



April 9, 2019

Honourable Lisa Thompson  
Minister of Education  
22nd Floor  
900 Bay Street  
Toronto, ON, M7A 1L2

To the Honourable Lisa Thompson, Minister of Education,

On Wednesday, April 3, 2019, the Board of Trustees of the Halton District School Board directed the Chair to write a letter on behalf of the Board of Trustees to the Minister of Education. The letter was to express funding, program and consultation concerns relating to recent education announcements, as well as some of the longer standing challenges experienced by the Halton District School Board. Our concerns regarding the announcements made on March 15 are largely with the impact of the systemic changes proposed.

**The Vision for the Halton District School Board is “Every student will explore and enhance their potential, passions and strengths to thrive as contributing global citizens”.**

This vision will be challenged by the proposed changes. The provincial government has a mandate of fiscal responsibility and debt reduction. Boards must present a balanced budget each year with the grants designated by the province. At the same time, Trustees must maintain focus on student achievement and well-being (Education Act s2018.1g) and assist the board in delivering effective and appropriate education programs to its pupils (Education Act s169.1c). We believe the proposed changes threatens our ability to fulfil this responsibility.

The breadth and depth of the proposed systemic changes, coupled with a lack of specific details have left a sense of uncertainty leaving the board, staff and the community to worry and speculate. Uncertainty and apprehension do not help to support confidence in this critical sector -- Public Education. As such, we suggest a “pause” on a number of the proposed systemic changes to fully consult with education partners to find creative solutions that could possibly lead to cost savings and/or system efficiencies.

For effective change management, we suggest additional collaboration with education stakeholders in order to ensure best practices are incorporated and decisions are evidence-based. Education funding and programs must be based on student needs. We are also aware collective agreements are coming to an end and we fear that if further measured consideration is not given, the education sector will experience great uncertainty during the next school year. This will unfortunately jeopardize the stability our students, staff and communities deserve.

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With this in mind, we offer the following comments and suggestions.

### **Increased Class Sizes**

The Halton District School Board vision will be negatively impacted with the proposed increases in class size averages at the secondary level rising from 22 to 28 students. Minister Thompson, you stated that your personal consultations have revealed that the ideal class size lies between 26 and 28 students. In order to maintain the 28-student class average, specialized courses with lower enrolment or smaller classes with students who have high needs that have a 10 to 20 student class size will mean that other courses have very high class sizes of 36 to 46 students. This situation will inevitably lead to eliminating course offerings with low enrollment, even though those courses may be the top choice for some students. Expected course offering losses will be felt most in classes with marginalized and at-risk students, upper-year arts, specialized math, and skilled trades and technology courses, all of which are largely unsuited for the online environment. Furthermore, we must comply with the course size requirements outlined in existing collective agreements to ensure safe and healthy workplaces for students and staff.

The Halton District School Board maintains a class size maximum of 20 students in transportation, construction and other courses that use machinery. This is in response to recommendations from a Coroner's Inquest due to a tragic in-class event a number of years ago. It is imperative that we continue to honour the recommendations of this Inquest. There will be less flexibility and ability to support these smaller classes which will lead to course cancellations. The Halton District School Board will find itself in a position of not being able to offer a course because enrollment numbers are too low or not being able to offer a course because the enrollment numbers are too high, resulting in safety concerns.

### **STEM Focus**

We acknowledge an ongoing focus of this Ministry on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM). While those subject areas are important, it is our belief and the experience of many successful and visionary individuals and companies that the arts, social sciences and humanities are equally as important. In practice, multidisciplinary teams are brought together to solve some of the most challenging issues.

### **Four Centrally Administered Online Courses Requirement**

The Trustees of the Halton District School Board are deeply concerned about the proposed requirement of centralized online courses students will need to take to receive their O.S.S.D. We are curious and interested in reviewing the peer-reviewed research which provides evidence for this profound change in curriculum delivery. Moreover, how does it increase student achievement and well-being?

There has been some suggestion there will be an opt-out option for students, but no details have been shared. Specific concerns are related to equity, differentiated learning needs and managing board resources. Some students will not have access to computers and the internet. In addition, evidence within the Halton District School Board suggests online learning is not the right choice for every student, as they learn more effectively in teacher-facilitated face-to-face settings. If students are not successful in the online learning environment, there will be personal and detrimental academic costs to them, financial costs to boards and implications for higher education and job sectors.

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The Halton District School Board is among several boards that has built significant capacity and expertise in developing and delivering online courses. The announcement indicates that boards themselves would no longer be delivering these courses. If this is the plan, we suggest the Ministry investigate a system that would utilize the already existing resources and expertise for the benefit of Ontario students who choose online education.

### **Additional Budget Pressures**

During the past few months, a number of memos and announcements have compounded budget pressures for the Halton District School Board. The reduction and/or loss of Education Programs Other (EPO) grants and other allocations severely decreased supports for local priorities and students at risk.

