

Equity, Inclusion and Youth Empowerment

A Meeting with the OCDSB Chair, Director and
Community Leaders Advocating for Marginalized Students
March 4th, 2019; 3:30-5:00PM
133 Greenbank Road, Ottawa

A Follow-up Report on Where We Stand

Submitted to:
OCDSB Chair Lynn Scott and OCDSB Director Camille Williams-Taylor
Friday, March 8th, 2019



Those in attendance included the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board chair, director, 2 superintendents and a diverse group of community leaders who have a wealth of experience in education and social justice.

Statement

We are a diverse group of people passionately interested in helping to make Ottawa and its schools places where all children and youth have a sense of belonging and feelings of well-being, places where they have equal opportunities to appreciate their heritages and to learn what they need to know for the life they want to live. These community members have come together in response to the idea that a reason we have not made more progress improving the lives of young people is that we have been too disconnected. It is essentially the idea that it takes a village to raise a child and that we need to become that village.

The whole process of us coming together is an exercise in democracy, defined here as respect for human rights and how to strive together to ensure that the rights of no one are violated. It has been said that democratic governance is messy and the bigger our institutions get, the messier it gets. Problems, as much as possible need to be worked out at the grass roots level. This means empowering people to solve their own problems, empowering teachers to meet the needs of their students as they see fit, and empowering each student to unfold the blueprint that makes him or her unique.

With respect to education, relationships are the bottom line. When well-being is established, engaged learning follows. Feeling respected means having a meaningful say in decisions that affect us, and this is why democracy is messy. We don't all think the same. Our exercise in democracy is to work with all the variables, all the give and take, all the differences of opinion while never losing sight of our goal to provide the best possible, sustainable life for young people and future generations. We need groups like ours to rise to this challenge, to provide an example of democracy in action, and to resist any urge to power over others.

The following is an account of where our group stands at this time. It provides an example of how democracy is messy and time consuming. In the pursuit of expediency, an email was sent shortly after the meeting to community members who attended. The goal was to give the OCDSB chair and director a clear sense of what our group wants to see in the OCDSB 2019-2023 Strategic Plan and the spirit of the partnership that the plan needs to uphold. At this stage a clear picture is not realistic, but the following report carries a strong message that it is time for real change and that we have many respectable and capable people wanting to work with the OCDSB to make it happen. The continuation of what is basically status quo can no longer be tolerated.

No one is a spokesperson for the group. We speak for ourselves and what one of us says is not necessarily what another thinks. We also respect that people can feel, for whatever the reason, that it is not an appropriate time for them to speak out, yet they have valuable views to share. Good democratic practices require that we keep hearing them on their own terms.

- Working Document -
Feedback from the Monday Meeting

Please note that the thoughts shared below are those of people who have years of experience in education and/or community service. They are people who have thought extensively about how to address the issues of equity, inclusions and youth empowerment. The opinions they express are their own and not to be taken as those of organization to which they belong.

General Views:

- The OCDSB 2019-2023 Strategic Plan must be flexible to address changing circumstances.
- The OCDSB must be transparent and accountable in its service to the public.

Text of the email sent to participants subsequent to the meeting

Good Morning all attendees,

By all accounts, our meeting on Monday was an encouraging start to making some real progress with our treatment of children and youth. We now have to make sure that it does not become just a moment of hope. The process of creating the OCDSB 2019-2023 Strategic Plan is nearing completion and we need to ensure it addresses our concerns, and so we want to be specific about our “asks”.

Our asks have previously been circulated within our group. No one has expressed objections, and some have expressed support. We need to know that we have general agreement on them so that our efforts do not dissolve into people saying, “That is not what I understood.”

You are therefore being asked to provide us your feedback. Below is the current list of asks, slightly modified from Monday’s handout after exchanges with Mante Molepo and Richard Sharpe. We need to know if you are OK with them, **what additions and/or deletions you suggest and other thoughts you have.** We hope to present to the board by Friday concrete ideas about what we hope to see in the Strategic Plan. We’re not trying to establish a firmly agreed to set of demands, but rather to take a significant next step in our efforts together. These asks will become more refined and fleshed out over time and with your feedback.

