

Students walk out of high school to protest YCDSB flag decision



Secondary school students from across York Region staged a mass walkout from classes last week to protest the York Catholic District School Board's refusal to fly the Progress Pride flag outside the Catholic Education Centre (CEC) for the month of June.

Held at 1.15 p.m. on Thursday, June 8, the walk-out was organized by Isio Emakpor and Patrick Mikkelsen, both Grade 12 students at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School, on Wellington Street East.

'We want to see the YCDSB reconsider their decision and vote to fly the Pride flag,' Patrick told The Auroran as students gathered along Wellington. 'It is very evident that students in the LGBTQ+ community need this and need support from their peers. We need people and we need the Board to see that we want change and we want to make a difference.'

Added Isio: 'This means a lot to me. We have been working on this and this is all we ever wanted - our school community to show that we care, show the School Board we're real people and we're not just numbers on a petition.'

Students who walked out of class on Thursday, said Patrick, 'are the real change-makers here' and 'we have built a community of students who want change and they want to make a difference here.'

'We have students within our school and many other schools who are coming out and supporting today, but the battle doesn't end there for them; they have committed to trying to make a difference year-long. Until this happens, and until Queer students are represented and visible, we will be here and there will be support for us.'

Over on Bloomington Road where the CEC faces Cardinal Carter Catholic High School, many students trooped over to the scene of the May 29 meeting where the YCDSB voted down staff recommendations on a vote of 6 - 4 to make their feelings clear.

'I went to a Catholic elementary school in the YCDSB for 10 years from JK to Grade 8 and the amount of trauma that school caused me from having to suppress my identity and everything about myself from the beginning - I didn't know any other gay people around me, I didn't meet them until high school when I luckily moved out of the Board and went to a public school. That school is the only reason I am alive today,' said Jordyn Leschiutta outside of the CEC.

'I would have very much not been here if I was still in the school board because of the insanity going on with people twisting the Bible, twisting what they want to say and what they want to believe, to fit their negative 'values' and pretend that they're Catholic or Christian when, in reality, they're just full of hatred.'

Grade 10 student Melody Liang noted she wanted to show support in the face of opposing students across the street.

"I am an advocate for all this because it is disgusting what people are doing, that they think it is okay, and honestly that is why we're standing out here," she said.

Indeed, not every student who walked out on Thursday was in support of raising the Pride flag.

Outside of St. Max, several students said what their peers were asking for was out of place at a "Christian-centred school."

"For us here, we're trying to be a Catholic school so we have Catholic values," said one student declining to give their real name. "We can't throw away our values just because of equality. We support everyone, we have a sticker that says Safe Space in every room. It's safe space for you. It doesn't mean we agree with you, it doesn't mean we have to believe in what you believe in.

"The values of homosexuality? Do we support them as a Catholic school? No. I am Christian and my beliefs are it is a sin, that's what it says in the Bible and I am following my beliefs. You don't need to push your beliefs on us and tell me you have to call me by what I identify as, you have to call me by my pronouns. No, the same way I get to have my beliefs you get to have your beliefs."

Another student said they did not have a problem with "gay pride" but rather it being in the schools.

"I think it is about self-discovery and not getting it pushed on," he said. "If a Grade 2 is going into their school and everything is about Pride, and everything is about coming out, that is just what their head is going to be about, instead of them actually going through the journey of self-discovery and who they want to be."

Parents who came out to the walkouts, however, had a different viewpoint.

Outside of St. Max, Paolo De Buono, a teacher with the Toronto District School Board with children attending schools in the YCDSB said he has been "pushing for more inclusive teaching practices in Catholic boards" in an effort to encourage them to "improve their teaching practices."

In his Board, De Buono said finding resources to do just that is far easier than it is in York.

"We shouldn't be afraid to talk about the subject because of some of those people we saw reacting negatively," he said. "We have to be proactive in this area because the impact is felt at the school level. At [an April YCDSB meeting] there were students who were saying they have experienced bullying, that they don't feel heard, and that they didn't have the experience every student should have in their school board.

"My interest in this area is as a parent and resident in York Region, informed by what I know as a teacher."

Also supporting students was Jennifer Fortier, whose daughter was demonstrating with her St. Max peers.

"I feel our youth need to know that they are supported by everyone and that they matter and that we love them. I just do my part as a parent to let them know," she said. "We teach our children equality, we teach them history within our school system both public and Catholic, and to find out the Catholic Board decided to deny basic human rights to people of something they disagree with is not necessarily how I want my kids to learn?"

"[People demonstrating against raising the Pride flag] have to understand that God doesn't make mistakes and makes everybody into their own image and person. Whether or not you like someone and their choices doesn't mean that their existence is a sin."

By Brock Weir
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