

Community feedback sought on safer schools

By Brock Weir

Summer is winding down to a close and parents are now turning their minds to the Back to School season, but as you go about getting new supplies and clothes for your kids, take a moment to think about what needs to be done to make schools the safest places they can be.

The Upper Grand District School Board and area police departments, including the Shelburne Police Service, are seeking input from the public on their new investigation protocol, which outlines the working relationship between schools, police and the public, and responses to occurrences on school property requiring police investigation or response to individual schools and boards.

According to the Upper Grand District School Board, the new protocol is "designed to encourage, enable and maintain a positive relationship between police officers, school administrators, staff, students, parents, members of the school community, and establishes guidelines for these various relationships."

The new document has been drafted under the guidance of the Ministry of Education and, according to Heather Loney of the Upper Grand District School Board, has been updated after a decade to reflect the very real issues being faced by the students of today.

"Cyberbullying was just not something that was mentioned in the previous (2011) document due to the age of the previous protocol," she says. "We decided to add something about cyberbullying in the definitions and glossary. We were absolutely making sure it was in line with the provincial model and we still needed to make sure it made sense for us and our partners in education and with the police staff."

While there are board-wide initiatives on how to tackle bullying and anti-bullying initiatives, each school has an individual plan on how to raise awareness and create a safe and accepting environment. These initiatives can include anti-bullying weeks and, more recently, the installation of "Buddy Benches", which "tries to promote empathy and inclusion."

The revised document outlines the roles and responsibilities of police officers, school staff and community members when incidents occur, including when a principal should contact police, when such calls should be mandatory or at the principal's discretion, steps that should be taken if there is to be an investigation on school property, or police having to interview a student.

Over the weekend, Shelburne Police investigated a lone car parked at Hyland Heights Elementary School where there was evidence of marijuana possession inside the car. As a result of the investigation, one adult and one youth were charged with possession-related offences.

Although this is one example of an investigation that would take place at a school, the document does not outline the courses of action in specific offences such as these or any types of specific offences.

"Police and school boards have an effective working relationship and jointly together this is something they are doing to try and ensure the safety of students and people who are in our school " staff and community members," she says. "It is something that directly affects them in their community. It could be their children attending a school. We want to make sure when there is an incident, everyone knows what the rules and responsibilities are, that when police go into a school there are the same protocols and procedures, depending on what school, so it is not changing every time they go in."

"If there is an emergency, the police can respond faster, the staff can respond faster, and they can work together because everyone knows who is responsible for what in an emergency situation. The Police play a crucial role in supporting the efforts of the boards and the school communities to ensure schools are a safe place for children to learn and for staff to work. It is community-based, it is our schools and it is people's children. I think it is valuable for members of the community to read over this document and give their feedback."

To view the document and provide feedback, visit www.ugdsb.on.ca.