

Chris Huggins - Planning for Return to School – 9 July 2020

Dear OCDSB Board members:

I am a parent to two children aged 8 and 11, who go to school in the OCDSB area. My wife and I both have full-time careers and have done our best over the past few months to raise our children while working from home. However, this situation has been far from ideal both for our children and for ourselves. Our children have missed physical contact with their school friends and also missed seeing their teachers in-person. While we supported our children to follow the home-schooling activities and assignments as much as possible, this is really not a replacement for school. Our children benefit from being physically present at school in multiple ways: in terms of their educational achievement, their social growth, and their physical and psychological health. This summer has also been disrupted, with the cancellation of summer schools and other activities. I am therefore very concerned about the planned 'hybrid' option for schools in Ontario when they reopen in Fall.

While I understand the need for some physical distancing in schools, and the difficulties that school boards will face in re-opening, I strongly feel that other, more creative options have not been fully considered. Aspects of society which are deemed important to 'the economy' have received a lot of attention, and funding, from the Provincial government: schooling should also be prioritized for investment, both financial and in terms of sound planning. Ontario has a wide range of expertise in education. Money could be spent to provide children with full-time school opportunities through tapping into different forms of education: outdoor education, physical education, museum tours and cultural activities, to name but a few. There are many unemployed or under-employed teachers, childcare professionals, and others who could be called upon to provide their expertise. The Fall 2020 school term may not look like a regular term, but it could provide children with daily opportunities to interact with classmates and teachers, Monday through Friday.

Without full-time education or child-care, there will be multiple negative impacts. Our children's education and mental health will suffer – particularly that of children from low-income households, and families experiencing social problems such as violence and addiction. Children will not develop their full academic and social capacity, and their Right to Education will be violated as a result. The adult working population will suffer, as most people will be unable to work at full capacity. It is very clear that the economic progress of our Province will be seriously impacted if children are not in school this Fall. Women, in particular, are likely to suffer due to inequitable social expectations that they step in to look after children, at the expense of their careers, their health, and their overall wellbeing. By underfunding and undersupporting school boards such as the OCDSB, the government is failing children and women, in particular.

There is still time for the OCDSB, in collaboration with the Provincial government and other stakeholders, to plan a more ambitious, creative and rewarding Fall for our children. I urge you to take this challenge seriously and vote for options that give our children 5 days per week of education, sports, music, cultural activities, and/or other activities this Fall, while maintaining fundamental public health measures (physical distancing, cleaning of facilities and hygiene).

Sincerely,

Dr Chris Huggins