Statement for Public Delegation - OCDSB meeting 9 July 2020

ATTN: Trustees of the OCDSB

I have provided this statement in relation to item 4.1 on the agenda of today's meeting, concerning the plan for return to school in the fall.

I understand that the Board has significant limitations based on the Provincial guidelines, and the report prepared by Mr. Reynolds makes clear that the Board has childrens' health and safety in mind.

However, I have significant concerns with anything other than a full return to in-class learning for the fall, and I would appreciate the opportunity to share these views with the Board.

I believe that a hybrid approach does not meaningfully reduce the risk of transmission, while simultaneously placing intense pressure on families, harming our children's mental health and wellbeing, and limiting economic recovery.

I request that trustees of the board do the following:
- Publicly advocate for option 1 (normal school day routine with enhanced public health protocols) including through communication with local MPPs, Minister Lecce and Premier Ford;
- Encourage other boards to also do the above;
- Request sufficient funds to allow for a full reopening and to prepare for adjustments as the public health situation evolves;

My concerns with silently accepting the Provincial directives, which appear to be driving towards only two days a week in school, are as follows:

1) Children's mental health and development

As noted in Mr. Reynolds' report, we have seen childrens' health experts cite the importance of social interactions and education to overall wellbeing and development. Fundamentally, children have a right to education recognized by the international community, and these options do not seem to place that right at the forefront of our thinking or as one of the most important considerations in this matter. Where is the creativity, the drive to bring new resources, to think more broadly about the use of facilities and allow as many children as possible to be educated in September.

Children thrive on social interaction and school is one of the core ways that they learn how to interact and behave in a prosocial way. This pandemic has shown us that we all depend on each other to be safe and healthy, and we're damaging this generation's ability to learn how to do so.

Children require consistency and routine. A two-day-a week approach will disrupt their ability to learn. Kids are learning how to speak, they're learning first or second languages, they're learning how to read and write - at what cost are we jeopardizing these critical milestones in their development?

2) Family circumstances and economic benefits

We've heard so much about the need to reopen the economy - but we can't expect the economy to reopen if parents are expected to work and parent and homeschool, simultaneously. 20% of kids have a single parent. We're talking about two thirds of families in the Province that have kids and that aren't able to fully return to work without a solution for childcare and education.

And that doesn't account for our most vulnerable parents who aren't able to work from home or take leaves of absence.

3) Incremental health benefit

We've also seen data come out of other jurisdictions showing that children are less likely to become infected, and less likely to transmit the disease. Experience in Nordic countries has not shown any increase in infections or transmission following the reopening of schools in May of this year.

If parents are left to find care for their children, they will certainly turn to outside daycare, family and other caregivers - this will expand the "circles" or "bubbles" of exposure, and could completely undermine the decision to split each class into smaller cohorts.

Fundamentally, I don't believe that the direction received from the province represents the best of available science and it does not prepare families for success. We need to be creative and open to families' needs and the role that parents play in our economy and society.

Thank you,
Neil Barratt