

MINORITY REPORT

Regarding Report 18-100 presented at OCTOBER SEAC 2018

Dana Somayaji
October 14, 2018

SECTION A: Background

At the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) of 10 October 2018, [Report 18-100 Update to the Elementary Gifted Review](#) was presented for discussion. This report focused on the Gifted Review Advisory Group¹(GRAG) created by a Board Motion on 20 December 2016 which mandated as follows:

Staff work with SEAC and an Advisory Group that would include SEAC representation to expand options to be presented to the public to improve the effectiveness of services for gifted students and to increase equity of access for under-represented groups.

The report summarized GRAG's activities over the past 18 months, along with staff's 'Overview of the Deliverables'. The first of these 'deliverables' is the OCDSB Interest Academy, a non-mandatory, in-class 'Genius-Hour' type program guide which could run in 6-week cycles, and that is similar to other interest-based opportunities which have 'existed in our District for a number of years'.

The second 'deliverable' identified is the *OCDSB Guide to Supporting Gifted Students in the Regular Classroom*, a resource binder/webpage containing current OCDSB strategies, a 'Year at a Glance' guide, and links to resources and research related to Giftedness.

The report states as follows:

Following the June 2018 meeting... communication was received from some of the community members on the Gifted Advisory Group. These members clearly expressed dissatisfaction with the work completed by staff. They stated that the deliverables were not an adequate reflection of the depth of ideas shared during the meetings of the Gifted Advisory Group.

and continues:

At this time, the focus of staffs work must shift from discussion at the Gifted Advisory Group level to implementation of the learning resources.

concluding that:

The OCDSB now has an endorsed framework for supporting all learners.

This report inadequately acknowledges the *significant* problems surrounding this group. It ignores multiple contributions *and options* presented by Trustee Boothby, Cathy Miedema, Dragos Popa and myself, Dana Somayaji. Furthermore, the non-collaborative staff 'deliverables' are severely lacking in regards to the motion's mandate.

¹Note that this group has been referred to by many names, but as it was originally referred to as the 'Gifted Review Advisory Group' by Director Adams in March 2017, I shall henceforth refer to this group as 'GRAG'.

SECTION B: Chronological Concerns

JUNE 2017

On June 8, 2017 I responded, as requested, to the staff's draft version of [Report 17-053](#) Gifted Program Review Update, which was presented on 20 June 2017 at the Committee of the Whole.

My response ([Somayaji Response to Gifted Program Review Update Report 17-053](#)) identified significant concerns with the report, including the misuse of the 'Renzulli' model (who himself believed that gifted learners should learn elsewhere than their regular classroom), and noted the group's lack of real-world parameters. I concluded that 'this report positions the Advisory Group as working towards integration without any further discussion of competing models, which is unacceptable.'

Staff never responded to my concerns, aside from acknowledging a spelling error, and released the June Update without incorporating or acknowledging the input shared by SEAC Vice-Chair Michelle Campbell. She resigned from the group, and as a SEAC Member, on June 7th, 2017.

Report 17-053 insisted that:

At this point, the group has not determined a new model to be recommended to the Board for gifted learners; however, currently it seems unnecessary to explore other options for program changes but rather to shift our focus on the development of a pilot program.

So even though we had not fully explored options, staff wanted the group to *stop looking* and instead create a revised model for gifted program to be based on a pilot program *which they don't describe*.

The Gifted Review Advisory Group was now tasked to design a pilot **which would not be brought to the public** until its completion two years later.

My concerns were never addressed, nor incorporated, into the report.

NOVEMBER 2017

Once the group resumed after the summer break, I made my concerns known again, but this time in person at the November 7 GRAG meeting. I reminded the group that our mandate was to create options to be presented to the public, not to create a pilot program. I reminded them we were asked in the May meeting IF, once a new program for gifted learners were developed, a pilot project *should be implemented* before rolling it out in the entire district.

We were not asked if the group should create a pilot project.

I also repeated my concerns that staff was focusing the group effort solely on in-class gifted supports, for the motion never mentions this constraint. After all, the motion was born out of concerns with staff's proposal to eliminate the Specialized Gifted Program in the lower grades without sufficient options.

Staff replied that we **will not discuss congregation** at any time in the group, and this included exploring options to expand access for underrepresented groups to the congregated program.

As I didn't understand how staff could change the mandate of the motion without Trustee approval, I began to reach out for guidance. I approached SEAC Trustees and OCASC with my concerns. Unfortunately as the GRAG update was not on the November SEAC Agenda, I wasn't able to bring my concerns directly to SEAC.

I then reached out to other Trustees, looking for guidance with my procedural concerns, until I had an extremely unsettling meeting with one Trustee. This Trustee questioned my education level and competency, insulted other Trustees, Trustee's children and OCDSB volunteer's children, questioned the ability of children to be identified as gifted at age 5, and when I replied that my daughter was reading novels at 4, questioned my socio-economic status. I left shaken and in fear that this Trustee would seek retribution if I proceeded with the group.

The next day I resigned from the Gifted Review Advisory Group.

DECEMBER 2017

A week later I asked SEAC Chair Kirwan if I could continue on with the work, as an idea came to me on how to possibly expand access to the gifted program to under-represented groups. I realized that I couldn't resign from the group without at least trying to put forth an option.

He allowed my return, and on Dec 6, 2017 at the end of the GRAG meeting, I distributed '[Option B Proposal](#)', which suggested creating an Alternative Program stream designed to meet the needs of high academic achievers.

This proposal was never discussed.

MARCH 2018

Staff asked GRAG to review the three-page 'Draft Pilot Gifted Report' that was slated for the Committee of the Whole (COW) meeting, which was to be held on April 17, 2018.

