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# Listowel Banner

PM43702524

Thursday, August 1, 2024

\$1.50 per copy (includes GST)

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Nicole Beswitherick photo

**DOUBLE HEADER** - The Listowel Legionnaires 22U braved the heat to play against the North Middlesex Sluggers on July 27. Legionnaires won 11-5 in the 1 p.m. game and 10-8 in the 3:30 p.m. game. More photos on page 9.

## Howick Fire station recognizes department members with awards

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**GORRIE** - The Howick Fire Department recently held an awards ceremony, recognizing those in the department for a job well done.

On July 23, the department gathered outside the fire department in Gorrie with family and members of Howick Council, as Fire Chief Josh Kestner presented the awards.

The first awards handed out were the five-year service awards, presented to firefighters Dai Matthews, Jason Benninger and Doug Burns.

Matthews was the first of the night to walk up and accept her award from Kestner.

"I think it's really important that you're always willing to, and you're always there striving to succeed to do better," Kestner said to Matthews. She also later in the evening received a course certificate.

Benninger, who has also been with the fire department since 2019, then came up to accept his award.

"Jason is a really committed firefighter and he's a big member

of the community," explained Kestner to the crowd. He added the firefighter is also part of the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) team "which is a really appreciated asset, especially these days when that's so important."

The fire department in Howick uses the CISM team and Peer Support team interchangeably. "Their job is to manage tough situations when they arise and promote mental and physical wellbeing," Kestner stated in an email to *Midwestern Newspapers*.

The Fire Chief joked around too, adding that Benninger will always volunteer to be the department's Sparky, "Nobody wants to put that thing on, on a hot day except for you."

Due to a conflict in his work schedule, Burns was not able to be at the event to accept his five-year service award. However, Kestner shared some appreciative words about him as well.

"He's very cool, calm and collected which we all appreciate, especially on a fire scene when it can be so hectic at times. He's also reliable in any situation."

*Continued on page 8*

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## Concerned parents of Westfield E.S. students calling for principal to resign over school-wide rainbow photo

*AMDSB says they are proud of their administrator's work*

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**LISTOWEL** - A group of over 100 parents on the Facebook group titled Concerned Parents of Westfield E.S. are distraught with the way the school's principal coordinated a school-wide rainbow photo in support of Pride Month on June 27.

As a representative of the group of concerned parents, Brent Shardlow, reached out to the *Listowel Banner* to share the

group's concerns.

Shardlow said he learned about the photo earlier in the month of June.

"Our principal was beginning to take things to the next step," he said. "I had heard some rumors around that there would be a Pride photo, which would be a rainbow photo of all the grades."

The staged photo would consist of every grade being assigned to wear a different color, then when standing together the stu-

dents would create a rainbow.

"Myself, I have a personal conviction against that and I was not comfortable with my daughter being a part of that photo," Shardlow said.

He explained that he reached out to the vice principal to share his concerns, and asked for his daughter to be put on a no-picture registry. He said he was told that was not a problem.

"I then began hearing rumors around the community that other parents were asking for the

same and they were being told no," he explained.

In search of confirming the answer he had first received, he contacted Westfield principal Marie Kalantzakos.

"The principal said there would be no alternative for her (his daughter) not to be in the photo," he said. "There would be no other options. You had two choices. You could keep her home or she was going to be in that photo."

*Continued on page 12*

**WHAT'S INSIDE**  
 Local News.....pages 2, 3  
 Opinion..... pages 4-5  
 Legionnaires .....page 9  
 Classified .... pages 10-11

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# Concerned parents of Westfield E.S. students calling for principal to resign after school-wide rainbow photo

## *AMDSB says they are proud of their administrator's work*

*Continued from front page*

"Last time I checked, she was my daughter and I will make the decision as to what I will or will not allow her to do at five years old," Shardlow said.

He went on to say that the principal was pressing him to explain why he didn't want his daughter in the photo.

"I said several times, it is none of your business," he told the *Banner*. "My choice and my convictions are mine. They are for me to decide."

Shardlow said Kalantzakos told him she "was going to stand up for all the oppressed things that have happened to the LGBTQ community since 1976 when it was illegal to be gay."

"I then reminded her that it's 2024, the war is over. I'm not telling you to drop Pride. I'm not telling you to stop. To ignore the fact that this exists. What I'm telling you is I don't want my daughter in that photo. And I have that right, as a parent to decide that. And I was given two options keep her home from a public school, which my taxes go to pay for, or she's going to be in that photo."

Shardlow said he decided to keep his daughter home from school.

