

June 19/2021

Dear Trustees of the OCDSB:

Let me begin this letter by thanking the Trustees who voted to terminate the relationship with the SRO program. I was a Social Worker who worked for over 31 years with the school board. I view this decision as of historical proportions, timely and necessary.

Historically, the SRO'S were linked to the Safe Schools program initiated by the Harris government. I believe this program was fundamentally flawed from the beginning. A heavy handed zero tolerance program such as this failed many of our students, and caused traumatic injury to them and their families. When the program was initiated, there were no deep conversations with the students and the community on what this response should look like. Once the SRO program was established, school administrators got increasingly dependent on them when dealing with high risk and possibly criminally involved students. The lines got more blurred. Discipline matters that used to be dealt with within the school, increasingly involved the police. Besides traumatizing and alienating students (particularly our racialized and L2SGBTQ+ students), these students who already had a problematic relationship with school, would only avoid it more.

As a society we are becoming more aware of institutionalized racism in police organizations. It is critical that we stop playing a role in allowing access of our students to such possibilities.

As a school Social Worker I witnessed first hand, the traumatic impact that the SRO's and police had on minoritized students in particular, as well as with the general student population and their families. Frequently, I met with students following an intervention with the SRO and they would be in tears or enraged as they shared their experience. As a social worker, I would have to do risk assessments and interventions after there was a critical incident at school. When interviewing the student and their families

afterwards, they would inform me on what the impact was after the police intervention. I am also thinking about times when the police would arrive with a warrant and interrupt a class to remove a student. Such students were forced onto the ground and handcuffed in front of their peers. Sometimes their weapons were drawn. These students were arrested for crimes that had occurred in the community and were attending school after the incident had happened. Some of these students had previous traumas with police involvement and other community services. This would only add to the pain they experienced. Certainly I also saw some instances of helpful interventions, but the most high risk students were often left traumatized and therefore, further alienated from school. The same can be said with their peers and friends at school who witnessed this. Oftentimes parents would also be traumatized by these events.

Being part of a team in Learning Support Services at the OCDSB, I could be involved in the crisis response in my schools related to student violence, threats and risks. As part of the follow up to those situations, I acknowledge that I also caused harm to students when intervening with the SRO's, as I was perceived as their ally. The Board should never allow this again where school board staff are compromised when assisting in police interventions. It has to be a separate process.

The OCDSB is at a crossroads and I believe this is a significant opportunity to create and implement an alternative crisis response program. The intervention strategy for students who are at risk to themselves and others, needs to be both compassionate and effective. Solely punitive measures have to be removed from the response plans.

The motion requesting the City for the the funding of an alternative crisis team to assist the OCDSB in responding to the situations that involve student safety, is long overdue and sorely needed. It also has to be part of a comprehensive and integrated response that makes connection and engagement with the students as the starting point. It is only through the

building of compassionate relationships with the students and their families, that OCDSB staff will be able to effectively and safely intervene with the high risk students.

In my opinion, currently there is still too much siloing and fragmentation in crisis services and responses. While there is already a Youth Crisis Team through YSB, there needs to be more resources allocated there and connected with the OCDSB services. Just like the integration of Youth Mental Health services through 1 Call 1 click, there needs to be something like that in the area of crisis response. OCDSB Social Workers, Psychologists and other staff in Learning Support Services need to be part of this newly created response. They and other front line staff at the Board have relationships with the students, crisis response training (they will require more of this) and knowledge of the school system. That is why they need to be part of any type of crisis response community team around student safety issues. Team members have already done numerous crisis interventions around safety that have not involved the police. When formulating the next phase of this process, please make this a central part of the many steps that will need to be taken in order to build safe and caring schools.

Thank you for hearing me out and I welcome any continuation of a dialogue around this.

Respectfully,

Larry Gauthier MSW RSW