I responded with many questions and concerns.

My feedback was never discussed or acknowledged.

APRIL 2018

Staff requested Trustee Boothby, Cathy Miedema, Dragos Popa and myself to expand on staff's pilot project.

The foundation of our [expanded proposal](#) was based on findings in the [OCDSB Gifted Program Review Final Report](#). We focused on the identified needs presented in the report and proposed a range of approaches and activities to address these needs. We presented multiple option for consideration, along with 'key measurements of success' for each objective. We invested considerable effort to ensure the expand the proposal incorporated staff's plan.

This expanded proposal was never discussed.

JUNE 2018

After nearly two months of no communication from staff regarding the expanded proposal, staff sent their proposed *OCDSB Interest Academy* and *OCDSB Guide to Supporting Gifted Students in the Regular Classroom* to the group on June 7, insisting that the next meeting would be June 11 with no consideration of member's schedule. This gave us **2 business days** to review their materials and prepare our response.

The vast majority of the meeting focused on staff's presentation, with no discussion of the expanded proposal and there was limited time to respond. Although I attempted multiple times to contribute to the discussion, I was cut off or ignored.

I was not given an opportunity to speak at this meeting.

AUGUST 2018: Letter of Complaint

After an additional two months of staff silence, Trustee Boothby, Cathy Miedema, Dragos Popa and myself sent a joint [letter of complaint](#) to Director Adams and the Gifted Review Advisory Group which detailed staff's appalling lack of response pertaining to the expanded proposal. It identified the disturbing lack of communication and collaboration, and we offered to meet again in August or September 2018 to discuss these outstanding issues.

There has been no response to this letter to date.

OCTOBER 2018

Following June's GRAG meeting, the first correspondence from staff arrived on October 5, 2018 - **119 days later**. This email contained only Report 18-100 and its four appendixes. As this was Thanksgiving Friday, this left an insufficient **2.5 business days** for SEAC members to respond accordingly, as SEAC was on October 10, 2018.

SECTION C: *Prima facie* violation of OCDSB Complaint Policy and Procedure

It is my understanding that staff are required to respond to a letter of complaint within a specified amount of time.

[OCDSB Board Policy P.129.GOV](#) Complaint Resolution Process Policy 4.4(c) states that all complaints are to be acted upon promptly and no later than two working weeks from the date of the complaint, with the goal of actually resolving the complaint within 30 days.

Our complaint letter was ignored by staff. We received no response. We received no meaningful dialogue. We received nothing. **This is a clear violation of staff's own Procedure and Principles.**

SECTION D: Concerns with the Report 'Deliverables'

It is my position that the *OCDSB Interest Academy*:

- would not be available to all in-class gifted learners, as it would not be made mandatory in every classroom
- already exists in the Board in various forms, so this is not a new option
- does not address the gifted child's need for academic peers; and
- provides *even less* support for gifted learners than staff's recommendations presented in [OCDSB Oct 2016 Report 16-120](#).

Furthermore, the *OCDSB Guide to Supporting Gifted Students in the Regular Classroom* is a list of all the supports *already* available to teachers.

There are no indications how either of these 'deliverables' could be monitored to determine if they actually help improve services in the gifted classroom, nor does the report clearly identify how they help to increase equity of access to the gifted program for under-represented groups.

As options for the Specialized (Congregated) Gifted Program *weren't allowed to be considered or discussed*, these recommendations falls incredibly short of what was mandated in the founding motion.

SECTION E: Summary of Concerns

For all of the above reasons, I must reject Report No. 18-100 in its entirety.

Report 18-100 *Update to the Elementary Gifted Review* ignores virtually all of Trustee Boothby's, Cathy Miedema's, Dragos Popa's and my significant concerns, recommendations, and contributions.

Most significantly, this report:

- fails to provide a full chronology of GRAG's efforts
- fails to address the significant concerns outlined in *Somayaji Response to Gifted Program Review Update Report 17-053*, as well as concerns outlined in the letter of complaint dated August 21, 2018
- omits two alternative proposals presented to the group, both of which were never discussed at the Gifted Review Advisory Group
- fails to mention that group members only received the Report 18-100 on Friday Oct 5, 2018, **only two and half business days** before its public discussion at SEAC (Thanksgiving weekend at that); and
- omits the fact that the Report was the *first communication from staff to the Group since June 2018*.

SECTION F: Conclusion

On a personal note, this 18-month process has consumed **at least** 200 hours of my time. Staff and the experts in the group, and to an extent Trustee Boothby, were all paid for their time; Cathy Miedema, Dragos Popa, and I were not.

As a Trustee pointed out, I do not have a Masters in Education. But I have read every single resource that staff has shared with the group, including many of Joseph Renzulli works, numerous pedagogical articles relating to giftedness, the Gifted Program Review Final Report, and the numerous sources contained within.

I have done every 'homework assignment' assigned by Superintendent Grigoriev, including answering list after list of complex questions, to the best of my ability.

I had faith that if I was an active participant that staff would at least *acknowledge* my contributions and we could engage in a healthy discussion. Instead, I have been ignored and silenced. This process has been extremely troubling for multiple reasons, and I cannot let this issue drop without OCDSB staff recognizing the incredible difficulties it has laid on parent volunteers. There are many 'learning-lessons' here, and I hope staff can identify them so trust can be re-established.

I am passionate about this issues as I have seen the profound effects of the Specialized Gifted Program in many children's lives. But please know that I carry this same passion for *all* children in the school board - and *especially* for our Special Education students.

I put this minority report forward in hopes that no other community member will ever endure the amount of disrespect and contempt that I have during a 'consultation' such as this, and with the hope that OCDSB staff will treat its volunteers better in the future.

Thank you,

Dana Somayaji