



**Name: Mars Wichmann-Young**

**Brief summary of issue or topic of discussion:**

I am a graduate of Richard Pfaff Alternate and I read that there are talks at this meeting about shutting down alternate schools. Alt school led me down the path to mental health recovery and is the only reason I was able to graduate and start university, and I want to share my story, to have it considered during this decision. I attended Richard Pfaff for my grade 11 and 12 years and I'm now in my second year of university. I recognize that the main schools whose shut down is being discussed are alternate elementary and middle schools, and what I forgot to mention in my application is that I also have been a tutor who has worked with special-needs elementary-aged students who are unable to thrive within the normal education system, and who greatly benefit from the opportunity to attend alternate programs. I also attended my alternate high school alongside many alternate middle school graduates. I wanted to add this addition to my description so it could be considered in the decision on whether or not I was able to be a delegate at the March 19 meeting.

Thank you for your time, Mars

My name is Mars and I am a second year student studying Biomedical Science at the University of Ottawa. I am also a graduate of Richard Pfaff Alternate Secondary School, where I spent my grade 11 and 12 years.

Although my experience was as a high school student and not an elementary aged one, I have seen firsthand how impactful and important alternative schooling is. Richard Pfaff saved my life and was the only reason I was able to graduate high school. Alternative secondary schools and elementary schools are different, but the big thing they have in common is the level of support they are able to provide their students.



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I attended school with many graduates of elementary and middle school alternative programs. Across the board, the same message is repeated over and over by all of us: “The only reason I went to school at all was because alternative schools were an option.” One of my closest friends attended Churchill Alternative School as a child and said that the program allowed him to learn math, reading, and how to make social connections, all of which he was really struggling with in a homeschooled environment. “They gave me the resources and time to catch up with the other students without judgement and with actual one-on-one help.”

I have also worked as a tutor for many years. One student I worked with was someone who really struggled in the mainstream school system. Between challenges with learning, being behind in subjects and lacking the support needed to catch up, and struggling to integrate with her peers, she ended up unable to attend conventional school. She needed one-on-one support to catch up, gain her confidence back, and navigate building social connections. Without the option to explore alternative programs, her access to schooling would have been incredibly limited.

Hundreds of students attend these schools, and shutting down alternative programs means denying them equitable access to education. A lot of students in alternative programs face challenges with learning, mental health, or social situations. Many of us are at these programs due to challenges that don’t allow us to survive, let alone thrive, in conventional schooling. Alternative schools were created to help students like us grow in an environment that aligns with our needs.

Shutting down these programs represents a dangerous trend. As soon as we decide that children with differing needs are merely an expense, a line on a budget that can be crossed off, where do we stop? Success stories like that of my friend, who is now attending post secondary school, living on his own, and thriving due to the skills he learned throughout years in alternative programs, will no longer be created. Choosing



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to deprive kids of a chance to grow in an environment that can meet their needs means choosing to leave them behind and to not let their full potential be realized.

Kids deserve a chance to thrive, and I have seen firsthand how these programs allow them to do just that.