



“Making our schools safer will take a fundamental shift in our school culture. Each of us must demonstrate a renewed respect for the diversity of our people. We have to ensure that the values and principles that are the cornerstone of Canadian society are honoured, respected and taught in our school system.”

- Lorne Mayencourt, SSTF Chair

Facing Our Fears – Accepting Responsibility

REPORT OF THE SAFE SCHOOLS TASK FORCE

Bullying, Harassment and Intimidation in BC Schools

June 11, 2003

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Safe Schools Task Force at Sundance Elementary, Victoria (L-R: Lorne Mayencourt, Brenda Locke, Wendy McMahon)



Members of the Safe Schools Task Force



Lorne Mayencourt (Chair), MLA (Vancouver-Burrard)

Lorne was deeply moved by the tragic circumstances that led to the deaths of Hamed Nastoh, Dawn Marie Wesly and Reena Virk. While these young students' stories were highly publicized, Lorne knew that many other students were suffering in silence. He believes student safety is integral for our youth to be able to learn to their full potential in school and succeed in life. He is committed to ensuring that every child in our school system is safe.

Lorne was first elected in the riding of Vancouver-Burrard in the 2001 provincial general election. Lorne serves on the Government Caucus Committee on Communities and Safety. He is also a member of the Public Accounts Committee and the Legislative Standing Committee on Finance and Government Service.



Brenda Locke, MLA (Surrey-Green Timbers)

As a mother of two daughters, Brenda is involved with many youth programs and hears firsthand the safety issues facing youth today. In her travels around the province with the Education Committee, she realized just how many people – young and old – continue to struggle with the problems of bullying, intimidation and harassment. Brenda believes we must continue to focus on bullying by ensuring victims are heard and successful bullying programs are shared with schools across the province.

Brenda Locke was elected MLA for the riding of Surrey-Green Timbers in the 2001 provincial general election. Brenda currently serves as a member of the Government Caucus Committee on Health. She also served on the Legislative Standing Committee on Education and is chair of the Legislative Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services. As well, she sits on the Burrard-Thermal Task Force and the Pacific Northwest Economic Region committee.

From 1979 to 1983, Brenda was office manager for the Richmond Association for Children's Services which managed three group homes for troubled youth and an outreach program for youth under twelve.



Wendy McMahon, MLA (Columbia River-Revelstoke)

While touring the province with the Education Committee, hearing from parents, teachers and students, Wendy recognized that student safety was an important issue in all parts of British Columbia. As a

parent, she was pleased Education Minister Christy Clark appointed the Safe Schools Task Force to further explore the issue of student safety – to identify best practices and share those strategies province-wide. It was critical to Wendy to ensure the voice of rural British Columbia was heard in these consultations. Wendy is particularly interested in the role of bystanders and how powerful their influence is on bullying.

Wendy McMahon was elected as MLA for Columbia River-Revelstoke in the 2001 provincial general election. Wendy served as chair of the Legislative Standing Committee on Education for 2001/02 and continues to sit on the committee. She is also a member of the Government Caucus Committee on Health, the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, the Government Caucus Committee on Communities and Safety and is chair of the Kootenay Caucus.

Executive Summary

Facing Our Fears

In every community in British Columbia there are students who travel to school each day, fearing what they may encounter when they arrive. The Task Force heard how bullying destroyed individuals' feelings of self worth and left them feeling excluded from their larger community.

While some high-profile bullying incidents are reported by the media, it is clear that many students suffer in silent anonymity.

It is evident that many parents feel helpless and do not know what to do or who to go to when their child is bullied. Some parents broke down in tears while describing what their child had suffered and the frustrations they experienced in trying to resolve the situation. Many are unaware of the resources that are available to them if their child is a victim of bullying.

Although many schools are implementing successful programs to address this issue, Task Force members feel that some school administrators could not or would not recognize bullying as a problem at their school. Students at those same schools were far more willing to discuss shortcomings, accept the problem, and offer solutions.

While extreme examples were few in number, there is a general concern about racism in all communities. The Task Force heard that some First Nations parents, having been educated at residential schools, continue to fear the education system and find it difficult to even enter a school building.

The need for providing ongoing programs tailored to the needs of students at every level of the school system became evident as stories unfolded. Presently, programs designed to promote responsible behaviour across the province are inconsistent. This was one of the most striking facts that the Task Force encountered.

A recurring theme echoed by many presenters concerned bystanders or onlookers. The Task Force learned that bystanders are not innocent witnesses in many cases and are often the cause of bullying.

In every school, there is a "code of silence" among students. The "code of silence" is an unwritten discipline that every student, bully, victim, and bystander, understands. Individuals feared reporting the bullying because they feel it will ultimately lead to further retribution, which could be far more serious than the initial incident.

Despite divergent views of the problem, presenters consistently drew a connection between school safety and underlying community problems. Criminals often target vulnerable students when selling drugs and in some cases, the Task Force heard of young students being solicited for the sex trade.

Accepting Responsibility – Seeking Solutions

The message from presenters is clear— more binders, programs or kits are not the answer. The problem of bullying must be faced head-on. The solution is about attitudes, commitment, action and accountability.

The issue of bullying, harassment and intimidation is complex with no easy solutions. There are examples of schools across the province that are addressing school safety effectively, not because they have a wealth of financial resources, but rather because they have a wealth of commitment by staff, school administrators and the members of their community.

Across British Columbia, there are numerous examples of schools and districts that are implementing programs and working effectively to create safer school environments. However, there is a considerable gap in the effective implementation of programs and policies across different districts and within individual districts themselves.

Schools that address bullying most effectively have managed to make their school culture more positive and pro-active. In these schools, students, parents and school staff clearly understand that bullying, harassment and intimidation are unacceptable. A positive school culture that encourages students to respect themselves, others and the school, is essential to addressing the problems associated with bullying.

Together with the community, schools can develop strategies that reach students in a way that teachers and administrators cannot. Sometimes students feel frightened or powerless within the administrative hierarchy of the school system. This creates a need for community groups to work with the schools in a semi-autonomous role so that students feel they can go to them for help and assistance. One of the best examples of this type of group is the Youth Education Support program in Surrey.

Safety zones have been established in some communities around schools. Working with local police and the community, safety zones are established in neighbourhoods surrounding schools and recognizes that criminal activity can negatively influence students.

There were innovative solutions not part of specific programs that are worthy of consideration. From using restorative justice and healing circles to implementing dress codes, many individuals that presented to the Task Force thought of outside-the-box solutions to bullying.

While there is no question that British Columbia faces a serious problem with bullying, harassment and intimidation in its school system, there are many signs to suggest we have a great opportunity to address the problem. Acceptance and acknowledgement is a key component of the solution. Once our schools and communities face their fears and accept responsibility for these problems, we can find ways to make our schools safer.

