

Catholic board ponders sweatshop committee

Issue on agenda when trustees meet

By **SUSAN O'NEILL** [More from this author](#)

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A proposal that would see the city's separate school board form a committee to oversee the labour practices employed by uniform suppliers doesn't go far enough toward ensuring Catholic school uniforms aren't being produced in sweatshops, says a North York trustee.

Members of the Toronto Catholic District School Board's administrative and corporate services committee will vote tonight on a proposal that would see the board issue an exclusive licence agreement with all suppliers of school uniforms.

That agreement would include assurances that the apparel was, and will continue to be, manufactured under safe and healthy conditions.

The committee will also vote on whether or not to establish a sweatshop-free advisory committee, which would meet with suppliers twice a year.

But that policy doesn't go far enough toward ensuring full public disclosure, said Ward 5 Trustee Maria Rizzo, who favours using an organization known as the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC) as the monitoring agency rather than creating an advisory committee that would include representatives from the clothing suppliers themselves.

"That's no good to us," Rizzo said of the proposal to create an in-house monitoring committee including industry representatives. "We have to have something that is totally independent."

The board's current policy, which was adopted in November 2005, requires suppliers to disclose factory information in order to sign an agreement with the board.

But Rizzo maintained the best way to ensure clothing suppliers aren't using sweatshops is to join a group called the Affiliation of Ontario School Boards.

Of the 29 Catholic school boards in Ontario, eight have decided to participate in the affiliation, which plans to enter a formal monitoring agreement with the WRC.

"We are trying to pass a sweatshop policy with some teeth," she said in reference to a group of students and community members she has been working with on the issue for the past three years.

Rizzo said it would cost the board between \$10,000 to \$12,000 to join the affiliation.

And while she said she recognizes there are significant financial pressures facing trustees, she maintained money is not the most compelling issue at stake.

"We want it to be completely independent," she said of the monitoring body. "This is all about the most vulnerable in our society. Corporate greed has made it very difficult to (look out) for those we purport to want to help."

The committee holds a public meeting at 7 p.m. at the Catholic Education Centre, 80 Sheppard Ave. E.