton

November 26, 2005 **Brantford**, Best Western

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