Recommendations:

- 1. (a) The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that school boards in consultation with school planning councils, review and amend existing school district policies or develop new policies, to better address bullying behaviour and provide clear expectations with regards to behaviour expected of students and staff. These policies must strive to prevent retribution against any person who reports potentially dangerous activity.**

(b) The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that the Ministry of Education provide schools with a framework to assist school boards in ensuring their policies and procedures are consistent with the values and categories detailed in the BC Human Rights Code and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.
- 2. The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that school planning councils promote the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils' workbook (*Call it Safe*) which outlines in plain language the steps parents and students should follow if they are victims of bullying. The Task Force further recommends that this document be distributed to parents and students throughout school districts and parent advisory councils at the commencement of the school year. It is recommended that this document also be given to any parent or student who comes forward to report an incident of bullying, harassment or intimidation.**
- 3. The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that all school boards, in consultation with school planning councils, be required to develop procedures for reporting and investigating incidents of bullying and that those procedures be widely circulated to parents and students throughout school districts. The Task Force recommends that school boards be required to publicly report the nature and volume of incidents of violence in district schools, together with evidence of appropriate response to such incidents.**
- 4. The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that school boards and the Ministry of Education collaborate to encourage schools and communities to work together to develop preventative measures to address bullying.**
- 5. The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that school boards develop strategies to link and share successful programs and among schools across the province and, in particular, from elementary through middle and secondary levels of schooling, reinforcing positive behaviour throughout a student's entire school career.**

6. **The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that government promote the establishment of safety zones around schools to help shield students from criminal activities.**
7. **The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that school planning councils, with participation from the community, discuss the effects of school dress on the safety of students at school and consider the implications of implementing school dress codes.**

Facing our Fears – Taking Responsibility

Introduction

The British Columbia Government recognizes that education is the cornerstone of a civil society. Our changing world demands that students emerge from our school system as innovative, creative, and well-rounded members of our society. Providing our children and youth with the best education possible has become ever more critical. We believe every student must be encouraged and supported to achieve their personal best.

We are becoming increasingly aware that not all British Columbia students reach their full potential. Some of these students do not feel safe at school and their fear interferes with their ability to concentrate and learn.

Last year, students, parents and educators across British Columbia responded to a Ministry of Education questionnaire designed to measure their satisfaction with several aspects of British Columbia's education system. Responses to survey questions that related to safety at school indicated a significant number of students report they do not feel safe at school.

Asked if they were bullied, teased, or picked on, 29 per cent of grade four students, 25 per cent of grade seven students, 22 per cent of grade ten students and 18 per cent of grade twelve students said yes.

Asked if they felt safe at school, 17 per cent of grade four students, 23 per cent of grade seven students, 33 per cent of grade ten students and 26 per cent of grade twelve students said they did not.

From our conversations with British Columbians all across the province, we have learned that bullying behaviour is often founded in discrimination based on perceived "differences" such as race, disability, gender or sexual orientation; that discrimination can have a negative impact upon student psychological and emotional health; and that bullying can contribute to decreased student participation in school and failure to graduate.

In recent years, there have been a number of high-profile court cases in British Columbia, in which there has been clear evidence that bullying behaviour is a contributing factor in both student suicide and homicide. This awareness has led to a growing determination among students, parents, educators and other concerned community members to take action.

The members of the Safe Schools Task Force recognize the challenges that schools and their communities face in providing safe environments for our children and youth, and we support them in their desire to eliminate violence in all its forms.

We believe, however, that British Columbians must acknowledge that the safety of our children and youth is a serious issue in need of our immediate attention - not just within our schools, but also throughout the wider communities in which our schools reside.

The increasing number of acts of violence among our children and youth are clearly troubling, and dismissing inappropriate aggressive behaviour as simply “kids being kids” is unacceptable. As one individual suggested to Task Force members, “Too often, people comfort themselves in ignorance.”

We believe that many people, until recently, have been either unable or unwilling to confront and discuss the issue of violence among our children and youth. Members of the Safe Schools Task Force feel strongly that as responsible citizens, we must overcome any tendency to avoid the discomfort this sensitive topic evokes. Complacency is no longer an option. Our children and youth are relying upon us - action is imperative.

During the months of November and December 2002, the Task Force visited 15 communities across the province to consult with British Columbians. The purpose of the tour was to explore and seek effective solutions to address concerns about violence in our schools and in the communities in which they reside.

Members of the Task Force were struck by the depth of passion and suffering expressed by individuals who related their stories to us, in person and through written submissions.

Although difficult, we have endeavoured to convey through a sampling of the stories we heard, a sense of the pain and desperation many of these individuals expressed as we met with them face to face.

We also consulted with experts in the field of education and with individuals and community organizations, who are working diligently every day with varying degrees of success, to make students safe. We have seen first-hand, the satisfaction that accompanies successful efforts to create and maintain learning environments that are safe and welcoming for all children at school, and as well, sensed the frustration of those who despite their best efforts, are faced with continuing violence among children and youth.

Guiding Principles

The intent of the Safe Schools Task Force has been to identify issues that exist province-wide with regard to the safety of students, and to make recommendations to address them. It has not been our intention to point out shortcomings of specific communities or schools.

Throughout our exploration of school safety we have been guided by the following fundamental beliefs and understanding:

- We respect the autonomy of school districts and schools in their efforts to improve school safety.
- We believe the same recognition of discrimination, and urgency of response provided to adults in society (e.g., with regards to intolerance based on race, disability, gender, or sexual orientation), must be brought to efforts that ensure the protection of our children and youth.
- We recognize and appreciate the efforts that many educators, parents, and others are making to address school safety. We acknowledge their contributions to date and encourage their continued efforts to develop policies and strategies that will improve the safety of British Columbia students.
- In particular, we recognize the importance of parent participation and appreciate the positive role that parental and family involvement plays, both in the support of students who experience the harmful effects of intolerance and in the education of all students about this troubling issue.
- We acknowledge that violence among children and youth is a complex social problem best addressed through local solutions customized to meet the unique needs of schools and the communities in which they reside.
- We appreciate that no single strategy or policy will effectively address this problem in every school and every community.

Facing Our Fears

The members of the Task Force have learned that violence among children and youth takes many different forms. Bullying behaviour, including emotional and physical harassment and intimidation that accompanies discrimination and intolerance of differences, were a major focus of this Task Force.

We have learned that children and youth who experience bullying often carry scars from this kind of assault for the rest of their lives. Those who bully often have deeper emotional issues which if not addressed in their younger years, can result in behavioural problems (e.g., dysfunctional relationships with spouses, children and friends) that continue throughout their lives.

Concerns about racism and homophobia figured prominently in submissions made to the Safe Schools Task Force.

The challenge of addressing intolerance and discrimination in our schools is complex. Before we can find effective solutions to a problem that has existed in our schools for decades, we believe British Columbians must understand the nature and extent of the problems we face.

Clearly, bullying is an issue that leaves many people with a feeling of unease but it is a problem we must confront.

During the course of our Task Force consultation tour, we heard from students, from parents and family members, from educators, and from other concerned individuals and organizations in communities.

Bullying related issues were present in all communities the Safe Schools Task Force visited. Whether in communities as small as Burns Lake or larger communities in the Lower Mainland, the Task Force found bullying affected children across the province.

Bullying does not occur in exactly the same form in every community across the province. Different communities face different challenges and each possess unique circumstances.

In nearly every community visited by the Safe Schools Task Force, no matter how large and small, individuals made presentations about the issue of harassment and intimidation based on sexual orientation.

These presenters talked about their experience in the school system and the ways that homophobic discrimination had led to harassment and intimidation that made their schooling difficult. Many gay and lesbian youth told us that they dreaded coming to school.

The Task Force also found that racism is an ongoing problem in many communities. While racial differences and racist beliefs are not always easily visible in communities,

the committee was struck by how those beliefs are exposed through young school children.

Clearly, many cases of bullying, harassment, and intimidation infringe upon fundamental human rights. Numerous presenters underscored the injustice visited upon children in direct contravention of the BC Human Rights Code, the Charter of Rights of Freedom and the Criminal Code. The Task Force heard there are many violations of established law that are being committed by children's peers, their teachers, school administrators, and other members of the community who are entrusted with their care.

Students

The Safe Schools Task Force heard from students of all ages at various levels in the school system, who were deeply concerned about bullying and harassment. Their input was exceedingly valuable. Students know firsthand what is happening both inside the school and outside of the classroom.

There were gang fights almost every day. Kids were scared to come to school. There were rumors of guns and knives going around the school. There were baseball [bat] fights.

