

?This is not just an isolated incident? Mother says son faces anti-Black racism at Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School

By Riley Murphy

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Sandra Anderson has had her children in the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board for all their lives. Now, she says her Grade 9 son experienced a hate-motivated incident and is faced with a lack of a safe education space.

Anderson says her son, who attends Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School, came back from school one day in February appearing stressed and dysregulated.

Anderson's son is autistic, and struggled to find the words to explain what had happened.

Through conversation, Anderson learned her son had been called a hate-motivated word during one of his classes that day.

She initially called the school before the weekend and, over the weekend, had multiple conversations with her son, explaining the gravity of the situation.

?We've actually had to have several conversations with [him] to get him to understand that this is not acceptable, this has nothing to do with you, this is just a person's level of ignorance,? says Anderson.

After the weekend, the school called Anderson and she learned that her son had been taken into the school's office to provide his account of the situation.

?This was problematic because for him, that's overwhelming for him to get pulled into an office,? explains Anderson.

Through Anderson, her son, and his sister, they were able to recount the situation to the school.

Anderson says she was reassured that the student involved in the incident would not be in class that afternoon, that they would conduct an investigation, and that they would call her back before the end of the day.

When she picked her son up from the bus stop that day, she learned the student involved in the incident was still in his class that same day.

Her son then told her he didn't want to go to that class anymore.

It was heartbreaking for Anderson, she explains, as he loves this class and worked hard to get it on to his schedule.

Anderson also claims she was not contacted again by the school that day.

?My understanding is, a promise was made that the student would not be in the classroom. When I picked my child up, he was again, still very dysregulated, and the kid was in the classroom,? says Anderson.

When she called the school again to explain the situation, she was told no promises had been made regarding a second reach out.

The school said, according to Anderson, that although they cannot discuss the details because they involve another student's privacy, they told Anderson they spoke to all 27 students in the classroom and that no one saw or heard anything.

?Based on your policy, that kind of aggression toward a student is an automatic suspension, so you did not believe my son, and you believed the other student,? she says.

?The moment when you decided to put that student back in that classroom, without any kind of consequences, they didn't miss a minute of class, they didn't miss a day of school, you gave them the license to now become an aggressor towards my son, an aggressor to any other Black student in your school. That's what you've done.?

Since February 27, she says she has not heard back from the school, and her son has missed six days of school for fear of being in the same room as the alleged other student.

The Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board said in a statement to the Citizen that they take matters involving discriminatory language, racism, and student safety very seriously.

?Upon being made aware of the concern, the principal of Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School conducted a thorough investigation. This included interviewing 27 students and speaking directly with parents and staff to ensure all perspectives were heard and fully understood.? reads the statement.

?To support the well-being of the student involved, as with all our students, a number of structures are in place, to ensure that the student would feel safe, supported, and included within their learning environment. Such structures are developed collaboratively, reviewed regularly, and adjusted as necessary to meet student needs. More broadly, the DPCDSB has clear procedures and policies that guide how schools respond to allegations of discrimination or unsafe behaviour. These include prompt review of concerns, engagement with families, and the use of appropriate supports and progressive discipline measures where required.?

Since the incident, Anderson has involved numerous organizations and filed multiple reports.

?And I'm not going to stop,? she says.

She says that this is not just a single issue but a broader systemic pattern within the school board.

?This is not just an isolated incident where you chose not to take any kind of action, or took the wrong action,? says Anderson, adding that she's seen this happen numerous times to other students in the school board.

Anderson draws attention to the 2023 to 2027 Strategic Plan to Dismantle Anti-Black Racism launched by the DPCDSB.

?They're not doing it, they're not following it, they're in violation of their own policies. It's just a glorified document,? she says.

From her children's time within the school board, she says she has not seen anything in relation to the strategic plan.

?While this particular incident might have struck a chord in terms of bringing this to light, it's because it's the frequency in which these incidents are occurring and the way that the school has chosen not to address it at all,? says Anderson.

Anderson says it's time the school board begins to follow their own policy.

?Why are they not being held accountable to follow it? You can't just create it and put it on a bookshelf and leave it there when you're having students that are being negatively impacted by this.?

?I teach all my children their values. They know who they are. They know that they are a valuable member of society, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. You are valued, you are important, and you can't let people, by using these words, try to tear you down.?