



Schools ordered to battle bullies

Every school expected to have program in place

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Saskatchewan's learning minister unveiled a new plan to deal with bullying that will require every school in the province to have an anti-bullying program in place by the end of the school year.

Andrew Thomson made the announcement at Walter Murray Collegiate Wednesday, and said the province is calling on the federal government to make changes in the Criminal Code of Canada to deal directly with systemic bullying.

"To say that it simply comes down to a schoolyard fight, I think, is an old-fashioned idea that just doesn't address the situation as we see it today," he said.

Thomson said that the new strategy is a direct response to the suicide of 16-year-old Travis Sleeva of Canora in December after he endured several months of cruel bullying, and the emotional reaction it provoked.



CREDIT: Greg Pender, The StarPhoenix
Learning Minister Andrew Thomson at Walter Murray high school Wednesday

Although bullying is not "particularly prevalent" in Saskatchewan, he said, "the situation in Canora in the past few weeks reminds us that bullying, even in isolated occurrences, can contribute to situations that result in the most tragic of events."

Carol Sleeva, who brought concerns about bullying to the public's attention after the death of her son, said that although she's pleased the government is taking action, she's worried that it may take too long to implement the policy.

"We need something in place in schools very quickly because the bullying is still happening," she said in an interview Wednesday. "I just don't want anything else to happen."

According to Thomson, under the new policy, every school will require a "site-specific anti-bullying program," which means each school's plan may differ based on unique situations communities face.

The new policy will focus on a community-based response, said Thomson, that will hold students, staff, parents, and community members responsible for addressing bullying concerns.

Sleeva also stressed that it's important for entire communities to get involved.

"I think we as a society as a whole have to take a real hard look at the way our children are being treated by other children," she said. "We as adults and caregivers of children should really be proactive in stopping the bullying."

The minister stopped short of defining what exactly constitutes bullying, calling it a broad term that ranges

from minor interferences to physical confrontations.

Bruce Bradshaw, principal of Walter Murray, said the term is difficult to define.

"I believe it (bullying) comes in a number of different forms, it can be physical, it can be verbal, it can be just a matter of a look or a glance, it could be a manner of a sign; there are lots and lots of different types of bullying."

Thomson said he wrote the attorney general of Canada and education ministers across the country Wednesday asking for support in amending the Criminal Code and making changes to the Youth Criminal Justice Act that will let police deal with serious threats before they result in tragedy and can help schools deal with young offenders.

The Saskatchewan government will also provide a quarter of a million dollars over three years, he said, as part of the strategy to develop better programs to deal with bullying and suicide prevention and intervention.

The minister's announcement came on the heels of a plea from Regina Beach councillor Wes Taylor at the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association (SUMA) convention Wednesday for the provincial government to take action against bullying.

"When individual incidents occur, such as the senseless suicide of a son of one of my friends in a school that I went to, I get emotional," he read in a statement to delegates. "Please, let's not play politics, and address a long-term serious problem and take a lead role in our country by setting direction for making a Preventative Bullying Program involving both schools and parents, community, a mandatory part of the school curriculum."

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