- **Grade 10 Student**

In every community in British Columbia, there are students who travel to school each day fearing what they may encounter when they arrive. They fear being bullied. They fear being harassed. They fear being intimidated or alienated by fellow students. They focus their attention not on learning, but rather on simply getting through the day with their self-esteem intact, and without being emotionally intimidated or physically injured.

Bullying during class time is much more subtle while students are under the supervision of teachers. The most overt bullying incidents happen outside of class time, at lunch or after school. Most often, bullying occurs in the school halls, the schoolyards, parking lots or in the community after school.

The Task Force heard how bullying had destroyed one individual's feelings of self worth and how it had left that individual feeling excluded from the community. We heard about how in many cases, bullying had negatively affected a student's academic performance at school.

The Task Force was told that in some severe cases in British Columbia, bullying had contributed to student suicides and deaths. Some of these incidents have been widely reported by provincial and national media. While some high-profile incidents are reported by the media in local newspapers and on television news programs, it is clear that many students suffer in silent anonymity.

In one community, a shy, nervous Grade 9 student stood before the Task Force and told a story that touched the hearts of all who attended the public hearing. She described, in vivid terms of how when she was in Grade 5 and new to her school, she had been teased relentlessly and physically abused by her peers.

I was living in a world of pain at school. For around four weeks, I had three friends (who I won't name). They stopped being my friends because they were being made fun of too. It got so bad that I'd cry everyday before and after school.

Unable to cope with the stress, she told us, she had attempted suicide.

I was so mad and upset, when I got home, without anyone knowing I tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide by suffocating myself. When I heard my parents coming I stopped.

(See Appendix 1 for a complete transcript of this student's submission.)

This student's story exposes the pain some students report they live with on a daily basis, and highlights the importance of addressing bullying, harassment and intimidation.

A young man spoke eloquently about a disturbing experience in which one school administration failed to protect him and instead blamed him for trying to defend himself.

Bashing my skull repeatedly with their knuckles, spitting on me, kicking me in the most painful place any male can be kicked, without provocation, dumping the computer equipment I depended upon in the garbage, were among the many assaults I was forced to endure, many times in the presence of school staff and in the classroom.

A reasonable person might assume that these sorts of actions would be met with punishment. Given their routine nature, a reasonable person might also assume that the perpetrators were either suspended or expelled. That simply did not happen. Anarchy went on unabated. Leniency was the name of the game, and I was its perennial loser.

In fact, it was I, and not my tormentors, that was assessed, analyzed, and punished. It was I who was often the one sent to the principal's office, as a twisted logic reigned that defending myself was somehow a greater evil than that perpetrated by my attackers.

See Appendix 2 for a complete transcript of this student's submission.

Bullying takes several different forms, and while physical and verbal bullying are the most visible, there is also a psychological form of bullying that affects many students. Reports of exclusion or alienation were particularly prevalent among female students.

These students cited examples of how a young student is excluded from a group of students, creating a feeling of abandonment.

In some cases, they told the Task Force, the group would exclude any student who spoke to a particular student who was already excluded. Thus, friendships were threatened as young students were forced to choose between the group and a friend.

One student from Prince George described for the Task Force how he had dropped out of school because the harassment, based on his sexual orientation, was too difficult to live with every day. After revealing his sexual orientation, he had faced constant threats by his classmates. He said that when he went to teachers and school counselors to express his fears, he did not get the support he needed to feel safe at school.

Bottles full of water and other fluids were thrown at my body. It got so bad that I'd leave class five minutes early so I could be in the halls by myself. I was too afraid to stay in school so in early February I dropped out of school and I won't get my diploma at a public school because I'm too afraid to go.

See Appendix 3 for a complete transcript of this student's submission.

The Task Force members heard that even the perception of being homosexual or of being tolerant of homosexuality is enough to result in harassment and intimidation, including both emotional and physical abuse from those who choose to bully.

Presenters expressed concern about the frequent use of homophobic language in schools. For example, the use of pejoratives such as "that's so gay" have become common in the lexicon of students for describing negative events or as an insult to make students who are, or are perceived to be gay, uncomfortable.

Parents and Family Members

Members of the Task Force learned that the effects of bullying last far beyond an individual's school experience, affecting their self-confidence for life.

It was evident that parents generally do not know what to do or who to go to when their child is bullied.

A grandmother promoted the use of a safe school program in her appearance at a public hearing. Following her presentation, members asked what had motivated her to appear before the Task Force. Asked if she had gotten involved because she had a child or grandchild who had been bullied she replied, "No, it was me ... I was bullied at school." Although she was bullied at school decades earlier, she continues to live with the emotional scars. She told us that her experience of being bullied as a child inspires her to try to help other victims of bullying.

Parents and students were consistent in their descriptions of the negative consequences of being bullied. Some parents broke down in tears while describing what their child had suffered and the frustrations they experienced in trying to resolve the situation. For the most part, parents said they did not know how to deal with the matter. Some transferred their children to other schools. Others blamed teachers and school administrators for failing to punish the student who had bullied their child. One parent expressed extreme frustration towards the school system when a teacher suggested that her son should take martial arts classes to defend himself.

One of the most blatant examples of racism was reported by an aboriginal woman. She related a story of a four-year-old, a member of her extended family, who told her brothers and sisters that she did not want to be called an “Indian.” When asked why, the little girl explained that school children had told her “Indians are dirty.”

While extreme examples were few in number, there was a general concern about racism in all communities. A group of aboriginal parents told the Task Force that many aboriginal peoples are reluctant to meet with teachers and administrators to address their child’s problems in school, be it academic or social.

The Task Force heard that some First Nations parents, having been educated at Residential Schools, continue to fear the educational system and find it difficult to even enter a school building. As a result, these parents who did not feel safe at school, are hard-pressed to convince their own children that school is both important and safe.

Currently, eight per cent of students in British Columbia are aboriginal. The number of aboriginal students is expected to increase substantially in the coming years. They are the fastest growing portion of the student population in BC’s education system. Some school districts expect that their aboriginal populations will soon exceed the number of non-aboriginal students. The number of aboriginal students with behavioural problems far outnumbered that of non-aboriginal students. In 2001/2002, the number of aboriginal students placed in the severe behavioural category by the Ministry of Education was 3.5 per cent compared to 0.9 per cent of non-aboriginal students. Increased family participation in schools is often credited with behavioural improvements in many districts.

In cases where aboriginal students had to leave their community to attend high school, the Task Force heard from several parents and former students who had great difficulty making the transition. Some said they were not at the same academic level once they began attending high school outside of their home community. For many, the academic and social transition proved too much, resulting in dropouts.

The trauma and everything that goes through that child and through that family is unexplainable. You just can’t describe it. If you don’t know the proper people to go and see or the proper people to ask you don’t get any help.

-A father on the impact of bullying

Submissions were also made suggesting that aboriginal students were disciplined more readily by school administrators than non-aboriginal students for behavioural incidents, including bullying. Presenters called for a consistent approach by school boards to ensure there is no discrimination in how students are disciplined.

The Safe Schools Task Force found that parents seem to lack a clear understanding of processes by which they can get help. Many are unaware of the resources that are available to them if their child is a victim of bullying. Some however, identified the British Columbia Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils' publication *Call it Safe* as a helpful resource. The document outlines steps to guide parents who are concerned their child is being bullied at school. Parents who have used *Call it Safe* told the Task Force they had found the guide and its recommended steps extremely valuable.

For their part, the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils suggested that, "At the heart of the issue is the absence of provincial policy on standards by which schools can address student safety."

Schools and School Districts

A teacher said it best: "Wake up BC– this is a serious problem."

Task Force members feel that some school administrators could not or would not recognize bullying as a problem at their school. Students at those same schools were far more willing to discuss shortcomings, accept the problem, and offer solutions.

