

Safe, Caring and Healthy Schools

Ontario's Safe Schools Act, passed by the legislature in June 2000, came into effect in September 2001. Its heavy handed, zero tolerance approach to bad behaviour in schools was criticized by many educators as being far too penal, punitive and reactive. Suspensions and expulsions in Ontario schools skyrocketed. The lack of supports for school boards to develop alternatives to suspensions was part of the problem. Its disproportionate impact on racial minorities and students with disabilities was so apparent that the Human Rights Commission took the Ministry of Education and a school board to court and won. Clearly, changes to the legislation were required.

Recent revisions to the Safe Schools Act have provided us with an opportunity to consider the impact of the previous legislation and correct some of its flaws. The settlement with the Human Rights Commission and the constant and continuing din from many educators have resulted in changes. New legislation (Bill 212) amending sections of the Education Act dealing with suspensions and expulsions was passed into law and took full effect on February 1, 2008. The new legislation is much more positive, preventive and proactive, but is it proactive enough? Features of the new legislation include the rejection of the concept of zero tolerance, an increased expectation to consider mitigating circumstances before suspending or expelling students, a focus on progressive discipline, and direction and support for school boards to begin developing and implementing alternative education programs for suspended and expelled students.

I would argue that the revisions in Ontario have not gone far enough down the positive, preventive and proactive road. We need to infuse *health* into the equation. Isn't a safe school all about the health of its community members? I mean health in the broad sense of the word, more than physical health. Health has a social/emotional element. Mental health needs to be considered. It can include spirituality. Let's also consider the concept of caring, for ourselves, others, our community and the environment. Isn't it more than safe schools that we are after? Doesn't *Safe, Caring and Healthy Schools* better capture what most educators are striving to achieve?

Recently the Ministry of Education in Ontario, as part of its Healthy Schools Recognition Program, introduced a resource called *Foundations for a Healthy School*. It encourages school communities to become healthier by enhancing programs around

physical activity and nutrition. In addition to those obvious areas, it includes bullying prevention, mental health, personal safety and injury prevention, and substance use and abuse. Many of these areas may traditionally have been linked to school safety, yet the connections to healthy schools are obvious. By creating this resource, the Ministry has shown leadership in this area. Schools can now focus on bullying prevention, perhaps by implementing a positive play program at recess involving older students in leadership roles, as part of a Healthy Schools program. This type of intervention encourages healthy physical activity, provides younger students with positive role models, provides authentic opportunities for older students to assume leadership roles and has the effect of reducing opportunities for bullying during recess.

The above example is one of many programs that schools can implement that overlap and weave together safe, caring and healthy schools. An eco-school club is about more than environmental education and awareness. It affects the health and safety of its community members and demonstrates care for the environment. As educational leaders, you are encouraged to begin exploring the connections between the many important areas calling for our attention. Linking safe, caring and healthy school initiatives seems to make sense on many levels. Doing so can be a way of aligning some of the myriad critical school culture objectives. Seeing the connections is a means of enhancing traditional safe schools objectives by introducing more positive possibilities to the types of programs offered. Lastly, linking these areas can result in a better framework for sustaining safe, caring and healthy school initiatives.

Social structures make safe schools or healthy schools a reality. Committees or action teams can be aligned into one group,



ideally reflective of all members of a school community. School staff, parents, students, public health staff and other community members should comprise this group. Objectives, goals and areas of focus should be locally determined to meet local needs. If student nutrition is an identified need, the positive impacts on student health and behaviour need to be understood. The connections between student behaviour and school safety need to be articulated. If introduced properly, with a flexible framework that meets local needs, it can assist schools in streamlining, connecting and aligning the many committees, teams and organizations in a typical school community.

Connecting safe schools initiatives with healthy and caring schools initiatives makes safe schools better. Most of us pursued a career in education to make a difference and to be a positive force in the lives of young people. I would venture to say that very few of us get excited about the prospect (or the need for that matter) of revising discipline codes, analyzing suspension rates or monitoring video cameras. By connecting safe school teams with other organizations and structures focusing on healthy and caring schools, we open up a new and vast array of possibilities that can be fun, exciting and positive, and still have the desired impact of improving school safety. A broad-based intra-mural program involving many students during recess and lunch hour, is a positive method of ensuring students are engaged and active rather than getting into trouble. Training older peers to be physical activity leaders (DPA in Ontario) in classrooms for younger students allows large groups of students to participate in a genuine and concrete opportunity to lead, perhaps for the first time. These types of outcomes are far better for school climate than adding student supervisors or surveillance cameras.

I worry about the capacity of schools. There is a lot expected of us. In addition to our core business of learning and teaching curriculum, we are asked to cure all social ills as identified by a wide cross-section of society, act as health care facilities, work with community partners, and complete many other tasks. Implementing and sustaining initiatives becomes difficult when people are isolated, overwhelmed and overworked. By encouraging connections, we have a better chance of developing real teams in schools that can be sustained over time. Issues around staff turnover, competing agendas and special interest groups all make sustaining key priorities more difficult. By linking initiatives, seeing connections and merging objectives we stand a better chance of gaining the critical mass required to continue. Progress has been made in Ontario in the area of healthy schools. Connecting these programs to safe schools, in a year where this will be a priority area for educators in this province, will stand us in good stead for the future.

Recently, attention and resources have been directed to Student Success and in particular to Community, Culture and Caring, an emerging pillar in education in Ontario. Character Education is being highlighted. Again, all of this underscores the need to understand how school culture impacts on learning and student success. By seeing the connections between safe, caring and healthy schools, we have a better chance of positively impacting the big picture of student success in Ontario schools.

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