

Jennifer Salahub – Planning for Return to School – 9 July 2020

I am the mother of a 9 year old OCDSB Early French Immersion student who will enter Grade 4 in September. I work full-time, as does my husband. We have been privileged to be able to work from home since March 13th, in response to this public health emergency. While we recognize our privilege, the past several months have been extremely difficult for our family, with severe and negative impacts on all our mental health. My son has not played in-person with another child since March 13th. He has become moody, combative and depressed. With the positive impacts of the efforts that Ottawans have made to reduce COVID-19 community transmission and infection rates, I am convinced that a return to class full time and in person can be done safely, with appropriate measures in place. Moreover, I am convinced that only that approach will meet the needs of our family to care for our mental health and meet our educational and professional needs.

Our experience with OCDSB's Learn from Home was uniquely frustrating. While I recognize that the Board did the best they could in uncertainty and without clear instruction from the Ministry, the model did not work for our family. With only his non-teacher parents for support most of the time, our usually engaged son became disinterested in learning and enraged at the shifting expectations during the first six weeks of lockdown. While our teachers did support us where they could and when we reached out for help, they were also in lockdown, trying to work during an emergency, while also trying to parent and teach their children. There was only so much they could do. By June, our son was mentally and emotionally exhausted and it was a daily struggle to get him to do the minimum amount of schoolwork. Mornings with scheduled online face-time with his teachers became a nightmare of trying to get him to participate.

As the Board considers options for school this fall, I urge you to do everything in your power to ensure that OCDSB students can return to full-time, in-person education on September 1st. This includes identifying new and reallocating existing resources to ensure that appropriate cohorting, sanitation and physical distancing measures can be put in place. It also includes using every lever in your power to mobilize additional resources from the Province to make sure this happens. OCDSB students need to be with their excellent and professional teachers, in an environment designed for learning, socializing, and getting physical exercise, with a predictable and common-sense approach to managing the public health risks that exist whether they are in school or at home. Part of that risk analysis includes balancing the risks to children and families' mental health of at-home or online learning, economic positions/need to work, and the risks of coronavirus transmission.

When it comes to your mandate to develop a hybrid model, I urge you to consider the negative impact that the current proposal of 2 days on/3 days off will have on children and their working parents. The inconsistency of the schedule, the weakness of the online learning model, the expectation that teachers - many of whom are also parents with childcare responsibilities - will be able and available to provide in-class and synchronous online learning when their own kids are out of class, the disregard of the health impacts of working parents needing to find alternative childcare outside of their school-based cohort during the 3 off-days all demonstrate that this approach *will not work at all* for the OCDSB's thousands of working parents. Even a model that saw students in class one week on/one week off with cleaning on the weekend would be more manageable for our family.

Please make the right choices for the children and parents you serve. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Salahub