



ASSEMBLY OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE DES ÉVÊQUES CATHOLIQUES DE L'ONTARIO

Submission to the Government of Ontario
Standing Committee on Social Policy
Concerning Bill 13 and 14
May 22, 2012

The Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario is the association of the Roman Catholic bishops in the Province of Ontario, who are responsible for the spiritual care of the approximately 4 million Roman Catholic citizens of our province.

Bullying, and the Fundamental Response to it

Ontarians have all become more aware recently of the suffering caused by bullying. This has led to renewed efforts to be sure that our schools are places where every student is welcomed and loved, so that young people will no longer experience such misery.

Catholic schools are committed to assuring an environment in which each person is treated as a child of God, and received as Christ, in accordance with the message of the Gospels which is the spiritual foundation of Catholic education.

The only truly effective and long lasting way to address bullying, and to create communities of learning in which all are welcomed as Christ, is to call each person to a deeper commitment to treat others with love and respect. That disposition to love others cannot be legislated, but will flourish within the context of a whole school community that is firmly rooted in the principles of the Gospel. Laws and regulations can, however, be helpful. It is good that the Ontario Legislature is considering legislation to address the serious evil of bullying.

The Scope of Legislative Efforts to Address Bullying

Any such legislation should focus on the issue of bullying itself, and on how to create an environment in which all people are loved and respected. If one or another dimension of this problem is emphasized, that emphasis should be based upon an objective analysis of various types of bullying in the school community, and an accurate understanding of those who are most at risk. The goal should be to help students, and all who are engaged in the life of the school community, to make their school a more truly welcoming place for everyone. In a Catholic school, the motivation for these efforts, and the principles that guide them, arise out of a deep conviction that each person is to be treated with love, for in each person we are called to see Christ (Matthew 25:31-46).

Some Particular Comments on Legislative Measures being Proposed

Bill 14 offers valuable measures which can assist in addressing the problem of bullying, and it would be good for them to be incorporated into the final piece of legislation.

Bill 13 offers useful amendments to the Education Act, which may help schools to address the issue of bullying more effectively. It does however, need some changes.

Legislation that seeks to address bullying should focus on making schools a welcoming place for all young people, in which no one suffers mistreatment. Many different excuses are used by bullies to mistreat others. They may focus on a person's physical appearance, or on grades, or on cultural background, or on many other factors.

Bill 13, in its present form, gives particular emphasis to one specific group of potential targets of bullying (note in the preamble its added specific reference to LGBTTIQ, and several references to homophobia, and its presentation of a particular methodology (GSAs) as normative - the only particular measure proposed by name in the bill).

Certainly that type of bullying is wrong, and must never be tolerated.

But there are many young people who suffer bullying, and most of them are not represented in the category given special emphasis in the bill. The bill should address the way in which our schools may be made more welcoming to all students. None who suffer should be ignored.

If there is any special emphasis on a particular aspect of bullying, it should be related to the actual prevalence of that aspect, and that is best determined at the local level, on the ground. From school to school the particular issues of concern will vary, depending on local circumstances, and the response should be determined by an objective assessment of the actual local situation. The law should encourage this flexibility.

Rather than identifying at the provincial level, in an act of the legislature, a limited number of highlighted groups (e.g. in section 9, in the list of four specific kinds of student clubs particularly to be fostered), the legislation should be more flexible, and provide schools with the principles that can be adapted at the local level to deal with whatever the actual situation is. All forms of bullying need to be addressed, and all victims of bullying need to be helped. There is no benefit to highlighting artificially a limited number of specific types of bullying.

Furthermore, there are many different pathways to reach the goal of developing welcoming schools in which all people are treated with love and respect. To attain that goal, which we all desire, each school should follow a way in harmony with its underlying principles. It is not helpful to propose one particular way, such as the one commonly called a GSA, as in some way normative for all. Those who prefer that

approach (whatever name is used for a group following that model) can easily find it elsewhere, but Catholic schools have their own highly developed ways of attaining the goal of creating a welcoming school, and offering personal support, ways based upon the Gospel principles which are the foundation of Catholic education. It is not beneficial to insist that they adopt one particular methodology that comes from a different perspective. Surely there is room in our province for alternative approaches. As long as the common goal of a loving school community is attained, diversity of methodology is a benefit which enriches the experience of education.

The document "Respecting Difference" of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association outlines the principles that guide the establishment of student groups in a Catholic school. These principles need to be respected in the implementation in Catholic schools of any law relating to bullying. Any student groups need to have guidelines in place to safeguard the privacy of the students, and to prevent unhealthy group pressure, and to assure that the spiritual traditions of the school are respected, as the whole school community seeks to become a place of love and mutual respect.

A further difficulty with Bill 13 is that in three places it uses the vague expression "incidents based on homophobia" (in the preamble, and in sections 4 and 7). A piece of legislation needs to be more precise, for that terminology could refer to any number of things. Although the key is to address the whole issue of bullying, and to offer help to all students, if it is desired to specify one form of bullying, then the legislation should clearly define the behaviour which it is regulating. This phrase does not do that.

Further Considerations

Education is primarily the responsibility of the parents, and the government is to assist them. It is important that the exercise of government power be clearly limited in a way that assures that it will not interfere with parental rights at the local level, or with the religious rights of parents and their children.

During the debate on Bill 13 and Bill 14, it is clear that our elected officials have struggled to cooperate to create an improved bill that addresses the complex problem of bullying. The Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario commends legislators of all parties who are seeking to protect the vulnerable, to do what can be done through law to eliminate bullying, and to help create a welcoming school environment. We offer these comments to assist in making that happen in a way that is equitable for all.

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