

Letter to the Editor
Globe and Mail
January 9, 2019

The story published by the *Globe and Mail* on January 5, *Educating Grayson*, highlights the difficulties being faced by students, parents, teachers, principals, vice-principals and school boards around the issue of school safety. It delved into the issue of exclusions and why they are used in some school for some students, including those with special needs. I was pleased to have the opportunity to talk to reporter Caroline Alphonso about this issue prior to the article being published and would like to reiterate some of the points I made to her that did not appear in the story.

First, exclusions are not the same as expulsions. While suspensions and expulsions are used for disciplinary issues, exclusions are used to address serious safety concerns. When a student's actions or presence is detrimental to the physical or mental well-being of other students, the student may be excluded from the classroom or school – usually for a short period of time – until the right resources are put in place to address the safety concerns that have arisen. It is important to emphasize that exclusions are generally of limited duration and only initiated after other strategies and options have proved unsuccessful.

Second, exclusions are used very rarely in schools across Ontario. In fact, in my 29-year education career, I have never been involved in a situation in which a student was excluded from school. When they are necessary, they are done in consultation with the school board and Supervisory Officers. A principal would not make the decision to exclude a student without consulting with board officials. When used, an exclusion would include a support plan so that the family, school and board have specific resources in place to ensure that the student can safely be reintegrated into the school setting.

Third, there has been, unfortunately, an increase in the number of incidents in schools over the past several years involving aggressive or violent behaviour by students. This data has been collected by our organization and by the public teacher federations. Some but certainly not all of these incidents involve students with special needs. It is critical that we find out why these incidents appear to be increasing and how we can respond.

The OPC, representing over 5,300 principals and vice-principals across Ontario, has shared our concerns with the government about these increased incidents and has proposed a number of recommendations including the establishment of a Think Tank to more fully research, study and develop recommendations with input from many stakeholders and provincial ministry representatives; additional resources for schools to assist students with complex behavioural needs; additional training for school staff so they can recognize unmet needs of students and refer them to appropriate medical practitioners; mental health leads in schools to assist in assessing students and helping

them find the appropriate medical treatment; and more in-school supervision. Resolving this issue will require the involvement of many people and resources (human and financial) from the provincial government.

Finally, we understand why parents are concerned about exclusions. They are advocating for their children, which is their right and responsibility. Similarly, principals and vice-principals must advocate for every student and every staff member in our schools. If the actions of a student puts themselves, other students or staff at risk, we must respond immediately, and sometimes – albeit rarely – that may mean temporarily removing that student until their needs and behaviour can be managed in an appropriate way.

While we would all prefer students to be in school learning every day, sometimes that is not possible. In those cases, principals, in consultation with their supervisory officers, respond appropriately and responsibly with many different tools, one of which – when safety is a factor – is exclusions. This is not done frequently or lightly, but is done when necessary.

Larry O'Malley
President
Ontario Principals' Council
20 Queen St. W., 27th Floor
Toronto, ON
lomalley@principals.ca
416-322-6600