



PARENT INVOLVEMENT COMMITTEE Report No. 18-120

21 November 2018

Ministry Consultation on Education Reform in Ontario – Next Steps

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PURPOSE:

1. To provide a summary of the feedback that the Parent Involvement Committee (PIC) received from parents during the 2018 Parent Conference on the Ministry of Education consultation on education reform in Ontario.

CONTEXT:

2. The Ministry consultation was launched on 28 September 2018. It asks for participants' input on the following seven key areas:
 - Improving Ontario students' performance in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM);
 - Preparing students with job skills, including skilled trades or fields, such as coding;
 - Graduating students with life skills like financial literacy;
 - Providing age-appropriate health and physical education curriculum that includes subjects like mental health, sex-education, and legalization of cannabis
 - Improving standardized testing;
 - Banning cellphone use in the classroom; and
 - Developing a parents' bill of rights.

At its 17 October 2018 meeting, PIC members presented a motion to hold a workshop during the 2018 Parent Conference to receive feedback from parents on the Ministry's consultation. Approximately thirty parents attended the PIC workshop. Participants were divided into three different groups; each group was tasked with addressing two of the seven above listed topics in addition to the parents' bill of rights. Each group included a trustee, District staff, and PIC members.

Below is a consolidation of the feedback PIC received from parents during the workshop.

CONSIDERATIONS:

3. Improving Students' Performance in STEM

Parents prefer to focus on STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) rather than STEM. They stress the importance of arts in children's education and well-being as it helps improving the executive skills in children (e.g. sustained attention, goal-directed persistence, and metacognition). Participants believe that integrating arts in curriculum will guarantee better academic performance in the other curricular areas of focus, i.e., STEM.

Skilled Trades

Parents believe the government and the media have a role to play in addressing the negative stereotypes surrounding skilled trades and better informing parents about the well-paid job opportunities available for apprentices. Parents believe that the preparation for an apprenticeship should start from the early years in the secondary level by expanding experiential learning, courses options, and cooperative education.

Financial Literacy

Parents believe that financial literacy is one example of the many life skills their children will need when they exit the school system and their homes. Parents are concerned because the only financial literacy course at the high school level is optional and few students register. They suggest integrating those life skills (e.g., taxes, income, mortgages, savings, banking, budgeting, and shopping) in the Careers and Civics course, which is required for all students.

Parents also encourage spreading these life skills throughout the curriculum of all grades starting from kindergarten, especially given that not all students are taught such skills at home.

Health and Physical Education Curriculum

To parents, child safety is of the utmost importance and they request that decisions need to be based on best practices and current research. At this workshop, several parents agreed that the 2015 curriculum should be instated considering the following:

- Adopting the curriculum to include recent developments (e.g. “# me too Movement);
- Making it consent-based and giving parents the option to opt out when specific topics are discussed in class;
- Including topics such as body image, eating disorders, social networking safety; and
- Training all staff on the curriculum.

Standardized Testing

It is not clear whether this topic is focused on standardized testing in general or on EQAO specifically. Parents raise a number of concerns on EQAO testing including, but not limited to the following:

- The purpose of the test and if it is meeting its purpose;
- Whether it is meant to test students or the teachers;
- The validity of the results for students who receive accommodations during tests;
- Teachers' perceived reluctance to take on grade 3 and 6 classes due to the pressure on teachers for good results and the time they have to take to interrupt teaching the curriculum to solely prepare the students for the test; and
- The way testing results are shared and used (e.g. real estate valuation, and connection to school funding).

Cellphone Use in Schools

Participants do not agree with banning cell phones use in schools, rather they prefer a healthy, proactive approach to using technology in classrooms, where teachers are empowered to use professional judgement based on the situation in class. Parents inquired about the use of jammers in schools and if these are legal or helpful.

Should the decision be made to not ban technology, parents suggest that consideration be given to students who do not have access to it and to apply an equity lens to address this issue. Parents request clear rules and consequences being communicated to the whole community to ensure adoption of the rules.

Parents' Bill of Rights

Parents are not well-versed on the rights they currently have as per the existing legislation and are not sure when to exercise such rights. Some therefore support the development of a parents' bill of rights on the following grounds:

- a need for a central source of information that clarifies the rights, systems, and processes available, especially for parents of children with special needs, and how to navigate and access them, instead of creating a whole new/additional system;
- to include both rights and responsibilities of all parties in such document;
- to give parents the right to see annual teaching plans and to access the materials used in class; and
- to give explicit rights to different communities.

There is no consensus on the benefits a parents' bill of rights will leverage in the presence of other systems that currently protect parents' rights (e.g., complaints resolution policy at the board level, reporting systems, parent interviews, Ontario College of Teachers, etc.). At the session, some warned against following the

example of the USA, where this approach became, in their opinion, a tool for extremists.

Parents' Concerns

At the three PIC sessions, parents expressed their concerns about the lack of information provided by the Ministry in order for parents to make informed answers to the Ministry's questions. For example, some parents were not clear on the difference between 2010 and 2015 Health and Physical Education Curriculum, and those of young children who have not yet experienced EQAO tests did not know what the tests involve and how they work in practice.

Parents feel strongly about the way the consultation is executed, for example:

- Phone Town Halls are not perceived as an effective way for feedback; and
- The three methods available to make a submission can be used by certain groups to push forward mass entries that serve particular interest groups.

Parents concluded the sessions by requesting information regarding the methodology the Ministry will use to synthesize and analyze the collected responses, especially given that all the questions are open-ended. Parents questioned the sustainability of decisions based on the results of this consultation as they may be overturned by future changes in the Government.

COMMUNICATION/CONSULTATION ISSUES:

4. The 2018 Parent Conference was a unique opportunity for PIC to expand discussions and engage in direct communications with the parents of the District around important changes that may impact their children's education. No further consultation with parents is required at this stage. This report is intended to inform the Board's submission to the Ministry's consultation.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

5. The provincial consultation on education reform in Ontario does not have any resource implications on PIC's annual budget.

STRATEGIC LINKS:

6. PIC's contribution in this process, whether through a submission made on behalf of the parents of the District, informing the Board's submission, or through encouraging parents' participation in the process, leverages an engagement culture whereby parents can have direct input into their children's education and well-being in support of the OCDSB's 2015-2019 Strategic Plan.

RECOMMENDATION:

- A. THAT PIC submits the above summary from Report 18-120 to the Board of Trustees in order to inform the OCDSB's submission to the Ministry on the provincial consultation on education in Ontario; and
- B. THAT PIC provides a submission with the above summary from Report 18-120, on behalf of the parents of the District, to the Ministry of Education via fortheparents@ontario.ca.

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