

Open Letter to the Community

Dear Parents, Guardians and Community Members:

As the Director of Education, I want to address a very sensitive topic – sexual abuse of students. Recent media reports have provided detailed information relating to charges against three former teachers at Bell High School for incidents in the 70's, 80's and 90's.

On behalf of the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, I extend a heartfelt apology to any current or former students who have experienced harm by an employee of the OCDSB. The school district recognizes that nothing can be said or done to make up for the trauma and emotional suffering experienced by victims. One thing that can be said with certainty is that abuse should never happen, especially not to a child and not at school where children should be able to learn in a safe environment. As an educator and the leader of this organization, I know that every employee is disheartened by the thought that a person who was employed by the OCDSB could inflict harm to a child.

Many questions have been asked about the media reports, the experiences of former students of Bell High School, previous investigations and what may or may not have been done by previous administrations. These are difficult questions to answer, and compounded by differences between the individual cases, publication bans, ongoing legal action, privacy regulations, timing and available documentation of previous complaints and/or investigations. With regret, we cannot fully respond to the details of all of the issues raised.

However, we can address questions about the practices in our schools today and what we do to ensure a safe and caring environment for students at school and at school-related activities.

- All new teachers are provided with training on professional boundaries and ongoing training is provided for vice principals and principals on both professional boundaries and how to respond to allegations of concern.
- By law, all school district employees are required to report suspicions of abuse to the Children's Aid Society (CAS).
- The school district has both a policy and procedure regarding Alleged Employee Misconduct Toward a Student which establishes a clear and documented process in the event of allegations of misconduct.
- All employees are required to report to the employer where they believe that a child may be the victim of physical, emotional or sexual abuse by another employee of the District.
- The school district has an employee responsible for investigating allegations to ensure a fair and consistent process is followed in every investigation.
- Employees, including teachers, who are members of a professional college are also subject to the standards of conduct and reporting requirements of their professional College or regulatory body. The College of Teachers issues

regular advisories to their members on topics such as boundaries, duty to report, etcetera.

In the coming months, the school district will be introducing a program for students called [Kids in the Know](#) and a companion program for staff called [Commit to Kids](#) to encourage a culture of reporting any concerns or experiences with inappropriate behavior. The Commit to Kids program includes some excellent [resources for parents](#).

In situations where there is suspected sexual abuse involving a current employee, the District immediately reports the matter to the Children's Aid Society, removes the employee in question from the classroom/school, undertakes an internal investigation, and staff is in direct contact with the family.

In cases of allegations involving former students, complainants usually report directly to the police. The school district cooperates fully with the police on any investigation. In these historical cases, the identity of the victims is often protected. The school district may never be informed of the names of the victims unless that information is released in the court case, revealed to us by the victim, or through some other action.

We cannot change the past, but we can learn from it. We have implemented changes to practices designed to create a culture of safety where students and staff are aware of boundaries; and a culture of action in the event that an individual does not follow professional boundaries. Any student or parent who has a concern should report it immediately to the principal or another supervisor. Today or at any time, anyone with information related to the possible abuse of a child assault is encouraged to contact the Ottawa Police Service Sexual Assault/Child Abuse Unit at 613-236-1222, or phone Crime Stoppers at 613-233-8477 (TIPS) or toll free at 1-800-222-8477.

In closing, I want to acknowledge our collective commitment to children and to ensuring their safety , well-being and right to a positive learning environment.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Adams
Director of Education/Secretary to the Board