

Members of the Board,

As a parent with three elementary-aged children attending an OCDSB public school, I am outraged at the lack of foresight and creativity demonstrated in the announced plans for a 'return' to school in the fall.

If we can all agree on one thing, after 14 weeks of patched-together online learning, it is that the social experiment of distance learning en masse was an utter failure. While teachers endeavoured to provide work that could be done at home through a variety of inadequate means, the experience was awful for educators, students and parents alike. Families with limited technology, English or French language, or indeed, time, were forced to watch their children lose ground in their learning. It will come as no surprise to a reasonable adult that children, in fact, need to be *taught* and not just kept busy.

In addition to the educational challenges, children lost access to therapies and learning supports, meal programmes, and the care and oversight of their educators. Single parents and essential workers have felt this strain acutely. And one of the most important aspects of attending school – the development of social skills – cannot be replaced by a weekly video call or hours chatting on social media and playing video games.

My children just completed Junior Kindergarten, Grade 3 and Grade 5. I have a graduate-level education, am fluently bilingual, have access to technology, wifi, books, a printer and a flexible employer such that I was well positioned to support my children. In other words, if anyone should be able to homeschool, it is me. And yet, our family struggled every day with the format, technology, content and time commitment of educating at home.

Homeschooling is not a sustainable, or indeed reasonable solution to educating children as this pandemic continues to evolve. Now is the time for the City and the Board to marshal the will, and the resources, working with the Ministry, to get all children back in school full-time while respecting public health advice. The notion that we cannot – in two months – figure out solutions is ludicrous. The proposal that our schools would sit empty one day a week for cleaning, while parents all over the city have had to adjust their hours, lives and homes to accommodate the closure is deeply offensive.

Ottawa sits on a stable of underutilized schools with the space to accommodate children at the proposed ratios. There are a number of recently closed schools (Rideau High comes to mind...) that could be put back into service. Churches sit empty that could easily accommodate kindergarten children to free up space in schools, where gyms, libraries, music rooms and extra portables must all be put to use in solving this challenge. All resources must be directed at finding space, PPE and staff. The Ministry of Education will certainly have to enable the hiring of more staff, but by all accounts, under and unemployed educators exist in our city.

This is matter for leadership, innovation, creative problem solving and considered steps to protect public health, but it is possible. The public school children of Ottawa deserve better and the parents and taxpayers of this city demand it. Another lost year of education, continued enormous strain on the mental and physical well-being of students and parents alike, as well as the huge financial cost to parents and the economy as a whole, is completely unacceptable.

Thank you for your time.

Sarah Estabrooks