Asks

1. We ask to be meaningfully consulted regarding the appointment of the following:

- a. a superintendent responsible for equity, inclusion and youth empowerment. This person would have a genuine appreciation for, and experience with, marginalized people.
 - b. a superintendent responsible for systemic innovation. This person would be a well-informed visionary passionate about bringing public education in line with the times.
2. With regards to data, we ask to be at the table at all stages to help ensure the proper collection and use of data.
3. We ask for the creation of a systemic innovation advisory committee including teachers and community members to work with the systemic innovation superintendent, and that we have a say in the composition of that committee.
4. We ask that innovative teachers who are pursuing, or who want to pursue, new directions be strongly supported. The systemic innovation advisory committee would facilitate all that this involves.
5. We ask that the board proactively build awareness of learning environments that promote equity and well-being for all students.
6. We ask for the implementation of pilot programs in partnership with researchers to develop the vision of a new age for learning and how to best transition public education to that vision. Pilot programs originating from innovative teachers are viewed as the most likely to succeed if properly supported.
7. We ask for the development of different ways to include all people in their community schools. This involves going to where they are, rather than having them come to you. It involves a full appreciation of equity, inclusion, youth empowerment, and a whole-hearted celebration of our Canadian mosaic.
8. We ask for timely answers to questions such as how much money is spent on lawyers and fancy documents so that we might offer advice on how the funds could be better spent.

Richard Sharpe said, "What I think bodes well for us and our meeting Monday is the broad and rich nature of the coalition. If this group can continue to be harnessed it will be difficult to ignore."

Feedback from this email

Brief quotes:

- "I agree with all of the proposed asks."
- "I support all the key points."
- "I am in agreement with everything said here."
- "I enthusiastically support these asks."
- "It all sounds good to me, vague, but I think that is a good thing."
- "This looks very good to me, at first glance."
- "I'm in favour of pursuing all of these asks."
- "The Superintendent of equity MUST have lived experience with discrimination."

- “I'd like to add that the OCDSB formally apologize to Vania and Winston Karam. (See also Emeka NDUKWE's comments below.)
- “Data: it's not just about being at the table but about the board applying the standards that set out how to collect data.”
- “With regards to data, we need to be at the table at all stages of this work.”
- “The word ‘Asks’ tends to suggest a parent-child relationship with the board being the authority. Perhaps the word should be ‘Expectations’ to remind everyone that the board is the servant of the people.”

Longer statements:

Amira Elghawaby

From my perspective and experience working with other school boards in the past, I find that we need to be asking the Board to provide regular reporting on its work ensuring curricula is delivered through an equity lens. That books, teaching materials reflect our communities in all their diversity. At the moment, my experience with public school teachers is that there really is no expectation for them to do any extra work ensuring that their teaching incorporates diversity in any way.

Joe Veryard

I am not sure if the reflective tool for principals which I had highlighted for you would address, at least in part, the issue that Amira has raised. If nothing else, I would welcome the thoughts of members of the group as to the value of such a tool (and improvements that could be suggested). I could relay the information to the team of people with whom I had worked on its development. The link for the tool is:

<https://www.continuumeie.com/>

Nira Dookeran

A written summary of my views, as both staff and parent, would include:

1. need for review of hiring, retention, promotion, and mentoring practices vis-a-vis equity and inclusiveness (including tracking and disaggregating data by gender, ethnicity, age, and ability);
2. an ombuds role and process (separate and distinct from the board's HR and Employee Wellness depts.), which may complement those processes but be empowered to investigate claims of preference, discrimination, harassment and bullying, etc. as an independent or arm's length body;
3. a regular, comprehensive, meaningful and board wide system training in cultural competence (not ad hoc in reaction to so-called “isolated incidents”, but proactive and embedded and implemented in board policy and practice at all levels as an ESSENTIAL SKILL SET for promotion and leadership within our organization).

From the perspective of a teacher within the system, these priorities are key to making and sustaining long-term change within the OCDSB.

Rachel Décoste

The only things which I feel are missing, and I am willing to admit I am not an expert so this may be a moot point.

1. permanent **funding** for mandatory diversity curriculum activities and programs for students (not for teachers). Diversity = for Black Canadian content, Asian-Canadian content).
2. system to address racism and racist behaviour that includes meaningful punishment

Emeka NDUKWE

Asks (Bold text highlights Emeka's input.)

