

Canadian schools help affected students, parents cope with conflict in Israel and Gaza



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In a virtual session this week, counsellor Leanne Matlow received a flood of questions from concerned parents: What should I tell my child who asks every night if someone from our family has died? What information should I share with my children – or keep from them? Is it safe for my children to attend school?

The session was held by the York Region District School Board, north of Toronto, for families of Jewish and Israeli students. Another two sessions on Friday will be for families of Palestinian and Muslim students.

Ms. Matlow, a cognitive behaviour therapy counsellor, walked 150 families through setting boundaries in their homes around news consumption of the Middle East conflict, and reassuring children of their safety. She recommended that families brainstorm ways to feel hopeful and helpful, and reminded parents that children are watching and listening to how they react.

“At this moment in time when incredibly uncertain things are happening, I think that that would go a long way in your home to help contain the anxiety, not create more anxiety, and maybe hopefully empower your child to deal with really, really difficult, unimaginable things,” she told her online audience of the tools she offered.

The sessions at the York school board are part of wider efforts among educators in many parts of the country looking to support students and their families affected by the conflict in Israel and Gaza.

Lois Agard, York’s co-ordinating superintendent of equity, said the school board worked with its mental-health clinicians, as well as Jewish and Muslim groups, to provide identity-specific practitioners to support families. Roughly 14 per cent of students at the board identify as Jewish, and 23 per cent identify as Muslim. Fewer than 1 per cent identify as Palestinian.

“We know that with the evolving tragic situation in the Middle East, it’s deeply upsetting for our YRDSB students, particularly for staff and family of Jewish, Muslim, Palestinian and Israeli communities,” Ms. Agard said. “We really wanted our focus to be on supporting the emotional needs of our students, staff and families.”

Similarly, the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board is offering support groups to Jewish and Muslim students in middle and high school. The board has done this in the past as well, said spokesperson Darcy Knoll.

“These allow students to come together across the district to connect, share concerns and experiences, and support one another,” Mr. Knoll said, adding that it allows staff to follow up with individual students, if necessary.

In Quebec, the English Montreal School Board said it has mental-health experts on hand to provide counselling to students. The board is also speaking with organizations, such as the Canadian Red Cross, to see how it can help with relief efforts.

Michael Cohen, the board’s spokesperson, said discussions are preliminary.

“Our schools have a history of supporting populations in need and so we are right now taking an inventory of options,” he said.

Radean Carter, a spokesperson at Winnipeg School Division, said staff are reaching out to schools to make them aware that clinical supports are available for students and their families. Students’ understanding of the events in the Middle East varies, as does their emotional response, she said.

“We will address these varying needs in age-appropriate ways through facilitating safe spaces for open and honest discussions, where students can express their feelings, ask questions, and receive guidance as they process their emotions,” Ms. Carter said.

“We want to ensure that no one in our school community feels alone or overwhelmed during this challenging time.”