

SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BOARD AGENDA

Date: Tuesday, April 9, 2019
Time: 6:00 pm
Location: Catholic Education Centre - Board Room
802 Drury Lane
Burlington, Ontario

Pages

1. Call to Order
 - 1.1 Opening Prayer, National Anthem and Oath of Citizenship (P. DeRosa)
2. Approval of the Agenda
3. Declarations of Conflict of Interest
4. Action Items
 - 4.1 Letter to the Ministry of Education
5. In-Camera
6. Resolution re Absentees
7. Adjournment and Closing Prayer (T. O'Brien)

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The Honourable Lisa Thompson
Minister of Education
21st Floor, Mowat Block
600 Bay Street
Toronto, ON M7A 1L2

Dear Minister Thompson,

I am writing on behalf of the Halton Catholic District School Board, to express our deep concerns with a number of the recent changes to education policy announced by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

While staff are still in the process of analyzing the available data to determine the definitive impact of these proposed changes, the preliminary implications are not promising. We write to you today to share our concerns, with the hopes that your Ministry will reconsider some of the changes you have proposed in light of the challenges that school boards will have in meeting the needs of our students.

Class Sizes

The Ministry of Education has proposed changes to class sizes that would cap the average class-size in Grades 4-8 at 24.5, and increase the average class-size requirements in secondary schools from 22 to 28. We have a number of concerns with these proposed changes.

Student Outcomes

Long-term studies¹ indicate that smaller class sizes in elementary school predict greater achievement in secondary school, including higher graduation rates and greater likelihood of attending post secondary education.

Further evidence suggests that smaller class sizes allow for improved peer social functioning, and provide greater opportunities for teachers to establish meaningful relationships with their students. Peer and teacher relationships are considered developmental assets for children and youth, and the importance of these assets in youth outcomes is well established, based on more than 40 years of data², through The Search Institute®.

Increasing the student-teacher ratio will have the most detrimental impact on students who are most likely to struggle in school, for example children with learning disabilities or social and emotional problems. The literature consistently shows that students with low socioeconomic status, for example, show a clear benefit in smaller classrooms.

Contravention with Collective Agreement

The proposed changes to class sizes, with implementation planned to begin in September 2019, are in direct contravention to the collective agreement we currently have in place with our secondary teachers, which requires us to staff our secondary school classes at 22:1.

The proposed attrition protection plan further confuses the matter by stipulating 'where permissible under collective agreements'. The inherent conflict and lack of clear direction in this matter has compounded the uncertainty that already exists around funding, putting a tremendous strain on staff as they undergo the staffing process for next school year.

Impact on Elective/Specialty Courses

An increase in average class-size will impede our Board's ability to continue offering elective courses in the arts, skilled trades, technology, and social sciences. At the Halton Catholic District School Board, it is our goal to ensure that all students have opportunities to achieve success. Many of the specialty courses we currently offer enable students to customize their high school experience to suit their interests and talents. The increase in class size requirements at the secondary level will make it very challenging to continue offering the breadth of programming that support student engagement, learning and achievement.

E-Learning

The Ministry of Education has announced that beginning September, 2020, the delivery of all e-learning courses will be centralized, and that secondary school students will be required to take a minimum of four (4) e-learning credits in order to achieve an Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

As a school district, we know that students learn differently, and with this in mind, we have made it a priority to offer educational experiences and opportunities that are differentiated so that we can support *all learners*. While some students will thrive in an online learning environment, this format is not effective for all students. In fact, many learners struggle in an online environment.

We are very concerned that requiring all students to complete four (4) out of 30 credits in an online environment will significantly hinder the ability for many of our students to graduate. While the Ministry of Education may view this as building resiliency, in our view, this would be setting up a portion of our students for failure.

Special Education

The recent decision of the provincial government to implement a consultation process with respect to the Ontario Autism Program was encouraging, albeit delayed. The initial proposed plan left families feeling understandably helpless and distraught. From our perspective, one of the aspects of the initial plan that was most concerning was the suggestion that schools and educators could provide the intensive therapy that is often needed to adequately support children with autism.

In the end, we remain hopeful that the provincial government will come to appreciate what this consultation process will certainly reveal: decisions to reduce supports for some of our most vulnerable students will have long-term negative impacts on all of our students.

Funding Cuts in General

As a Board, we have consistently demonstrated fiscal responsibility in the provision of programs and services for our students. Despite the fact that we are the lowest funded school board in Ontario, we have been able to effectively manage our resources with the ongoing focus of supporting the needs of our students. Our commitment to this focus can be evidenced in the success our students have experienced.

In a recent news release issued by the Government of Ontario, you are quoted as saying, *"We are putting our province on a path back to balance so that we can protect the core services that matter most - like education - while restoring fiscal sustainability to the people of Ontario."* With all due respect, Minister Thompson, while we appreciate the efforts of the provincial government to be fiscally responsible, we fail to understand how the proposed changes to education policy are protecting education. These strategies seem quite focused on creating efficiencies for today at the expense of tomorrow.

I would like to end this correspondence by sharing the hopes we first had when we came together as a new Board of Trustees in December, 2018. Eight of our nine elected trustees were brand new to the role, and we began our term with a sense of promise and excitement, prepared to work together to undertake our collective responsibility to ensure the delivery of quality education to the students entrusted to our care.

We attended the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association seminar at the end of January 2019, and had the opportunity to hear your first address to a room full of Catholic school trustees from across the province. Your comments about wanting to collaborate with Trustees and educational partners resonated deeply with us, and we left that seminar feeling very optimistic about our ability to work with the Ministry of Education over the next four years. Four months later, we are confused and disheartened.

And so, we join our voice with the voices of our colleagues across the province, some of whom have already expressed their formal concerns. It is our hope that you will take our comments and apprehensions under careful consideration. We would welcome an opportunity to work with you and your Ministry to find solutions that will truly benefit our students, and our future.

Sincerely,

Peter DeRosa
Chair of the Halton Catholic District School Board

References:

¹ Filges T., Sonne-Schmidt C.S., Klint Jorgensen, A.M. (2015). "Small class sizes for improving student achievement in primary and secondary schools: A systematic review." The Campbell Collaboration.

Krueger A., Whitmore D (2000). "The effect of attending a small class in the early grades on college-test taking and middle school test results: Evidence from Project STAR," NBER Working Papers 7656, National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc.

² Roehlkepartain E.C., Pekel K., Syvertsen A.K., Sethi J., Sullivan T.K., Scales P.C. (2017). "Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive." Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute. <http://page.searchinstitute.org/relationships-first-020217a>