

Letter to the Editor
January 8, 2023

The decision to close Belleville's Adventure Class is a misapplication of the definition of equity if ever there was one.

How many times have you, as a child, or a parent, or a member of a child's extended community, thought or said out loud, "public education should be able to meet the needs of my kid" or "why isn't there a program for that?"

The Adventure Class, a program run publicly in the Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board, hits the needs of children and students like a utopian vision of public education. It was started 37 years ago as a joint effort by the school board and a group of parents who wanted to see learning happen for their children in less traditional, more experiential ways. More hands on, if you will.

The program offers:

- Inclusion into a local school, with all that entails, like classroom amenities, participation in school events, assemblies, extra-curricular teams, et cetera;
- A multi-grade class for grades 1, 2, 3, and then for grades 4, 5, 6;
- Opportunity for parent and extended family involvement, with open schedule for in-class volunteering, field trip chaperoning, and behind the scenes supporting;
- Regularized field trips, using community space and community resources; and,
- An outdoor education component.
-

The AC runs in accordance with Ministry education standards, and follows the Ontario curriculum. The children are subject to EQAO testing.

The AC is multi-grade, expanding the touchpoints of how it is able to meet the learning needs of children without pinpointing learning differences like the sore thumb labelling of "loser" many of us remember from our own traumatic bullying experiences of being different in classroom that demanded conformity.

Instead, children practice leadership, team building, empathy, and multi-age integration, with stellar adult guidance and modelling for unification and community building by a diverse demographic of families.

The AC offers opportunity for family involvement unparalleled in the public setting, with an open-door policy, teachers who know the kids well, care for them deeply, and see the parents as a resource to tap into as they guide the children's learning in open, experiential, and creative ways. It's everything you'd want a classroom to be and more. As if the founders of the AC had a crystal ball to see the need for raising and teaching children in a climate crisis, the program has a hefty community based and outdoor component, with community and environmental stewardship baked into the operation of it. Like I said, utopian public education. The sort of stuff that parents are homeschooling to find or pulling their children out of public school to pay for.

And it is on offer publicly in Belleville, Ontario, though it is hidden from public view and not advertised by the Board. It *should* be the crowning jewel of the Board: celebrated and held out as an example to other school boards of what can be possible and how to engage children and their families in a self-sustaining way.

There's a waiting list of 30 children who want to get into the class. So, there's a clear need and desire for this program and education that is delivered in this way. It costs no more to run than any other classroom costs.

And the Board has made a decision to cancel the program, on the basis that it is not *equitable*.

The program requires parents who do not live in the school catchment area to drive their children to and from school every day. It invites parent and family involvement. It is accurate to say that the success of the program is in large part due to that parent involvement. Though it is voluntary, some parents elect not to apply to the program if they cannot commit their time.

Everything the AC does to try and address the claims of inequity either strips the class of its core operations and pulls it further from its foundations, or, it is used against the program.

Rather than finding creative and realistic solutions to the identified barriers for other families who would participate but for some reason cannot, as the principles of equity would demand, the Board has instead replaced some of the practices, fundamentally changing the way the AC works.

Now, the admission into the AC is by blind draw, eliminating a pool of parents who want to be involved in their children's education, stripping the family participation away and jeopardizing the organic self-sustaining way the program runs.

Now, siblings of admitted students are no longer guaranteed admission to the program, forcing parents to make hard choices about what their families can accommodate – are they able to do school drop off and pick up in two different schools? Are they comfortable as a family agreeing one of their children can have access to the program while the other(s) are held behind in classroom environments not nearly as enriching? It jeopardizes enrollment.

Now, if students perform well, it's because the program offers them more than the rest of the students in the Board, so it should stop. But if students don't perform well, it's because the program isn't meeting their learning needs.

The AC just can't win for losing. And now, the Board is simply going to cancel it altogether.

The decision is a bit jealous really, though, isn't it? Sort of like saying "if I can't have it, then no one can" while maniacally dropping a big ole "cancel bomb" on a program that provides so much value to the students in it and isn't causing anyone any harm. A total misapplication of the principle of equity.

Equity requires a removal of barriers for those unable to access a service, not an arbitrary erection of barriers upon those who can. Or worse, a total obliteration of something good for the purpose of leveling the playing field at mediocre.

#savetheadventureclass #STAC #multigradelearning #ittakesavillage