

Parents applaud review on racism at York region school board, but still want director to resign

'It feels like you've been fighting cancer for so long and you just cut out the tumour,' mother says

By Laura Fraser, [CBC News](#) Posted: Apr 11, 2017 7:44 PM ET Last Updated: Apr 11, 2017 7:44 PM ET

The mother at the centre of an equity complaint that sparked a scathing review of the York Regional School Board applauded the recommendations for change — but said she still wants to see the director of education step down.

Charline Grant, who was the target of a racial slur used by former trustee Nancy Elgie, said she was thankful to both the authors of the study and the education minister for holding the board to account.

- [Review of York Region District School Board finds 'culture of fear,' 'systemic discrimination'](#)

It's an acknowledgement of what she and other parents allege they lived through for years: discrimination at the hands of people who are supposed to mold the community's children.

"You know what it feels like? It feels like you've been fighting cancer for so long and you just cut out the tumour," Grant said at the Ontario Legislature Tuesday. "We know we have remission to go through and we still have to fight because, even though those recommendations were put forward, we know there's still more to come.

"But we're hopeful."

Taking action

Education Minister Mitzi Hunter issued 22 directives to the school board as a result of the review, which calls for mandatory "equity, human-rights and anti-oppression" training for all trustee members. It also calls for the creation of a human rights office within the board to ensure complaints are investigated.

The report by law professor and former school trustee Patrick Case and former deputy minister Suzanne Herbert described the board as dysfunctional, particularly in its refusal to take responsibility for mounting allegations of racism.

Much of that report's criticism — a document prepared after interviews with staff, parents, students and board members — targeted the board's director of education, J. Philip Parappally.

The report's authors described Parappally as cultivating a "fearful and threatening environment" in which some staff members are asked to spy on others, and said it appeared that promotions were distributed based on favouritism more than ability.

Grant and her husband, Garth Bobb, allege that the board's inaction on complaints of racism worsened after Parappally's hiring. The report also condemned the fact that neither the director nor any of the trustees filed a Code of Conduct complaint against Nancy Elgie after she acknowledged she used the N-word in reference to Grant.

'Areas for improvement'

Both Grant and Bobb said that, given what's happened, it's difficult to have faith in Parappally's ability to implement the recommendations. Instead, they hope Hunter will appoint a new supervisor.

And Bobb said Parappally should resign.

'If the leaders of the community aren't embodying principles of equity and inclusion, then what are we teaching our students?' - *Gilary Massa, National Council of Canadian Muslims*

"He's shown himself to be at the head of an organization that has had so many issues," Bobb said. "The board had a good reputation for equity and was moving in the right direction until a couple years ago."

Parappally wrote in a statement that the board recognized "there are areas for improvement" and would be reviewing the report's findings.

[The board attracted the attention](#) of both media and the Ministry of Education last fall after Markham principal Ghada Sadaka posted controversial items on Facebook involving Muslims and Syrian refugees that some parents and students found offensive.

Members of the National Council of Canadian Muslims joined with Grant, Bobb and other parents in voicing concern about anti-black racism and Islamophobia. The organization's advocacy co-ordinator, Gilary Massa, said she has faith Hunter will make sure the recommendations are implemented, because they're critical to rebuilding trust between students and educators.

- [Toronto-area mother called 'N-word' launches human rights complaint against York school board](#)

"Your principal is someone you go to when something is happening to you in the school, somebody that you're supposed to trust and have faith in," she said. "If our administrators, if the leaders of the community aren't embodying principles of equity and inclusion, then what are we teaching our students?"

With files from Ali Chiasson

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