

UGDSB holds town hall to discuss police presence in local schools

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The Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB) is looking towards the community for input regarding police presence within local schools, and the community is now stressing for the inclusion of BIPOC voices and mental health programs.

The Upper Grand District School Board held a town hall and survey on Tuesday (Oct. 20). The town hall saw over 150 community members from across the UGDSB region partake in the online survey, anonymously sharing their thoughts on police presence in UGDSB schools.

"It is important to the Upper Grand District School Board trustees and staff that a safe venue be provided to confidentially hear all voices, ideas and opinions without bias or oppression," said Cheryl Van Ooteghem, Superintendent of Education at UGDSB.

The information gathered from the survey will be used in producing a report that Ms. Van Ooteghem said will provide options and recommendations for UGDSB trustees in making a decision on police presence in the schools.

Marva Wisdom, co-chair for the Police Presence in Schools Taskforce Committee, hosted the town hall discussion addressing some of the top comments given by community members.

The survey provided by the board asked two discussion questions to participants. The first question asked was "what are your thoughts about the role and impact that police presence has in the UGDSB school community?" and the second was "what additional feedback do you have for the Task Force to consider going forward?"

For the first question there was 164 responses from participants.

"Police are inherently ill equipped to meet the needs of children and teens who might be struggling. There are other professionals who are better fit," read the top-rated question in the meeting.

"We have to be mindful of the relationship that some of the students/families in our school have had with police, it is important because this impacts interactions," read another.

In response to the second question, community members commented on the need for BIPOC voices in the decision as well as mental health programs over police presence.

"Ensure that BIPOC lived experiences are considered because these voices are often dismissed and/or silenced," read the top-rated comment for the second question.

"Please consider other service providers who could support schools, who are not part of the police," read the second top-rated. "Students deserve mental health professionals and trained educators to teach them about drug use and safety."

Back in July a task force committee was established consisting of two trustees, one student trustee, three staff members and eight community members from across the board. The committee, Van Ooteghem said, have been gathering information from staff, researchers, police and community. The committee will be tasked with creating the report with recommendations and options of the board regarding police presence.

The report will be given to the board, no later than Dec. 31 and the survey will remain open until Oct. 26.