

Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board
156 Ann Street, Belleville, ON K8N 3L3

January 17, 2023

Dear HPEDSB Trustees,

I am contacting you on behalf of the below signed Adventure Class (AC) Parents. We feel that there are ethical and professional conduct transgressions occurring within HPEDSB regarding the process in which the AC is being reviewed. These incidents require the urgent attention and immediate action of the Trustees.

The AC Parents and members of the community were informed that the program would be under review. It was stated that this review would be conducted by a researcher, and would inform the decision to continue or cancel the AC. On Friday (Jan 13, 2023), the AC Parent Board Liaison, Principal Bellwood, and QVS School Council Chair met with Superintendent Elliott, Superintendent Niemi, and Heather Truscott. Ms. Truscott has been selected to complete the review of the AC. However, it is not clear why she was hired, as Ms. Truscott has zero credentials or formal training in program assessment or research. Was there a job posting and selection committee?

The Evaluation Design Framework states that data collected will undergo a Thematic Analysis. This process requires an appropriately qualified and credentialed reviewer. A qualified reviewer will have sufficient formal training and experience in conducting program assessments and research. Does Ms. Truscott possess these qualifications? Has she previously utilised the software needed to analyse data both quantitatively and qualitatively (like SPSS or NVivo)? Has she conducted a quantitative or qualitative analysis before? The answer is no. Considering that this review will have a significant impact on current and future HPEDSB students and families, whether it is refined or discontinued, an experienced reviewer/researcher must be hired. Ms. Truscott indicated in the above-mentioned meeting that her job will be to “correlate, capture, and share her perceptions with the Board” and that raw data will be provided to the Board employees. “Perceptions” and raw data are not equivalent to a data-driven Thematic Analysis conducted by an unbiased and experienced researcher. Yet, it seems that the senior leadership at the Board believe that Ms. Truscott’s “perceptions” are a suitable substitute. When asked about the time and resource requirements to complete the review, Ms. Truscott stated that this had not yet been determined. How can a consultant be engaged for a contract when the scope and time commitment required is undetermined? Also, the parents’ representative asked to have another parent attend the meeting as well, they were told this was not allowed. Is there a fear of scrutiny of the process? It must further be noted that Director MacIver and Ms. Truscott have a well-documented prior working relationship. This is a significant and egregious conflict of interest. These questionable decisions must be investigated and addressed.

Further, the framework itself is highly flawed. It was created by graduate students, as a special class project – this is clearly stated in the evaluation framework. Are we to understand that the best practice in program evaluation is an untested student project? Surely other boards must have engaged in similar reviews. The HPEDSB Senior Leadership Team feels that the fate of its Special Programs should be determined by a handful of university students and a retired teacher/consultant from a neighbouring board? Of course, the framework was created with valid assessment strategies in mind; however, these strategies were interpreted by students. The strategies included in the framework do not mirror best practices supported by professionals within the field. A quick review of the academic literature, which the framework was “based” upon, will reveal that more data collection is required to conduct a thorough program evaluation.

It is clear that there are ethical concerns with the way in which the review of the Adventure Class is progressing. The AC Community is not trying to prevent a review from being conducted, but instead strives

to ensure that the review is conducted in an ethical and valid manner. There is no doubt from this community that the positive outcomes of the AC will come to light.

The AC could be made to be more equitable, and this is not the responsibility of the parents and teachers of this program. Making the program more accessible lies at the feet of the Board. There are barriers that prevent every family from joining who wishes for their child to learn in a multi-grade, experiential, outdoor classroom environment. Reducing these barriers for these families is the Board's responsibility. By adding the AC Program to other schools within the Board, offering busing to students who live far from QVS (or wherever the program is offered), and educating HPEDSB staff on the merits and benefits of multi-age/multi-grade learning, the Board can begin breaking down the barriers they, themselves, have put in place.

As members of the HPEDSB Community, it is our duty – yours and ours – to ensure access to the best possible learning opportunities for our children. Canceling the Adventure Class Program will not only jeopardize the learning trajectories of the students currently within it, but also those to come. The AC Program is not for every child, but it IS for our children, as well as many other children within HPEDSB. It is the place where these children feel heard; feel safe; feel empowered; feel part of a strong, supportive community; feel secure to learn in their own ways and in showing others their true selves. Let's expand the AC Program and capture more alternative learners who may experience unsurmountable obstacles within other classrooms.

A program evaluation requires a professional who is knowledgeable, experienced, and without conflicts of interest. Ms. Truscott fulfills none of these requirements. If the conduct throughout this program evaluation process does not draw the attention, oversight, and action from the HPEDSB Trustees, then we do not know what else would. If in the end, the review ends with a closure of the program, we will continue to advocate as best we can for rich, diverse alternative education in HPEDSB. The Board owes itself a transparent, fair, and ethical program review tool. Is that what it's getting?

Additionally, senior leadership has created an extremely tight timeline, and staff and families need to make decisions for the 2023/2024 school year very shortly. By forcing students and parents to sit in a space of uncertainty for years, then conducting a hasty review, an extreme strain has been placed on the mental health and wellness of the students and the community. The Board's lack of empathy and understanding of this is cruel and clearly shows they are not considering their stakeholders. The Adventure Class should move with the rest of QVS school community to Easthill Elementary, and an appropriate review must happen then.

Who will hold HPEDSB Employees accountable when questionable decisions are made that will significantly impact the education and lives of students? Who will advocate for these students and their families? If not the HPEDSB Trustees, we will seek out someone who will.

Your attention to this matter would be appreciated.

Sincerely,

Rachael Bertram, Tara Bertram, Keelin Mayer, Shane Mayer, Elisa Palmer, Brice McCarrell, Lee Turner, Christy Mays Turner, Andrea Mulvihill, Kerry Vadneau, Kevin Clarke, Sean Tait, Jennifer Gibson, Ema Katirae, Galen Nuttall, Candice Pilgrim, Jeremy McCoy, Jocelyn Plane, Bryce Armstrong, Dineen Morrison-White, Karlie Cowie, Yassabi Siwakoti, Anna Siwakoti, Sonja Lawrence, James Lawrence, Erin Mullarky, Amanda Taylor, Kim Burke, Joe Jackson, Lindsay Poyner, Matt Poyner, Nathan Bowland

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