

Thank you for the opportunity to address the board today.

My youngest child, Meagan was a kindergarten student at Our Lady of Sorrows in Etobicoke when she was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour. This news was devastating to our family, but we were comforted by the unwavering support of the OLS school community who embraced Meagan and our entire family during our time of need.

One of her last outings was a visit to her kindergarten classmates to say goodbye. The weeks leading up to this encounter, the students had been hard at work folding and decorating paper cranes as a sign of support. Margaret, a grade 8 student had been reading the story of Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes. In this story, the main character, Sadako is diagnosed with leukemia. She begins to fold paper cranes as a Japanese legend suggests that if someone folds 1000 cranes they will be granted a wish and her wish was to overcome her cancer.

Meagan sat on a blanket in the middle of the school yard and the students formed a large circle around her. 1 by 1 the students presented her with their paper cranes and well wishes.

There were thousands of cranes that decorated the school, woven into the fences and all around the school yard.

That day has become a very special memory for our family and in our history as Meagan Bebenek Foundation.

That day the first circle of hope was created and has since inspired our Kids Helping Kids School Program. The program centres around the concept of HUGS - Hope, Understanding, Gratitude and Support.

As a former teacher with the TCDSB, I believe that integrating emotional well-being into the curriculum enables educators to ensure that students not only excel academically but also develop the emotional resilience and social skills needed for a fulfilling and successful life.

Learning about hope helps students maintain a positive outlook and resilience in the face of challenges. Understanding fosters empathy and compassion, reducing conflicts and promoting a supportive school environment. Gratitude can enhance overall happiness and reduce stress by encouraging students to focus on the positive aspects of their lives.

When students practice gratitude, understanding, and support, it fosters a positive and inclusive classroom atmosphere. This environment not only makes learning more enjoyable but also encourages students to take intellectual risks and engage more deeply with the overall outcome being improved academic success.

By emphasizing these key concepts of hope, understanding, gratitude, and support, we as educators can nurture well-rounded individuals who are not only academically competent but also emotionally intelligent, socially responsible, and resilient in the face of life's challenges.

Over the past 20 plus years I have witnessed the power of this school program and received countless testimonials from students, parents and teachers alike about the impact it has had in their lives and within their own school community. I am hopeful that with your support, we can

impact the lives of all TCDSB students helping them learn to lead by example putting their faith to action.