1. We ask to be meaningfully consulted regarding the appointment of the following:
 - a. a **Senior Superintendent or an Associate Director with supporting staff** responsible for equity, **maintenance of a level playing-field** and youth empowerment. **Such an officer will regularly liaise with both the Board Chair and Director under her/his purview, in addition to issuing one well-researched report on the equity file every six months.** This person would have a genuine appreciation for, and experience with, marginalized people. **A level playing field in the hiring, mentoring, retention and promotion of marginalized staff would require a seismic paradigm-shift which would stop the tail (aka the unions) from wagging the dog (aka School Board, the employer.)**
2. With regards to data, we ask to be at the table at all stages to help ensure the proper collection, **analysis** and use of data.
5. We ask that the board proactively build awareness of learning **and work** environments that promote equity, **welcoming atmosphere** and well-being for all students, **staff, parents and guardians.**
7. We ask for the development of different ways to include all people in their community schools. This involves going to where they are, rather than having them come to you. It involves a full appreciation of equity, inclusion, youth empowerment, and a whole-hearted celebration of our Canadian mosaic. **Serious thought should be given to a policy of organizing community consultations and other similar activities/events in different parts of the entire District. Other factors to be considered are accessibility by public transit and the sizes of available auditoria, halls and gyms.**

8. We ask for timely answers to questions such as how much money is spent on lawyers and **colourful, eye-catching publications**, so that we might offer advice on how the funds could be better spent. **Any high school graduate should be able to easy to identify both line items in the Budget; they should not be cleverly embedded or buried in the pages of a bulky or padded document.**

#APOLOGYTOWINSTONKARAM

OCDSB leadership should chart a new course in its 'modus operandi' by issuing an apology to Winston KARAM and Vania, his mother. This duo persevered and won a precedent-setting case against the Board for failing to uphold Winston's rights, when he was bullied. Check out the article via the weblink below.

<https://www.therecord.com/news-story/6773614-family-wins-precedent-setting-case-against-public-school-board/>

I think one important next step among others would be to set up a performance-monitoring outfit, preferably with a user-friendly website. The overarching goal would be to nudge OCDSB Trustees and senior management along the path of accountability and transparency. The third leg of this tripod would be a combination of respect for divergent views, the courage to take full responsibility for proven misdeeds and make adequate, appropriate and necessary amends. It could be called Ottawa Education Observatory to be run by a small team of dedicated community advocates and volunteers. Students from all school boards could help to receive, transcribe, register and store messages/reports, in order earn the mandatory hours of volunteer service required for obtaining their high school diplomas.

Emeka NDUKWE (from an earlier email)

Curriculum change has been the central focus of my active participation as a volunteer in the Community Council for Ethno-cultural Equity (CCEE), which ventually morphed into the present Advisory Committee on Equity (ACE). The School Board employees who attend the Committee's meeting have repeatedly countered with the usual one-liner that it's a provincial matter, which therefore, falls under the purview of the Ministry of Education. I've always countered by assertively denouncing and exposing the falsehood, convoluted and warped pseudo-logic behind this frivolous and lame excuse because of my firm belief that where there's a will, there's a way.

Since my arrival here in 2001 as a senior diplomat at the Nigerian High Commission, I've always seized every opportunity to engage in casual and frank conversations on this topic with immigrants from the African continent and Canadians of African Descent. This group includes a large number of current students, recent graduates, and employees (academic, administrative/non-academic staff) of the publicly-funded education system. In this context, 'system' refers to Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, Ottawa Catholic School Board, and the French language school boards

(Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario - CEPEO, and Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est - CECCE). I've heard and continue to hear two major strands of the same familiar refrain I hear all the time:

- Complete and deep-rooted reform of the entire school curriculum will effectively shift the paradigm without the possibility of triggering interminable, divisive, passionate debate/polemics and generating interracial violence;
- "We're tired of always having to explain and justify our presence and legitimate actions in the classroom and school environment." This irksome situation is worsened by the trauma of excessive, relentless and inescapable round-the-clock 24/7 surveillance within the school premises and the larger society. One student graphically illustrated it with the apt and telling metaphor of living in a small, ubiquitous glass dome or glasshouse.