While teachers and administrators tended to focus their presentations on programs that they were using, and the things they were doing in their schools to create a safer learning environment, students tended to focus on their own personal, negative experiences.

Parents also described situations in which teachers and school administrators had not recognized that there was a problem with bullying in their school.

The Task Force heard from many students about what one group of students termed "teacher gullibility." Even though bullying was going on, they felt teachers and school administrators had not recognized bullying or were perceived by the students to be ignoring or rationalizing bullying.

Some parents felt that schools and school districts have a tendency to close ranks around teachers when instances of bullying are brought forward. Whether this is true or not, there

It was anarchy... that characterized my experience in elementary school. There was a common authority above me and my fellow students, namely teachers and administrators. This authority, however, was unwilling to step in and enforce fairness, or justice, between us.

-Former Surrey Student

is at the very least a perception among some parents that their schools and school districts refuse to acknowledge their complaints.

Parents also acknowledged that there are many schools across the province in which teachers and school administrators are working effectively to ensure that students have a safe learning environment.

The Safe Schools Task Force saw first-hand, examples of schools where staff and school administrators had implemented successful programs at the elementary school level. However, when students moved on to a new school to continue their education, there did not seem to be the same supports in place. This was most evident when students move from elementary school to middle and secondary school.

The Task Force members noted that the most severe instances of bullying reported to the Task Force, had taken place in Grades 8 to 12. It appears that children who are being taught strong moral values and respect for fellow students at a young age are not getting the same type of reinforcement as they continued through their education.

The need for providing ongoing programs tailored to the needs of students at every level of the school system became evident as stories unfolded. Implementation of programs designed to promote responsible behaviour across the province is inconsistent. This was one of the most striking facts that the Task Force encountered. Members felt that to achieve success in reducing instances of bullying in the school system, a province-wide approach will be required to implement these programs.

The Task Force found there was a wide gap between the perception of students and administrators of problems within their school. While school administrators spoke highly of programs aimed at reducing bullying, students at those same schools said bullying was still a major problem.

The committee found that in those schools, administrators were often concerned with protecting the image and reputation of their school. Parents and students suggested that these teachers and principals played down the seriousness of some of the offences. The Task Force heard from students who believed that administrators and teachers either deliberately ignored problems or were completely out of touch with what was happening at their school. They were critical of how their school administration chose to deal with problems.

Brenda Leighton, a coordinator at the First Nations Development and Training Centre in Prince Rupert, pointed out that there are not enough aboriginal teachers in the school system. As a result, aboriginal students and parents did not feel comfortable getting involved or, more importantly, addressing issues of racism and bullying with school administration when problems occurred. It should be noted that this does not necessarily constitute racism, but it certainly points to a wide cultural divide.

Leighton's assertion was echoed by Burns Lake superintendent Gordon Milne who stated:

There are very few aboriginal teachers to hire. It's very difficult for aboriginals to go back into the community.

One inner city school in Vancouver had great difficulty getting parents of aboriginal children to attend school functions. To improve parent and family participation, they invited reluctant families to the school to attend a meal. Staff and members of the Parent Advisory Committee invited them to a corn roast that encouraged volunteerism from many of those same families. It was a spectacular success and broke down multiple barriers. Parent and family participation increased substantially as did parent and student satisfaction with that school.

Another successful strategy that promoted acceptance of cultural diversity came from William Konkin Elementary in Burns Lake. The school offered Carrier language courses to both aboriginal and non-aboriginal students. Many non-aboriginal students took these courses and in addition to learning a new language, developed an understanding and respect of local aboriginal culture.

Although the Task Force heard a great deal about racism from the aboriginal community, it must be recognized that racism is in all communities.

At one school located in an urban center, teachers and administrators told of how racism plagued their school before they began to address the problem. Students divided themselves along racial lines and gangs fought regularly before, during and after school hours. On one occasion, the administrator told of how a large fight erupted and students pulled out the galvanized steel fence posts from a chain-link fence and started using them as clubs.

Teachers and school administrators told members of the Task Force that they often feel uncomfortable when faced with incidents of discrimination based on sexual orientation. They say this is because they feel inadequate and do not know how to respond effectively. As a result, gay and lesbian students are left feeling like outsiders in their own schools; excluded, targeted, picked on, vulnerable and unsafe at school.

Teachers also reported that when they tried to raise the issue of homophobia in schools they had met resistance from the school board, other school staff, parents and students. These teachers said that when they had tried to increase awareness around homophobia in their school by supporting Gay Straight Alliances or by bringing in guest speakers to talk about homophobia, they felt shunned by parents, students and even by their peers and colleagues.

The Community Connection

There is a strong connection between incidents that occur at school and those that take place in the community.

While incidents of bullying or other criminal behaviour took place off school property, there was recognition that such events were actually planned during school time, on school property. In some cases, fights between students were planned at school but take place off school property. It was reported in one community that planned fights were sometimes videotaped and students would either gather to watch the fight live or watch it later on tape.

These types of examples show the need for community involvement in dealing with the issue of bullying. Despite divergent views of the problem, presenters consistently drew a connection between school safety and underlying community problems. The Task Force heard many times that students do not have enough after-school activities to keep them occupied and out of trouble. It was suggested that problems with drugs and alcohol misuse were sometimes a result of boredom. Problems arising from the use of drugs and alcohol, such as violence and even organized crime, often made their way back into the school system. In some cases, students were exposed to criminal activities that took place near the school and often involved current or former students.

Problems involving students such as violence and drugs, were blamed on the lack of extra-curricular activities. Some of the problems appeared to stem from community apathy. In some small towns, there was an obvious lack of parental or adult involvement, as students told the Task Force that there were not enough coaches or adult leaders to coordinate events that would keep students occupied after school.

A Grade 10 student from a small community told the Task Force how a group of students put on community skits to get the message out there that there was a serious problem with violence and racism.

There were gang fights almost every day. Kids were scared to come to school. There were rumors of guns and knives going around the school. There were baseball [bat] fights.

While the skits touched a nerve with the student body, the student said adults in the community were offended and denied such problems existed.

We had a lot of people say that [our skits] were wrong. People shouldn't see [racism played out]. They don't understand that we see it everyday in our school and in our community.

Community crime, namely drugs and prostitution, spill over into neighbourhoods near schools. Criminals often target vulnerable students when selling drugs and in some cases, the Task Force heard of young students being solicited for the sex trade. The problem

carries over from one generation of students to the next. Former students who were introduced to the drug trade or a prostitution ring often return to the neighbourhood near the school to prey on younger students because they know they can take advantage of students to fulfill their needs.

Bystanders and the Code of Silence

A recurring theme echoed by many presenters concerned bystanders or onlookers. The Task Force learned that bystanders are not innocent witnesses in many cases and are often the cause of bullying.

Many submissions suggested bullies were simply looking for attention. Bystanders fulfilled that desire and often fueled violent behaviour by either watching with interest or encouraging the bullies. It is important to note that these individuals are the bully's audience and supporting cast. Their inaction encourages the activity to persist.

As noted in the previous section, the damaging role bystanders play was made most evident by a group of students who told the committee fights were often taped and replayed at parties. It can be argued that in such cases the bystanders are an accomplice to the attack. Submissions were also made suggesting fights were at times spontaneously organized by large groups of students who would surround two potential combatants and urge them on. The majority of submissions that dealt with this issue agreed that the number of school fights, violence and bullying in general would drop dramatically if no one watched. While some schools were active in treating bystanders as offenders, most schools did not have a strategy to deal with bystanders.

One presenter shared a very detailed description of how a group of students "staged" a fight between her fourteen year old son and another student. The instigators of this fight were students other than the two who did the actual fighting.