"This is not about gay rights," Shardlow told the *Banner*. "It's about parental rights. And I have the right as a parent to decide what I will have my kids involved in and what I will not, and my child shouldn't have to miss something fun that every other kid is allowed to do because of one principal."

The *Listowel Banner* reached out to Kalantzakos through the Avon Maitland District School Board (AMDSB), however April Smith, Superintendent of Education (K - 12 Program Services); and Jane Morris, Superintendent of Education (Support Services, IT and Data) provided comments.

"We are part of the public education system of Ontario and part of our mandate is to educate students and staff on how we can support human rights of all of our citizens and our community members," Smith explained.

She further explained that this is embedded in curriculums starting in Kindergarten and spanning all the way through to Grade 12. AMDSB's work is directed by an Equity Diversity and Inclusivity action plan, as well as the Ontario Human Rights Code.

Additionally, all Ontario school boards have been asked to look at how they are intentionally supporting staff and students who identify with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

"Last year, around the same time, the minister of education asked us to double our efforts to protect 2SLGBTQIA+ students and ensure their inclusion within Ontario schools," Smith said. "He said 'It's incumbent on all school boards to ensure that these students feel supported and reflected in their schools and welcome within our communities and that includes celebrating Pride in constructive positive and meaningful ways to affirm their identities and to let educators and staff and school boards and administrators and the government know that we stand with them.'"

Smith said the practice of equity

in schools occurs all year long.

"This is not new work for us," she said. "Sure it's showed up in June, but it's actually work that we do all year. It is the core of our work. It's not just a monthly photo."

Morris explained that this is not exclusive to Westfield, this is the case in all Ontario schools.

"We see Pride celebrations in all of our schools across the district, and likely most schools across the province of Ontario, because this is a core expectation now of the work in the province."

Another concerned Westfield parent, Chris Raben, spoke with the *Banner*. He estimated that there were over 100 upset parents.

He said he spoke with an AMDSB superintendent, as well as a Human Rights and Equity staff person.

"I expressed my concerns, and I was asking for an alternative space for my daughter to go to while the picture was being taken for moral and religious reasons," Raben said.

Although he said he does not disagree with all elements of Pride, he listed what he does have qualms with.

"There's so many things that fall under the Pride umbrella and so for one, I don't agree with gender modification surgeries for minors ... I don't agree that somebody can say they're a cat or a dog and I'm supposed to treat them like that, I don't think that's right," Raben told the *Banner*.

He said he expressed his concerns to the superintendent and was shocked by the response given.

"The superintendent said, 'If I don't agree with what they stand for, then I should go to another school,'" Raben said.

Raben said his issue is with being told he needs to celebrate Pride, not with Pride itself.

"I do want to reiterate, if people want to celebrate it, they are totally free," he said of Pride. "If they want to celebrate gender modification surgeries for minors, I guess that's their right. If they want to celebrate anything Pride, that's totally their right. And I'm not against that at all. What I'm against is being told I have to celebrate it."

Raben said he understands that the Ontario Education Act dictates that schools teach students about "different family setups, etc. in June."

"I get that that's part of the curriculum, and it is what it is, but celebrating something is over and above being taught something," he said. "I mean, as a family, as a parent, we choose not to celebrate those certain aspects of Pride."

On June 27, Raben decided to send his daughter to school with a letter from his lawyer stating that she would not be in the photo.

Raben guessed that over 100 kids did not show up to school because of the photo, and others who didn't want to miss the last day of school dressed in black in protest.

"There was complete disregard for the kids' level of comfort, for the families' wishes, it's hard to even believe this happened in a Canadian school," Raben said.

Although the school board did not confirm the number of students who did not wish to participate



Kelsey Bent photo

A group of concerned parents of students of Westfield E.S. in Listowel are distraught with the way the principal coordinated a school-wide rainbow photo in support of Pride month on June 27. AMDSB says they are proud of the administrator's work.

in the photo, Morris did state that she and her colleague Smith were at the school on the day the photo and, "to be honest, it was a really fantastic, joyous moment."

"I didn't actually observe anybody who was in distress or who seemed concerned," she added.

Smith said that they both received several messages from staff, students, and parents who thanked them for their support.

"Staff thanked us and students as well said thank you very much for doing this work," she shared.

"It's just really important for our children to learn that they will live alongside, work alongside, study alongside people of all different types of identities and with different perspectives on the world and we just think that this is exceptionally important."

### Facebook

Since June 27, Shardlow, Raben, and 120 other members of a Facebook group titled Concerned Parents of Westfield E.S. are lobbying to have the principal resign and change policies to ensure something similar does not happen again.