At the April 3, 2019 Board meeting, Trustees received a (HDSB) 2019/2020 Budget Development Process Update from the Superintendent of Business Services. As part of the report, the following was stated:

“Based on the limited information currently available, it is estimated that the funding reduction will amount to \$18.7 million (or 2.7%) of the provincial allocation, with approximately \$10.7 million (or 1.5%) reduction outside of class size adjustments. These calculations are subject to change as the GSN is released. This figure includes \$6.7 million in local priorities funding... [The] HDSB is reassessing how programs and services are delivered, in order to continue to support student learning within available means.”

As mentioned previously, the Trustee mandate is to maintain focus on student achievement and well-being (Education Act s.2018.1(g)) and assist the Board in delivering effective and appropriate education programs to its pupils (Education Act s.169.1(c)). We are concerned our exemplary results will not be replicated in the face of ongoing, cumulative impacts. Staff are highly trained professionals. The uncertainty and resource reductions that staff are facing are not respectful of the critical role they play in education or conducive to the stable and innovative environment that we are trying to foster.

### **Consultation Process**

The Trustees of the Halton District School Board implore the Ministry of Education and related Ministries to investigate and research issues thoroughly, and meaningfully consult with all partners prior to making large scale decisions and announcements. Each time an announcement is made, with consultation following it, we are put into a reactionary position, and scarce resources are redirected to try to determine what the local implications will be. Our focus should be on providing proactive, visionary and strategic direction to our system.

A recent example is related to the Ontario Autism Program. In early February, announcements of the radical funding model change forced school boards to divert limited resources to delve into possible student support scenarios and brace for ramifications. Despite boards being a key partner in delivering change, there was little to no advance consultation from the Ministry of Education. We are thankful the Government has recently taken a step back to study the issue with experts, to consult with affected families, and instituting a six month extension to the status quo.

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The Class Size Consultation Guide and the School Board Hiring Practices Consultation Guide released by the Ministry (comment deadline of May 31, 2019 after staffing decisions and class sectioning would have usually taken place) both list that the goals to guide decision making include “Student Achievement: Success and well-being of every child” and “Evidence-based Decision Making: Grounded in sound policy, inter-jurisdictional scan, and empirical research”. The Trustees of the Halton District School Board respectfully request evidence that these goals are in fact the focus of these consultations as drastic decisions seem to have already been made without sincere consideration of either stated goal.

We ask that school boards and all education partners be at the table prior to future announcements so we can explore how we can maintain Ontario as a global leader in education.

### **Financial Literacy and Indigenous Education**

The Trustees of the Halton District School Board thank the Minister and Ministry of Education for recognizing the need for improvements in both Financial Literacy and Indigenous Education within the Province of Ontario. Both of these issues have been spoken about frequently at the Halton District School Board table and their inclusion within the curriculum is praised. Ongoing and meaningful consultation with Indigenous leaders is necessary to develop strong relationships for reconciliation and to ensure that the truth of the past, the implications for the present and opportunities of the future are taught in all Ontario classrooms.

### **Halton District School Board Context**

Our letter and concerns are rooted in the necessity to support all students. Our existing context already makes this challenging. The Halton District School Board has been the lowest or near lowest funded school board, based on per pupil funding, for many years. Further, when the phase-in of the 2014 Special Education formula was completed, our Board received a \$20M annual reduction in support. As a result, the Halton District School Board overspends yearly in Special Education to meet student needs. We believe that the Ministry formulae are not reflecting the growth in our Board, the increase in poverty rates and student needs.

Last year, the Halton District School Board also suffered a financial loss when our Education Development Charges by-law lapsed due to a lack of Ministry approval. While the by-law was eventually renewed, the allowed rate does not reflect the cost of land, resulting in a loss in excess of \$3M in revenue which is targeted for the purchase of new school properties. We are grateful that the Ministry has now put in place a process whereby boards can increase their development charges rates, however, there is no mechanism to recuperate the incurred losses.

### **Conclusion**

Above all else, the Halton District School Board strives to uphold our vision that “every student will explore and enhance their potential, passions and strengths to thrive as contributing global citizens.” The changes proposed by the Ministry, coupled with our existing context, make this very challenging.

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We encourage the inclusion of student voice in any change. When we listened to students who participated in local demonstrations about education changes, they were very articulate in expressing their concerns for their academic achievement and their futures. They spoke about the increased class sizes, the potential loss of optional credits in the arts and technology areas, mandatory e-learning, and changes to OSAP.

The Halton District School Board seeks to be a creative and collaborative partner with the Ministry of Education, all education partners and our communities in the fiscally responsible delivery of effective and appropriate programs that will promote student achievement and well-being. We ask the Ministry to revisit recent proposals and funding cuts, and to consult with its education partners in a meaningful and timely way to ensure proposed changes in education match what is best for the students and the future of Ontario.

Sincerely,



Andréa Grebenc  
Chair of the Board of Trustees, Halton District School Board

Cc: Ted Arnott, MPP  
Stephen Crawford, MPP  
Parm Gill, MPP  
Jane McKenna, MPP  
Effie Triantafilopoulos, MPP  
Ontario Public School Board Association  
Ontario Student Trustees' Association  
HDSB Board of Trustees  
HDSB Senior Staff  
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