After a disagreement during class earlier in the week, where one boy threatened the other to fight, another group of boys fed the flames by spreading rumours that one boy called the other "chink" and "sushi boy," even though those racist names were not uttered by either of the two boys who ended up fighting.

The fight was held at a small tennis court near the school. The group of students watching, closed the gates of the tennis court and when the two boys hesitated to begin, the crowd began to chant, "fight," and "you beat him up or we will come and beat you up."

The presenter claimed his son was hit in the head multiple times and received a concussion. The administrators refused to discipline the instigators, claiming this was merely an incident between two people that were mad at each other.

The Task Force found that the vast majority of students/bystanders do not feel comfortable reporting incidents to teachers and administrators. However, it was evident to the Task Force that elementary students feel more comfortable reporting incidents than high school students.

Retribution

In every school, there was a “code of silence” among students. The “code of silence” is an unwritten discipline that every student understands. The “code of silence” is enforced by the bullies. Witnesses of bullying would not report incidents of violence, primarily because they feared retribution from their peers. In many cases, bystanders simply feel relief that they are not the victim and have absolutely no desire to do anything that may change their role from a bystander to a victim. The bystanders are intrinsic to the bully’s action and knowingly and actively encourage and control the incident. Bystanders are accomplices to the incident and negative behaviour and discipline should reflect their participation.

Victims, for their part, also exercise the “code of silence.” Many were simply too embarrassed. Others did not have confidence that reporting an incident would prevent further incidents. Most understood that they should go to the teacher or the school administration, however they feared it would only make the situation worse. Victims feared reporting the bullying would ultimately lead to further retribution at a later date, which could be far more serious than the initial incident.

In several presentations, the Task Force heard parents also feared retribution, often in the form of social isolation. In one case, a parent reported an incident to her elementary school and as a result teachers refused to meet with her. Other parents were informed of the parents’ report and as a result, refused to speak to her or allow her to participate in school activities, including the parent advisory committee. This isolation became so severe that she moved her family to another community.

In most schools it was evident that a convenient reporting system that protected the identity of the informant was necessary to address the “code of silence,” fear of retribution and the issues surrounding bystanders.

Accepting Responsibility – Seeking Solutions

Commitment

In every community the Safe Schools Task Force visited, there was genuine concern expressed about the issue of bullying, harassment and intimidation. This concern is evident in the various approaches schools and communities are taking to address the issue of school safety. Without a doubt, the high level of commitment of these individuals and groups determines the success of these measures.

It is through the commitment, the creativity, and the innovation of local decision makers that British Columbia will be able to resolve issues of child and youth violence.

The Safe Schools Task Force saw examples of programs currently in use that both the public and private sector have spent thousands of dollars developing.

The Safe Schools Task Force heard from presenters who suggested that the government must allocate additional funds to school districts if it is serious about addressing bullying in our schools.

Other presenters told the Task Force that to simply throw more money at this problem would do further injustice to the victims of bullying in our schools. The message from presenters was clear – more binders, programs, or kits are not the answer. The problem of bullying must be faced head-on.

The solution is about attitudes, commitment, action and accountability.

The issue of bullying, of harassment and intimidation, is too complex for quick-fix solutions. There are examples of schools across the province that are addressing school safety effectively not because they have a wealth of financial resources, but rather because they have a wealth of commitment by staff, school administrators and the members of their community.



Safe Schools Task Force receiving input from students (L-R: Lorne Mayencourt, Wendy McMahon, Brenda Locke)

It is clear: spending more money is not a panacea. Additional funding will not and cannot effectively alleviate the problem of bullying.

Successful Practices

Across British Columbia, there are numerous examples of schools and districts that are implementing programs and working effectively to create safer school environments. However, there is a considerable gap in the effective implementation of programs and policies across different districts and within districts.

The public spoke of an abundance of information and myriad of programs that successfully address bullying in B.C. schools. The Safe Schools Task Force was fortunate to learn about several effective approaches schools and school districts are taking.

As submitted by the BC School Trustees Association:

Policies are followed up by the use of numerous anti-bullying programs and strategies that have been adopted or developed locally, especially at the elementary school level, where proactive strategies have long-lasting benefits as students move through the school system.

Many teachers told us they were implementing the provincial *Performance Standards for Social Responsibility* in their schools and school districts. These standards help teachers develop lesson plans that reinforce positive attitudes, respect for others, an appreciation of diversity, and that also promote inclusiveness. Teachers and parents alike were unanimous in their endorsement of the Performance Standards for Social Responsibility.

Effective Behaviour Support (EBS) was widely endorsed as a program that promotes a positive school climate. A number of British Columbia schools have fully implemented this program, and many more appear to have adopted strategic parts of the EBS program - perhaps without even realizing it. British Columbia is a leader in EBS and presenters commented that, although it takes time to change student and adult behaviour, EBS offers a framework to achieve a definite positive shift in the school culture. EBS integrates everyone as a partner in that positive school environment including non-teaching staff such as maintenance, lunch monitors, crossing guards and clerical staff, as well as volunteers and parents. In addition to facilitating this culture shift, EBS schools record and quantify incidents affecting student safety and use that information as a benchmark to see where their schools and districts can improve.

As many of these schools implement accountability contracts, they have sought to include student safety as a criteria for success. The data collected has been useful in setting goals to improve overall safety.

While all communities deal with the common issue of bullying, harassment and intimidation in our schools, the Safe Schools Task Force recognizes that each community and school is unique and there is no single way to address this issue.

Teachers and administrators in many schools are successfully using and adapting the many resources available to them by the government such as *Focus on Bullying*, *Focus on Harassment and Intimidation*, and *Roots of Empathy*. Other programs such as *Safe Teen* are being used effectively in schools to help children develop strategies for avoiding and recognizing bullying.

Focus on Bullying: A Prevention Program for Elementary School Communities is a resource to help educators create conditions within which children respect and support one another. The document discusses the nature of bullying, provides a framework for schools to prevent bullying, responds to it when it does happen, and provides lesson plans for teachers.

Focus on Harassment and Intimidation is a similar program for older students, and was developed for use in secondary school communities.

In the *Roots of Empathy* program, a baby and one or both of the infant's parents visit a classroom. An instructor works with students, teaching them about caring, how others feel, and how to deal with tension. One *Roots of Empathy* instructor who made a presentation to the Task Force talked about how some students who bully were surprised to learn that they could be good parents even though they thought their own parents were not.

Many parents and teachers told the Task Force that the National Film Board videos *Sticks and Stones* and *In Other Words* had helped them and their students to better understand homophobia.

The Speers Society instructional guide entitled *Choices for Positive Youth Relationships* is based on another National Film Board film, *Love that Kills*. This document helps students recognize and understand appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in dating relationships.

A number of schools are using *Safe Teen* to teach students how to react in situations where they feel uncomfortable. Developed by Anita Roberts, *Safe Teen* shows how bullying affects male and female students differently.

Positive School Culture

The Safe Schools Task Force saw many acronyms developed to support different programs, but noticed that a simple statement endorsed by students, parents and teachers was a hallmark of many of the most successful: "*Respect yourself, respect others, respect your school and respect your community.*"

Schools that were addressing bullying most effectively had managed to make their school culture more positive and pro-active. In these schools, students, parents and school staff clearly understood that bullying, harassment and intimidation were unacceptable.

Changing school culture is one of the foundations of Effective Behavioural Support (EBS). EBS places emphasis on recognizing and rewarding good behaviour as well as dealing with inappropriate behaviour. The Task Force saw that traditionally, schools focused on bad behaviour. Schools implementing EBS focus on the positive actions of students. This is an approach that is easily adaptable to many situations, schools, and circumstances. EBS addresses bullying problems at the root, teaching every partner in the education system what is acceptable and what is not.

