

# Caledon Citizen

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## Covering all of Caledon

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## Were all the Hall students' suspensions really justified?

THERE'S SURELY NO DOUBT that some of the 19 Robert F. Hall Catholic high school students suspended for up to eight school days richly deserved the punishment.

However, it's equally obvious to us that the school authorities reacted too quickly and failed to set a proper example for the student body.

Although "cyber-bullying" is clearly a serious problem, and not just in the Caledon school, the punishment meted out against individual students must not only be fair but be seen to be fair.

It now appears that at least some of the 19 students were punished simply because they had been part of a group. It was a matter of "guilt by association," a concept that has no place in a proper judicial system.

All the 19 had in common was that they participated in the creation of a Web site on Facebook.com, a popular online networking site.

It would seem that the initial idea was to use the site for an exchange of ideas concerning some controversial school policies, one of which was a ban on cell phones and similar devices in the classroom.

In a country where "freedom of expression" is constitutionally guaranteed, establishing such a communications tool ought not to present any problems. However, the participants ought to realize that even freedom of expression has its limits, and does not extend to areas such as deliberate falsehoods, racist messages or defamatory statements.

It now seems clear that some of the postings by the Hall students that targeted their principal, Edward McMahon were derogatory, demeaning and sexually explicit. One apparently even suggested that students stage a riot.

On grounds those postings violated the school board's code of conduct, officials suspended most of the students for up to five days and the student who set up the site for eight days. The code states that "using computer technology to communicate inappropriate, demeaning, harassing or threatening messages shall be subject to disciplinary action. Police may be contacted."

That's fine and well, if it is demonstrated that an individual student did engage in such postings. However, one of those suspended for five days was the school council president, Kevin Sultana, who told the Toronto

Star he had been punished without being given an opportunity to plead his case.

Questioning whether the school administrators had overstepped their boundaries the 17-year-old Mono Mills resident asked: "When does the school's jurisdiction end?"

Stating that as far as he knows none of the 19 students had accessed Facebook during school time or on school computers, the Grade 12 honour student said he was among eight pupils summoned to the school office and told they were being suspended for five days for being members of the online group and supporting what others on the site had posted.

"It was just a blanket statement and we had no chance to plead our case," he told the Star, adding that he'd been invited to join the group when it was created in December but never wrote or even read anything on the network. "I'm an innocent bystander in all of this."

He described the original intent of the network as "an open-forum discussion group to discuss Mr. McMahon's policies and decisions. When I joined, it was empty."

In this new age of Internet technology, cyber-bullying and harassment have become far too widespread among students, even some in elementary schools. Only last week, a group of Pickering elementary students apologized for posting a video on another popular Web site, YouTube, that mocked a schoolmate who had suffered a stroke.

To deal with such incidents, school administrators everywhere are understandably under pressure to adopt policies that make it clear that students' rights do not extend to interfering with the freedom and dignity of others.

It should be obvious to one and all that our educational institutions should adopt policies barring online postings of hurtful statements about others, whether fellow students, professors or principals. They should not be tolerated any more than any other form of bullying or harassment.

The Dufferin-Peel board does have such a policy, making it easier for school officials to act quickly.

As we see it, the only time an entire group should be punished is when it is impossible to determine who made the offensive postings and it is clear that all members of the group supported the individuals' actions.

WHAT WOULD CANADA DO WITH A MILLION DOLLAR COIN? TWO WORDS...



## Our Readers Write

### In support of Hall principal

The following letter, to the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board, was submitted to the Citizen.

We, the Catholic School Council, would like to express our concern over the events

### Hoy was 'right' on!

Claire Hoy's Feb. 7 article on Dion's environmental ride hit the nail right on the head. Unfortunately, it got bent severely to the right.

While some of your natural history is very correct about long-term warming and cooling trends for the planet, you missed the nail completely with your current analogies. Legitimate climate change scientists would only add that the current warming trend is an accelerated blip in the system and will produce chaotic weather patterns. They could legitimately contribute this acceleration to 10,000 years of human deforestation and agricultural practices along with our current use of fossil fuels. In other words, this deliberately caused phenomenon has never before been seen in the natural history of the planet.

Politically, your story has no plot. It was the Liberal government who fully acknowledged Kyoto commitments, introduced the Climate Change Action Fund in 1998 and then Project Green which contained 13 initiatives for clean air and water, energy conservation, climate change, and the protection of natural resource capital. The Climate Change Plan for Canada in 2002 was the first educational initiative of its kind.

In February of 2004, Ralph Goodale introduced the greenest budget in Canadian history, and in March 2004, the One Tonne Challenge for Canadian citizens was launched. I believe that was about when Stephane Dion moved from Inter-

that took place with a few students at Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School. We were saddened to hear that some students deliberately and improperly used the Internet to spread harmful and improper comments regarding the principal of this school.

We would like to come in defence of Mr. Ed McMahon.

At our school council meeting on Monday evening, parents and other council members showed an overwhelming support for the character of principal McMahon. In our opinion, he has always shown solid leadership in dealing with matters in a fair and non-judgmental manner. His proactive involvement with the students during their lunches enables many to feel free and open to discuss various issues with him, and he responds with respect. He is known throughout the board, and we see this at Hall, as a man of integrity. He is a real teacher - he lives his faith through his personal life and brings this integrity to his leadership at our school.

Since coming to our school many positive changes have happened and the parent community of R.F. Hall Catholic Secondary School overall affirms his constructive and positive influence. He truly cares for the students and has their best interest at heart.

He does not tolerate disrespect for the rules he is obliged to enforce on behalf of the school board. He tackles issues with fairness and would welcome discussion on any subject. He is an exemplar of what it means to live what you believe, with faith in God and with belief in other people.

*Marie Deckert*  
Chair,  
Robert F. Hall  
Catholic Secondary  
School Council

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# Caledon Citizen



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