In my view, a thoroughgoing reform of the highly Eurocentric curriculum is long overdue. It could be either gradual or seismic. I'm in favour of a gradual approach, provided it won't take another four hundred years to set the captives (aka 'racially bullied, marginalized, oppressed, repressed, psychologically terrorized, excessively and traumatized groups') free. No matter how one slices it in the 21st century, there is no reason whatsoever for continuing to teach and treat the experiential narratives of the aforementioned groups as tiny footnotes in "history = his story." The experience of the other groups, their rich heritage and the contributions to humanity **ARE NOT** mere appendages of the European settlers' story in North, Central and South America.

Joe Veryard

Asks (The red text is Joe's input.)

1. We ask to be meaningfully consulted regarding the appointment of the following:
 - a. a superintendent responsible for equity, inclusion and youth empowerment. This person would have a genuine appreciation for, and experience with, marginalized people.
 - b. a superintendent responsible for systemic innovation. This person would be a well-informed visionary passionate about bringing public education in line with the times. **I have provided you with some of my thoughts on this in earlier communications. I am sure that everyone realizes that being consulted does not translate to an assurance that all of the recommendations provided by the group will be incorporated into the decisions regarding SO appointments. As well, it is likely that an existing SO would be taking this role on, in addition to an already existing portfolio.**
2. With regards to data, we ask to be at the table at all stages to help ensure the proper collection and use of data. **I guess that the main challenge here would be in**

- how to go about ensuring that the questions, concerns and suggestions of the whole group are brought to the table, if a place at the table was allotted to the group. Turnaround time to collect input prior to sitting down at the board table would be key.
3. We ask for the creation of a systemic innovation advisory committee including teachers and community members to work with the systemic innovation superintendent, and that we have a say in the composition of that committee. Given the important role that partnerships and relationships play in assisting in the development of youth to face our 21st Century reality, this type of approach would seem to be of great benefit. As one stakeholder group, albeit representing a diverse range of interests, it could be anticipated that there would be limitations to the degree of input the group would be allowed, I am assuming.
 4. We ask that innovative teachers who are pursuing, or who want to pursue, new directions be strongly supported. The systemic innovation advisory committee would facilitate all that this involves.
 5. We ask that the board proactively build awareness of learning environments that promote equity and well-being for all students. I wonder, again, if the reflective tool that I had mentioned would be of some benefit in this area.
 6. We ask for the implementation of pilot programs in partnership with researchers to develop the vision of a new age for learning and how to best transition public education to that vision. Pilot programs originating from innovative teachers are viewed as the most likely to succeed if properly supported. My thoughts here would be similar to those I expressed in response to #3.
 7. We ask for the development of different ways to include all people in their community schools. This involves going to where they are, rather than having them come to you. It involves a full appreciation of equity, inclusion, youth empowerment, and a whole-hearted celebration of our Canadian mosaic. I think that this is a good idea and one that I incorporated, with some success, at one of my urban schools. I would also suggest that it would be beneficial, along these same lines, to look for creative ways to engage parents, representative of the school community, in existing structures such as School Councils.
 8. We ask for timely answers to questions such as how much money is spent on lawyers and fancy documents so that we might offer advice on how the funds could be better spent. I realize that lawyers and documents were two of the focus areas that came out of the discussion. Would it be easier to simply ask for transparency in terms of all budget allocations? There might be other areas that end up being of interest in the future and a look at the "whole" might allow for a better picture than looking at isolated sections of the budget. It might also allow those looking at the budget to see where the money could be moved to and not just where it should be taken from.

Richard Sharpe said, "What I think bodes well for us and our meeting Monday is the broad and rich nature of the coalition. If this group can continue to be harnessed it will be difficult to ignore." At this point, it is more important for us to take a next step, not the perfect step. We need to step towards perfection over time in the usual back and forth and

sideways manner, but never stop stepping. I agree with Richard's statement, again with the understanding that there can be challenges in trying to address the needs of all members of this diverse group. It is certainly a worthwhile endeavour in which to engage though.

Thank you for your time and support. My apologies for rushing you. We're creating another moment of hope. Again, the thoughts included here are my own and do not represent the position of Youth Ottawa. I hope that at least some of this feedback that I have provided is of value.