A positive school culture where students respect themselves, others and the school, is essential to addressing the problems associated with bullying. If it is acceptable to report bullying incidents, then ongoing acts of bullying can be addressed before they get out of hand. With this system underway in many schools, students are more willing to report actions to teachers and administrators.

Community Involvement

Time after time, the Safe Schools Task Force heard presentations that emphasized the importance of the community as a whole, in preventing harassment and bullying. The Task Force was told it was very effective when schools opened their doors to the community and worked in conjunction with community groups and organizations, outside government. In their submission, the BC Teachers Federation clearly stated, “schools must work with communities to teach good citizenship.”

School teachers are not children’s only teacher. Beyond the five or six hours a day that they spend at school, students are taught by their families, their friends, the books they read, the movies and television shows they watch, the games they play, and the things they witness in person or on the news. Schools must work in partnership with communities to teach good citizenship.

- BC Teachers’ Federation

By themselves, schools are limited in how they can influence student behaviour. Students attend school for approximately six hours a day while they spend the remaining three quarters of their day and the entirety of their weekends at home and in the community.

Community support in the form of police liaison officers, organizations such as the Rock Solid Foundation, YouthQuest! and numerous others, working in conjunction with schools can increase awareness of the impact of bullying, harassment and intimidation. Together with the community, schools can develop strategies that reach students in a way that teachers and administrators cannot.

Some gay, lesbian, transgendered and bisexual youth have found that participation in groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances at schools or organizations such as YouthQuest! outside of school help them feel accepted.

Sometimes students feel frightened or powerless within the administrative hierarchy of the school system. This creates a need that allows some community groups to work with the schools in semi-autonomous roles so that students feel they can go to them for help and assistance.

The Youth Educational Support (Y.E.S.) program has begun to establish itself in Surrey. It uses practicum students from local colleges and universities, studying various disciplines including social work, nursing and human services, to help high school students address problems they may be having both at school and at home. One student told of how the Y.E.S. program helped him change from being a student that bullied and did not contribute to the school community into one of the school's leaders.

Working with local police and the community, safety zones have been established in neighbourhoods surrounding schools, where it is recognized that criminal activity can negatively influence our children and youth, more so than other locations. If a criminal offence is committed within the safety zone, police inform Crown Counsel who may inform the judge that the offence occurred near a school, and may recommend a stiffer sentence. As the community becomes familiar with safety zones, neighbours take an active role in reporting criminal or suspicious activity.

Some of the most effective programs seen by the Safe Schools Task Force were those that instilled purpose and a sense of civic responsibility. They were holistic and mobilized not only stakeholders within the school, but the whole school community.

Other Alternatives

There were innovative solutions, not part of specific programs that are worthy of consideration. The Safe Schools Task Force heard several examples of Restorative Justice programs and healing circles where victims and bullies would sit down together with an impartial facilitator and discuss the problem. A vice-principal from Williams Lake told a compelling story of two Grade 10 students who got into a serious fight and were suspended for 10 days. Their confrontations continued until the pair participated in a healing circle and learned that both had parents who had died recently. In this particular case, there were deeper problems that had led to violence. Discussing the issue openly and honestly set the stage for solving the problem and created some common ground for the two youth. These two individuals later established a respectful friendship.

It should be noted that suspending students was not a preferred punishment by many teachers, administrators, students and parents. Many felt suspensions were essentially rewarding the bully's inappropriate behaviour because they did not wish to be at school in the first place. As a result, it had little effect in changing their behaviour over the long-term.

While zero-tolerance was often touted by school districts, many students, parents and teachers stated that it was not an effective model for change. Zero-tolerance is absolute

and fails to consider students' situations, prospects for the future and their relationship with the community. Suspensions from school fail to address the underlying issues that lead to the unacceptable behaviour, and simply send the problem elsewhere.

It was suggested that zero-tolerance policies ignore the potential of the school or community to form or modify student behaviour. It has become an excuse to treat all students needing corrective measures the same, ignoring the importance of balancing strength with fairness, ignoring individual circumstances, and ignoring the need for differentiated consequences.

Other presenters suggested school dress played a role in the harassment, intimidation, and bullying of students. Concerns were expressed, particularly about young female students dressing like pop stars and unintentionally stereotyping themselves in the eyes of male students. The way in which some of these students dress, can lead to inappropriate, sexist comments or harassment. Submissions were made detailing the severe emotional impact on young female students who do not understand why they are the targets of name-calling.

Prince George teacher Ann Saar submitted that male teachers have great difficulty addressing this issue and explaining to students why they might be targeted for how they dress. She said there was a fear among male teachers that they would be accused of harassment by suggesting that their female students should cover their bodies.

To avoid this, it was suggested that school boards implement dress codes in their strategies. For example, D.P. Todd Secondary in Prince George implemented the Four-Bs dress code: no breasts, no butts, no backs, no bellies. Another school in Dawson Creek had adopted a "golf course" style dress code.

Summing Up

The Task Force often heard that it often takes only one person to help turn a student's life around. All that is required is one person's dedication to help these students feel they are valued.

While there is no question that British Columbia faces a serious problem with bullying, harassment and intimidation in its school system, there are many signs that suggest we have a great opportunity to address the problem. Acceptance and acknowledgement is key. Once our schools and communities face their fears and accept responsibility for these problems, we can find ways to make our schools safer.

It will require the full commitment of individuals involved at all levels of the school system, to change our schools, make them safer places, and foster the climate needed for students to succeed.

We acknowledge those who do this work as champions in our schools; they are teachers, parents, administrators, volunteers, and others like practicum students with the Y.E.S. program. Their dedication and commitment changes school culture. They give strength to our students.

We know that schools are not communities unto themselves. They reflect both the good and bad in the wider communities in which they reside.

We heard repeatedly from presenters that the problems they were concerned about were not limited to schools — the wider community must also be involved to effectively address bullying, harassment, and intimidation.

Clearly, there are serious efforts underway in communities throughout the province to address bullying behaviour. Parents, educators and community organizations drew our attention to many examples of excellent programs. Many of the most effective programs and strategies were extraordinarily creative and most did not require a large dedication of resources.

The challenge is to help both schools and communities develop or adopt programs that will work for them. It is imperative that schools and communities work together to solve these problems with the support of provincial agencies. Local solutions to address local problems are required, however, the supports must be in place to guide schools and communities.

Task Force Recommendations

The members of the Safe Schools Task Force believe that there must be a standard baseline policy in place in every school district across the province that establishes clear expectations for all members of the school community regarding bullying, harassment and intimidation.

These policies ought to be based upon a common framework and incorporate all of the categories of rights and responsibilities identified in the *Human Rights Code* and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. We feel strongly that policies should encourage appropriate action and provide a basis for sanctions in response to inappropriate action.

We believe that policies must address the issue of ‘bystanding’ – recognizing the major role bystanders play in bullying behaviour. Policies must provide the means for holding bystanders accountable for any failure to report acts of violence or potential acts of violence. The Task Force members believe such policies should be developed at the local level in order to best serve the needs of individual communities.

1. **(a) The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that school boards, in consultation with school planning councils, review and amend existing school district policies or develop new policies, to better address bullying behaviour, and provide clear expectations with regards to behaviour expected of students and staff. These policies must strive to prevent retribution against any person who reports potentially dangerous activity.**
(b) The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that the Ministry of Education provide schools with a framework to assist school boards in ensuring their policies and procedures are consistent with the values and categories detailed in the BC Human Rights Code and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The Safe Schools Task Force found that many parents did not know whom to turn to if their child was the target of bullying. Although there are many avenues to pursue beyond the school level administration, there is a significant gap between those that are affected by bullying and those that have the information on how to resolve the issue with school officials. It is also important that such policies include a way for bystanders and witnesses to anonymously report incidents of bullying.

