

Dear Director Malloy, Ms. Gardner, Mr. Felsen, and the Board of Trustees,

We have attended your consultations and had discussions with many TDSB administrators and trustees to get more information about the proposed changes to Optional Attendance and Secondary Schools. We are very concerned about the lack of transparency in this process and how it will negatively impact students in the TDSB.

In official TDSB descriptions of the Secondary School Review, you write:

*“The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is undertaking a review of secondary schools to ensure all students have equitable access to programs and opportunities, as close to home as possible.*

*The vision of the Secondary Program Review, which will address both under and over-utilized schools, includes fewer schools with strong programming and increased access to courses that support all pathways. In order to achieve that, the Board will consider potential consolidation and/or relocation of schools, re-purposing secondary school buildings to address other system needs, and different models of school organization (e.g. full-year programming).”*

Your summaries and surveys use wordings of a general nature, with little concrete detail to respond to. They imply that your review is early in its “brainstorm” process, with no conclusions determined about “how” these broad goals will be achieved.

In fact, we have learned the opposite to be true. Pooling information gathered from private conversations with administration and trustees, this is what we understand is actually the plan: the TDSB’s over-arching goal is to “transform secondary schools” so that all or the vast majority of students attend only their “neighbourhood”, “right-sized” school (1100-1200 students). Each of these newly transformed schools will supposedly be able to immediately offer a full range of options to fit every diverse student’s academic, social, emotional, and other developmental needs.

To achieve this, TDSB plans to change sizes of schools, eliminate commercial and technical boundaries, change other boundaries, significantly reduce and likely eliminate optional attendance, and change specialty programs, attendance policies and locations in as yet undisclosed ways. In the future, a student’s placement would be determined only by where they live, with the rationale that by reducing options for everyone, this somehow achieves “equity”. This plan is scheduled to be submitted for final approval in June 2020.

We believe this plan is highly problematic for a number of reasons, including the following:

- We believe that such an approach would actually punish those whose neighbourhood school is not the best fit for their educational needs, by denying them access to options that would enable greater academic achievement and wellbeing.
- We believe that the current utilization rate of Optional Attendance by students (about 50%) is very significant, voluminous, and tangible feedback to the TDSB from tens of thousands of families about how diverse and important ‘fit’ is to developing adolescents. Every day teens and their families literally go the distance to attend better fitting schools for their academic success and mental wellbeing.

- We believe if parents, teachers, and principals were given this description of and detail about what the TDSB is considering, there would be significantly more feedback and engagement on this discussion, leading to better solutions.
- We believe, that for such sweeping change, an effective “feedback period” would need to include many, well-publicized large group, public forums to explain actual plans, have questions asked and answered, and hear other parents’ perspectives. In our opinion, it is problematic that the only in-person “consultations” were for a few hundred of about half a million TDSB parents in small groups last November, where no concrete plans were disclosed and feedback was not transparent. Furthermore, online “feedback opportunities” have been short-term, closed-box surveys and “consultations” that asked very non-specific questions with little actual material to comment on.
- We believe that the choice to not be transparent in sharing with the public detailed plans or feedback received is likely an intentional choice by the TDSB so it can claim that opportunities for feedback were held. In reality, the plans for change were developed apart from real consultation with a broad representation of the families and teachers in the TDSB.
- We believe it is a huge disservice to the public, especially the students and families who attend the TDSB, to exclude them from meaningful dialogue about transparent, detailed changes that directly impact their education, as consequences and better solutions are likely to be overlooked or misunderstood in the decision-making process without it.
- We believe it is unwise for the TDSB to also exclude teachers and principals from extensive, transparent, candid dialogue about concrete plans before considering any plans for such sweeping change to our secondary schools.
- We believe the plan we have perceived is poorly informed, will cause more harm than improvement, and will intentionally and unintentionally dismantle many robust, successful programs, environments, and secondary schools in the TDSB at the expense of the students.
- We speak on behalf of all the families at Northern who experience the immeasurable benefit of a school that uniquely and effectively meets the diverse needs of a diverse population. But, we believe our concerns are shared by parents of many other schools, where students’ ability to seek better fit in strong programs and schools allow them to reach their unique potential.

Yes, changes need to be made, and the problems are complex.

However, we ask for your thoughtful consideration of these questions:

- 1) We agree that smaller schools will have to and should close. But why not keep successful programs completely intact in their current forms, or consider expanding them to accommodate as many students as possible? For example, for schools that are in high demand, such as Northern and others, why wouldn’t you allow maximum enrolment that space allows to give every student the best opportunity to find their best fit?

- 2) Does the Board recognize the fact that “one school does not fit all” and that having choice between rich, diverse, mature programs in schools is an essential factor in the mental wellness and academic success of secondary students?
- 3) Would the Board please acknowledge that it takes years of growth, accumulated staff expertise, and critical mass of likeminded students to support the growth of new programs? We are concerned that students not be misled that new programs placed in schools will all be immediately effective and not just “programs in name only.” While the Board transitions to gradually close schools, these new programs can be cultivated and developed. But, while there is still excess space in the system, students should have the choice to find their best fit.
- 4) Will the Board hold many future, well-publicized, online and in person public feedback forums (town hall style), where parents can hear transparent, concrete proposals, ask questions, and hear each other’s perspectives exchanged before making decisions?
- 5) Since closing schools is not possible at this point with the provincial moratorium, what is the justification for making any changes to reduce Optional Attendance at this time, when it obviously serves a significant portion of the population successfully? While there are all these empty seats available, why isn’t the Board increasing access to Optional Attendance choices, in order to help students find their best “fit” regardless of where they live?

We, and the other parents at Northern Secondary School, look forward to your response.

Respectfully,

The Parents of Northern School Council