"This is not just a couple of radical Christians," Shardlow said. "There's quite a group. I've had homosexuals reach out to me and say ... 'this is completely ridiculous, you should never be forced to have your kids get involved in anything you do not want them to.'"

Like Raben, Shardlow stated this is not about the rights of the "homosexual community."

"This is about the overstepping of a principal and my rights as a parent," he stated. "It's about the principal being unwilling to make other accommodations for students, but they do for other things."

He claims that the school does not "make the Muslim students participate in Remembrance Day, because it could be, and I quote triggering for some of them who have come from war-torn countries such as Syria, etc."

"When I went to school, the Jehovah's Witness children did not have to participate in Christmas stuff or Easter," he added.

Smith said there has not been instances where there's been separate spaces provided.

"It's important to know that as a school board, we can't actually provide a separate space where we would have students, and or staff, expressing their concern or their disagreement with another group's human rights," she said.

"We just aren't permitted to do that. It would be in contradiction to the Human Rights Code. And that's just something that we couldn't do."

Smith went on to say that Westfield staff acted as any school in the province should have, they provided a schedule for the day, so that the parents could make their own decision.

"But we absolutely could not accommodate a practice or a space where that would contravene the human rights of another group," Smith said.

In reference to the comment about exclusion from Christmas activities, Smith said, "A religious practice is different than saying 'I don't or my values do not recognize you as a human being.' So there are different instances, again, in every Ontario school, where there might be a choice by a student or a family member that we may not recognize that same religious value so we won't participate. That is not the same as saying, 'We don't celebrate the actual identity and human rights of a fellow human being.'"

Smith went on to say that Westfield administrators followed procedures correctly.

AMDSB has a Religious Accommodation and Ministry of Procedure, available to the public on their website, which speaks to exemptions related to human development and sexual health expectations.

"It does talk about that schools are not able to exempt students for instruction related to those expectations outside of that specific instruction," she said. "And, in fact, we are working just like all school boards are, to actually support this work to help our students understand diversity, equity and inclusion. There was this idea that something was not followed. We are encouraging and supporting all of our administrators and educators to actually have these conversations and to talk about difference and to talk about human rights but also this idea that it is actually a skill that we all will need to learn to be able to develop to be successful in life."

In their lobbying efforts, the group of concerned parents sought support from the local school board trustee and member of provincial parliament. Both Shardlow and Raben said the elected officials are very concerned about this.

In an email statement Vice Chair for Avon Maitland District School Board of Trustees and Trustee for the Electoral area of North

Perth, Nancy Rothwell told the *Banner*, "I have received emails and calls from concerned parents and community members. I have listened and shared their concerns with senior administration at the board office."

Perth-Wellington MPP Matthew Rae wrote in an email statement, "I have spoken with various families, including that of Mr. Shardlow and Mr. Raben, to listen to their concerns. I suggested that they, and those who shared their concerns with me should contact their local school board, and their school board trustees. Avon Maitland District School Board is responsible for the day-to-day administration of its schools and would be in the best position to address their concerns."

### Resignation and policy change

When asked what outcome they wanted, both Shardlow and Raben were in agreement that they would like to see the principal resign, and have policies changed to ensure that a space be provided to students who wish to be excluded from similar events in the future.

"Someone has to be held accountable for this. This is not right," Shardlow said.

"I honestly would like to see her (the principal) removed from her post, I don't see how she can move forward in this community, like what she did was absolutely mind-blowing that she did not care about us," Raben said. "She did not care about the different opinions."

When asked about the status of the principal's position at the school, Smith explained that the board would not discuss a human resources issue with parents, the public, or the media.

Smith added that the board is proud of the Westfield administrator.

"We're very proud of our administrator's work and our educator's work to have conversations that develop the understanding of our students around diversity, equity, and inclusion," she said.

Morris added that Westfield has a supportive community behind them.

"We've got a very robust committee in North Perth right now, a Community Engagement Committee that has nine different agency organizations that have been coming together to talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion work across the North Perth region," she said. "I feel that we are well supported by the municipality, the local police service, by North Perth Pride, by the United Way, and all the partners."

Community Living, EarlyOn, public health, and the hospital alliance, are also among the committee supporting AMDSB.

"The municipality of North Perth has done a lot of excellent work in this area, including raising the flag, we are very happy to partner with all of those organizations that work in this area," Smith added.

As for changing AMDSB policy, Smith said, "The Ontario Human Rights Code prevents any school system from providing a space where human rights of students or staff are denied. So creating an exclusion space would violate the code and we just would not do that."