2. **The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that school planning councils promote the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils’ workbook (*Call it Safe*) which outlines in plain language the steps parents and students should follow if they are victims of bullying. The Task Force further recommends that this document be distributed to parents and students throughout school districts and parent advisory councils at the**

commencement of the school year. It is recommended that this document also be given to any parent or student who comes forward to report an incident of bullying, harassment or intimidation.

The Safe Schools Task Force realizes that eliminating bullying in our schools will not happen overnight. There should be the implementation of accountable and transparent tracking and reporting of bullying across our province to determine which programs and districts are having success and which are not.

- 3. The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that all school boards, in consultation with school planning councils, be required to develop procedures for reporting and investigating incidents of bullying and that those procedures be widely circulated to parents and students throughout school districts. The Task Force recommends that school boards be required to publicly report the nature and volume of incidents of violence in district schools, together with evidence of appropriate response to such incidents.**

The Safe Schools Task Force recognizes that the problem of bullying, harassment and intimidation in our schools does not simply reside with schools. It requires parental, community, and school involvement to tackle the problem effectively. Besides working closely with community police forces, the government should encourage schools to work with community groups and organizations that provide support for students while school is not in session.

- 4. The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that school boards and the Ministry of Education collaborate to encourage schools and communities to work together to develop preventative measures to address bullying.**

The Safe Schools Task Force realizes while some elementary schools have had good results in developing positive attitudes among students with locally developed programs, those programs are often not carried through into middle or high schools in the same district. While recognizing that individual attitudes and actions develop with age, it is important that districts have a continuum of programs to address bullying and violence.

- 5. The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that school boards develop strategies to link and share successful programs and among schools across the province and, in particular, from elementary through middle and secondary levels of schooling, reinforcing positive behaviour throughout a student's entire school career.**

The Safe Schools Task Force found that crime is a contributing factor that negatively impacts the safety of students. Near some schools, criminal activity such as drugs and prostitution flourish due to the simple fact that criminals target vulnerable, young students. Safety zones increase the awareness that schools are locations where criminal activity is particularly unacceptable and strongly discouraged.

- 6. The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that government promote the establishment of safety zones around schools to help shield students from criminal activities.**

The Safe Schools Task Force found that the issue of school dress codes was raised a number of times. Many presenters suggested that dress was a factor in harassment and bullying at schools. More discussion on this topic is needed.

- 7. The Safe Schools Task Force recommends that school planning councils, with participation from the community, discuss the effects of school dress on the safety of students at school and consider the implications of implementing school dress codes.**

Acknowledgements

We would like to take this opportunity to thank every British Columbian who took the time to make an oral or written presentation to the Safe Schools Task Force. We also want to acknowledge the important and continuing work of teachers, parents, school and school district administrators, police, and the many other members of communities across the province whose efforts every day, have devoted time and energy to the important issue of safety in our schools and communities.

More specifically the Safe Schools Task Force would like to thank:

- *School District #61 Greater Victoria*
- *Sundance Elementary School, Victoria*
- *The Rocksolid Foundation*
- *School District #70 (Alberni)*
- *VAST School, Port Alberni*
- *School District #68 (Nanaimo-Ladysmith)*
- *Nanaimo District Secondary School, Nanaimo*
- *School District #73 (Kamloops-Thompson)*
- *Parkcrest Elementary School, Kamloops*
- *School District #58 (Nicola-Similkameen)*
- *Merritt Secondary School, Merritt*
- *School District #6 (Rocky Mountain)*
- *Golden Secondary School, Golden*
- *Lady Grey Elementary School, Golden*
- *School District #22 (Vernon)*
- *Kalamalka Secondary School, Vernon*
- *School District #23 (Central Okanagan)*
- *School District #36 (Surrey)*
- *Frank Hurt Secondary School, Surrey*
- *Princess Margaret Secondary, Surrey*
- *Youth Educational Support (Y.E.S.), Surrey*
- *School District #43 (Coquitlam)*
- *Blakeburn Elementary School, Port Coquitlam*
- *Banting Middle School, Coquitlam*
- *School District #39, Vancouver*
- *Hastings Elementary School, Vancouver*
- *School District #91 (Nechako Lakes)*
- *William Konkin Elementary School, Burns Lake*
- *Lakes District Secondary School, Burns Lake*
- *School District #57 (Prince George)*
- *Harwine Elementary School, Prince George)*
- *School District #59 (Peace River South)*
- *Central Middle School, Dawson Creek*
- *Each District Safe Schools Coordinator*
- *BC Teachers Federation*
- *BC School Trustees Association*
- *BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils*



Outside of Prince Rupert (L-R: Wendy McMahon, Brenda Locke, Lorne Mayencourt)

Without their generous support, this report would not have been possible.

Appendix 1: Submission 1

In Her Own Words ...

I never thought school would be such hell.

Yah, it's tough moving to a new school in the middle of the school year, but most kids can make friends at some point. All but me that is. Grade 5 was the beginning of it all.

It was hard enough moving, but that school (I won't name it) made it worse. Sure, at first pranks were played on me, but that was normal... wasn't it? It was worse though, way worse. Kids were sending me on wild goose chases to the principal. They called me pretty horrible names. They always accused me of stuff that I never did and I was always punished for it.

They never called me what I wanted them to. They insisted on calling me by me my full name, Susie May. I was living in a world of pain at school. For around four weeks I had three friends (who I won't name). They stopped being my friends because they were being made fun of too.

It got so bad that I'd cry everyday before and after school. I decided to tell the counselor about what was going on. I told her how everyone hated me and how the lunch-time supervisors picked on me, never let me get away with anything I did, yet the other kids got away with a ton. She said that she'd talk to the principal and the staff.

It got worse. One day I wore white pants to school. Some of the kids put a donut with chocolate icing onto my seat in class and I sat on it. I asked the teacher to let me go home and change and he refused. I had to take PE class outside with the pants on, I had an asthma attack during that class and the teacher wouldn't let me stop. Then I had to go the rest of the school day and walk home in my soiled pants.

I was physically, mentally and verbally abused by the same group of students. I was kicked in the chest and again in the leg by one of my so-called friends. The kids called me names so often that I believed them.

I even locked myself in the bathroom planning to stay there overnight. My principal tried to make things seem better. He promised that things would be better and that my teacher would not tell the class why I left. My teacher did though. I was teased even more. Through all this my parents continued to have meetings with the principal and finally tried to get me out of that school and into a new one, but the principal wouldn't let them.

I was so mad and upset, when I got home, without anyone knowing I tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide by suffocating myself. When I heard my parents coming I stopped.

In grade 6, I had a different teacher, but things were the same, I broke my wrist and had to wear a cast, the other kids and the teacher didn't believe that it was really broken, I

was told that I was wearing a fake one so I could get out of work. I even brought the cast care booklet into school to prove it to them.

One day a boy sprained my finger. The teacher assured my mom that he would be disciplined, he was to stay inside every recess and lunch for one week. He stayed in the next day at lunch, then at the end of the week my mom went to school to find out why the boy had been outside every other day of the week. In the end, he stayed inside one more lunch period.

One day I gave a note to my one and only friend Kristen saying why I was going to kill myself. This time however something was done about it. My mom took me home and phoned the principal the next day demanding that I be moved to a new school. He told her that I was only “playing games”, but finally relented and sent me to a great school, where I made new friends and was finally accepted.

I’m in grade 9 now and I’m not part of the popular crowd, but I have many friends and I’m very happy. I know that some kids talk about me behind my back, but it doesn’t bother me. They aren’t bullying me, it’s not in my face and it’s not meant to hurt me. I’ve learned that some things are going to happen even if I don’t like it and that I have to let some things go.

