

Dear trustees,

You are faced with immense challenges, not only now, but for many months/years to come. I know many of you are also juggling work, home-schooling and parenting - thank you. These are not normal times, so they require abnormal responses. You hopefully already understand why it is so vital to safely bring schools back to the fullest extent possible. If you don't, and you think schools should remain closed until maybe there's a vaccine, I urge you to reconsider and examine the evidence.

- The last four months were an emergency stopgap measure, but children's learning has largely stalled and parents are at breaking point
- E-learning as delivered was extremely difficult, stressful, and likely not successful in advancing academic attainment, especially for elementary children. Teachers, through no fault of their own, are not trained or supported to deliver e-learning in a real way
- There are children for whom the lockdown has been profoundly frightening, leaving them hungry and in abusive settings.
- The impact of school closures has been disproportionately felt by children already facing barriers in life – low-income children; children who don't speak English or French as a first language; racialized communities who've already felt the worst of COVID-19; children with special needs; and children without access to technology or the internet.
- Parents are at a breaking point. I hope you've seen responses to the OCDSB consultation. Parents are in distress - the level of anxiety expressed in the submissions shocked me. There is intense fear for their children, for their jobs, for their livelihoods.
- Employers are pressing staff to return to work. Parents cannot leave children home alone, which will force those who can't afford alternative arrangements to drop out of the work force.
- It will mainly be women who drop out of the workforce to handle home schooling. This will set women's equality back years. It will wipe out generations of progress, affecting women's careers, livelihoods, and pensions,
- An average 40% loss of household income will devastate many families, especially single parents. It will push families into poverty, slowing economic recovery, increasing demand on government assistance and deepening inequality.

Nobody wants their children to be safe more than parents. But we also know there are various forms of safety. We weigh risk to our kids daily. COVID transmission in Ottawa is currently low, with a strong public health system and excellent ability to test, trace and isolate. These are solid conditions for reopening society. In fact, we've already seen many forms of commerce return, albeit modified.

Currently, the risks to our children of being out of education, and to their parents of losing major portions of household income, outweigh the risks of infectious disease spread in Ottawa. The head of CHEO is calling for a full return to school, because the negative impacts of not doing so, outweigh the risks.

We also have two months of evidence for school returns, from countries similar to Canada - with strong public health systems, and capacity to test and trace. I know the science is fast evolving, but we have a base to work with. It is not possible to wait for a vaccine (that may never come) before we re-open schools.

You are trustees of our education system. You should be the embodiment of the human and legal right to education. Education is the fourth UN sustainable development goal, and something denied to too many children around the world. If we are curtailing or denying our children a human right, we better have a watertight reason to do so. Lack of ambition and difficult logistics are not a good reason. And the plan emailed to parents on a Friday night was woeful. It was devoid of ambition or care for our children. It also defeated the supposed public health aim of the plan, as wealthier parents will secure childcare outside of the school system, and expose teachers and families to more risk. It is better to have 5-day fixed bubbles, than 2 days with the other 3 days with unknown and uncontrollable contact.

I know your hands are tied in many ways. I know the ultimate power lies with the provincial and maybe federal government. I know you've been asked to do too much, with too little. But you also have power you aren't currently using. You have the voice and ability to push back, to defend children and parents, and advocate for better. You do not have to accept the bare minimum framing you have been given. You can live up to the ideals I hope prompted you to run for your positions. You have political capital and voices that could prompt a rethink by governments, and force them to add more resources and support to education.

If we're going to get the resources needed to safely re-open schools, it'll require us all to become advocates. Even if that's uncomfortable and not the usual roles we play. If you care about children, then you will move to an advocacy position to defend them. I know this is not the norm for school trustees, but this is not the norm in life. Kids need you to advocate for them, especially those who are vulnerable, trapped and hungry. We need to aim high, and it may be that we fall short. But if we start from the bare minimum, we will never get higher.

You should be ambitious and frame your plans around children's right to education. What do children deserve, and then, what do we need to make that happen, and how much would it cost? We should prioritize vulnerable, indigenous, racialised and special needs children, for a start.

The challenges you are facing are not unique. They are shared across Ontario, and the country. Where can you make connections, partner on shared challenges, and find best practice?

To return to school properly, we need to physically spread children out. So we need more physical space, and more educators. These are tough challenges, but not insurmountable. You should be creative, and develop novel solutions. Suggestions include appropriating empty rec centres, colleges, universities and hockey arenas, then fast tracking teacher training with mentors and bringing in community teachers.

I would suggest:

- Develop a 3-range scenario for school return, projecting impact, and costing each scenario. What would be the impact of the bare minimum on kids, and how much would a full return cost? What are the knock-on social impacts on food security, child abuse, household income etc. Partner with multiple school boards to hire an expert to project this.
- Propose creative solutions that are hard to turn down. Then expand them province-wide. Show some leadership. Imagine if you brokered an agreement with Carleton and Ottawa universities to use their classroom space, and even their TAs. That would put pressure on the government, and give a template for other boards to follow.

- Publicize your costed scenarios. I realize this would cause political disquiet, and unhappiness from the provincial government. But you have leverage as a board. When else are you going to use this leverage, if not now? What are you saving it for? Send the scenarios to parent groups. Let them advocate for you.

Finally, I would urge you to think about the end game. This isn't going away, and the pressure on you will only increase. You need to show you've taken smart, concrete steps that prioritize children's education, and understand the impact school closures have on kids and women. I know advocacy is hard, but if you're not willing to use your political capital now, when will you? You ran for this office to show leadership. That time has now come.