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Rainbow Conference fosters diversity equity

By Marni Walsh

Students from across the Upper Grand District School Board have been invited to celebrate LGBTQ youth at the Rainbow Coalition Conference.

The Rainbow Coalition Conference, which will be held Thursday, May 5, at the University of Guelph, is an annual event to connect youth to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) student allies.

The event, first started in 2013, is free to attend and open to all UGDSB students in Grades 7 through Grades 12+.

According to Heather Loney, Communications and Community Engagement Officer for the Upper Grand District School Board, ?the conference provides workshops led by professionals, community members and students, focusing on anti-bullying, anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia education.?

The conference also provides information to students who are interested in starting a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at their school. GSAs provide a safe environment for students to meet on a regular and on-going basis for support, to discuss issues, and work toward diversity, equity and respect within their school.

Amanda MacLean, a Special Education Resource Teacher for the UGDSB, is the Rainbow Coalition Committee Chair. She leads a committee of elementary and secondary teachers in organizing the conference.

?Students have access to educational workshops, a variety of topics which include: how to Be an Effective Ally, Identity, and Coming Out,? says MacLean. ?Community organizations also attend, providing students with access to information and resources related to LGBTQ topics, such as mental health, allyship, and crisis workers.?

CDDHS student Alannah Halis attended the Rainbow Coalition Conference last year and says she is looking forward to going again this year.

?The Rainbow Coalition is a great opportunity to become educated on social issues and to receive support,? says Alannah. ?It is a friendly environment, where you don't feel any kind of social pressure, and don't have to feel afraid to be you. The workshops held at the conference each year are educational and teach you a lot about stomping out the stigmas associated around topics such as sexual orientation and gender identity. It is important to advocate for diversity, and the coalition conference does a great job at doing so.?

CDDHS English teacher Brayden Scott, who will be attending the conference with CDDHS students for the third year, says the conference brings ?like-minded students together in an environment in which they can be themselves, and feel safe, included and accepted.?

Mr. Scott reports that students choose two workshops, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Every year there is a keynote speaker, and this year it is singer-songwriter Rae Spoon.

?Each of the workshops has a focus around equity and diversity training for both students and specialty workshops specifically for educators,? he says ?It has been an amazing experience to see students from all schools in our board come together and love and accept each other and respect each other's differences. It is conferences such as these that allow students to share unique experiences and support each other in a safe and inclusive atmosphere.?

Jaxzon Allen, a CDDHS student, adds: ?Having conferences such as the one held by UGDSB is important for all students. I have recently come out as transgendered. Attending workshops such as these allow me to meet people who share similar experiences and is a safe and inclusive space for all. I love going to the Rainbow Coalition every year.?

The Upper Grand District School Board serves approximately 34,000 students and 3,000 teaching and support staff ? there is no denying that this is a diverse community in every sense of the word. The Rainbow Coalition, although a long time in coming, is an important, but small piece in the effort required by school boards and the community at large, to work to ensure the safety and acceptance of all people through education.