I think that to stop this problem authority must stop things when they start, not after. Bullying should be a topic in schools and classes. Offensive words should not be permitted and actions must be taken. Counselors should have a relationship with their students and should check up on them monthly. Zero tolerance should mean just that. Principals and teachers should teach the students to follow the “Golden Rule,” treat others the way they want to be treated.

Appendix 2: Submission 2

In His Own Words ...

As a political science student, I would like to use an analogy from my studies that fits perfectly the vital issue this task force faces.

Among the first things you learn in an introductory poli sci course is the academic definition of anarchy.

Contrary to its common connotation, anarchy in this sense means the absence of government, or a common sovereign authority.

It was anarchy, in this sense, that characterized my experience in elementary school. There was a common authority above me and my fellow students, namely teachers and administrators. This authority, however, was unwilling to step in and enforce fairness, or justice, between us.

Relations between students were simply determined by who was stronger than who, who was more popular than who, who could marshal more students to gang up on and inflict torment upon who.

I was unlucky in that, with my physical limitations, I was not particularly strong, my non-conformist manner rendered me more than unpopular, and as a result, I was ganged up on and tormented on a routine and daily basis.

It was not chaos; there was a despicable sense of order between us, but with the powers that be taking a "solve it between yourselves" approach, it most certainly was anarchy.

Left to their own devices, my fellow students were usually content to verbally berate me to the point of breakdown on a daily basis. Quite often however, that was not enough for them.

Bashing my skull repeatedly with their knuckles, spitting on me, kicking me in the most painful place any male can be kicked, without provocation, dumping the computer equipment I depended upon in the garbage, were among the many assaults I was forced to endure, many times in the presence of school staff and in the classroom.

A reasonable person might assume that these sorts of actions would be met with punishment.

Given their routine nature, a reasonable person might also assume that the perpetrators were either suspended or expelled.

That simply did not happen. Anarchy went on unabated. Leniency was the name of the game, and I was its perennial loser.

In fact, it was I, and not my tormentors, that was assessed, analyzed, and punished.

It was I who was often the one sent to the principal's office, as a twisted logic reigned that defending myself was somehow a greater evil than that perpetrated by my attackers.

It was I who was sent to hear the advice of supposed experts who would have you believe that bullies usually operate on their own and not in groups, and that simply ignoring them is enough to make them cease and desist. I speak not from years of study, but rather real life experience, when I tell you that that is utter nonsense.

Remember that Reena Virk, to use but one example, was not murdered by one individual, but a swarm of individuals. I can attest to the fact that that is how bullies operate. I can also tell you that my attempts to ignore them proved to be absolutely futile.

At one point, it was I who was forced to change schools and enter a behavioural program. My fellow students in this program were the sort that often had to be physically restrained by staff lest they seriously injure themselves or others.

As my mother has told you, there was literally a padded cell in our classroom that was put to frequent use.

Anyone who truly knows me knows that I did not belong in a setting like that.

That too proved useless. I eventually left that program and moved to another school, with the torment I had become accustomed to continuing nonetheless.

It was not until I finished elementary school and moved on to high school that the torment from my fellow students finally came to an end.

I was, however, to be subjected on a few occasions to verbal abuse from my high school's teaching staff. Again, given the powerful shield from accountability provided to teachers by union representation, that too went unpunished.

I was, to some extent, able to pick up the pieces and move on. People who know me also know that I can be stubborn, and can attest to the fact that I am determined to put these painful events behind me and make a better future for myself.

But I cannot say that the scars have left me, or will ever leave me.

I still find it next to impossible to form quality social relationships with most people, especially those my own age.

I still find myself nearly incapable of overriding my instinctive urge to withdraw myself from others; for fear that I will again be subjected to the nightmare that was my childhood.

Whether I can purge myself of this instinct, only time will tell.

What I can tell you is that administrators failed me.

Many of my teachers failed me.

The supposed experts failed me.

In short, the system failed me.

However, if there is anything good that came out of these experiences, it is this:

It ingrained a deep seeded sense of justice and empathy within me.

I never want to see another student be subject to what I was in our great province, let alone anywhere.

I never want to see another student resort to suicide, because he or she was subject to worse torment than I was.

I never want to see another student murdered, because the authorities that be did not reprimand the perpetrators until it was too late.

That is why I have come before you today.

Do not be blinded by those who will tell you that leniency and mere conflict resolution are the answer.

Do not allow yourselves to be connived by those who would place the blame back on the victim.

Do not allow the cloud of expert testimony and intellectual musings to obscure the common sense solution that lies before you.

As George Orwell once said:

"There are some ideas that are so preposterous that only an intellectual would believe them."

It is time, as my mother has told you, to establish unambiguous and universal guidelines, that will lay out clear and unequivocal consequences for violating a student's right to safety and security in their place of education.

It is time to send the signal that bullying in public schools will simply not be tolerated in the Province of British Columbia.

It is time to put an end to the anarchy I have spoken of.

Thank you for your time, and may God grant you the wisdom to confront this vital issue.

Appendix 3: Submission 3

In His own Words...

Bullying and Harassment in schools

I've been teased and harassed in school ever since I can remember. I was the quiet, shy kid that was easy to make cry. But it never got serious until I reached grade 11 and came out of the closet.

I didn't announce it or anything, but through the great teenage gossip ring, it got around and soon people started to up the harassment level. It started with general name-calling. Words like "Fag, faggot" and "queer" were shouted at me as I walked down the hall. It started to escalate into vandalism the 2nd semester when my locker was torched. The assailants attempted to set my locker with my personal and school belongings on fire, and I had to be moved across the school to a new location and locker. Notes soon appeared on my new locker with threats of violence or name-calling on them. Names were called out in the crowded halls, and most times I couldn't make out who said them. Bottles full of water and other fluids were thrown at my body also. People approached me trying to goad me into fights or other acts of violence.

My grade 12 year was much worse though where - as in grade 11, people I knew harassed me, this year brought in a large fluxuation of new students. With more people in the school, it became more dangerous.

The threats continued, but became more frequent. I was shoved around in the halls, and people I didn't know and have never had any contact with started harassing me. It got so bad that I had to leave class five minutes early so I could go to my locker without someone trying to hurt me.

I couldn't use the student washrooms because guys would harass me until I left, and signs started to appear saying things like, "No fags allowed".

It got too unbearable during the beginning of the second semester, when random people would walk by me in the stairwell and push me so I would fall. I couldn't walk in the halls anymore unless I was with a group of people because I was afraid I would be hurt. I couldn't go outside without my group because people would throw whatever was available. And sometimes even having people around me didn't stop them.

There was even a rumor going around about a collection that would be given to whoever could beat up or kill my gay friend and I. I couldn't handle the stress anymore; it was affecting my schoolwork and attendance record. I was too afraid to stay in school. So in early February I dropped out of school. Now I will not finish my grade 12 education in a public school for fear of the same situation happening again. I must find an alternative way to getting my Dogwood because of harassment and bullying.

Appendix 4: Hearing Schedule

The Safe Schools Task Force visited fifteen communities across the province and held public meetings at which they consulted with students, parents, educators and other individuals and groups about the important issue of school safety.

Location:	Date:
Port Alberni	November 6, 2002
Nanaimo	November 6, 2002
Kamloops	November 12, 2002
Merritt	November 12, 2002
Golden	November 13, 2002
Vernon	November 14, 2002
Kelowna	November 14, 2002
Victoria	December 2, 2002
Surrey	December 3, 2002
Coquitlam	December 4, 2002
Vancouver	December 5, 2002
Prince Rupert	December 10, 2002
Burns Lake	December 11, 2002
Prince George	December 12, 2002
Dawson Creek	December 13, 2002