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Brief summary of issue or topic of discussion:

EPR and alterative program

The OCDSB Alternative Program's Untapped Markets

This is my eldest son's story of our journey to the Alternative Program, and a vision of how the Alternative Program can draw families to the OCDSB.

My Son's Story

When it was time to register my eldest for kindergarten, I asked various neighbours where would be the best school to send him. I was told that the English Catholic school just down the street was very highly rated, and all the Anglophone parents send their kids there. So we enrolled our son there and considered ourselves to be lucky to live near a great school.

It wasn't long after kindergarten started that we started getting notes from his teachers about incidents. The notes turned into calls from his teachers about his difficulty with self-regulation. The school then started sending him home regularly in the afternoons as they were unable to deal with him. This then escalated to him receiving a suspension. He was still only in Kindergarten!

During his return to school meeting, the school recommended a Psycho-Educational assessment, which resulted in a "low needs" neurodiversity diagnosis. With this report, the school immediately put an IEP in place for executive functioning and social skills, and his class time started to go more smoothly. However, the IEP did not help during recess or EDP, and my son learned to fade into the background instead of interacting with his peers. As parents new to the neurodiversity world, we figured this was as good as it would get. Again, we counted ourselves lucky, because I was regularly hearing stories from parents in the public board whose schools were refusing to put IEPs in place for their kids.

It was also through these parents that I learned that a different style of learning that worked for many learners was available through the Alternative Program. COVID then struck, and

upon returning to in-person learning, we changed school boards and enrolled our son in the Alternative Program. From the get-go, we were blown away by the difference. On the first day, the Learning Support Staff introduced all of the neurodiverse kids in his class to each other, and my son has felt a sense of belonging ever since! He regularly spends recess together with them and their larger circle of friends - and happily joins them in social events outside of school! When I asked my son about what is different about the Alternative Program, he told me, "At Summit, my teachers and friends will not let me fade into the background - they always pull me out." My son, who struggled in a mainstream program, is now engaged and thriving in the Alternative Program.

An Alternative Vision

As you can see, parents are willing to change school boards to access the best programs for their children. As was mentioned in the April 15 COW meeting, families are also willing to move to a different city to access programs that fit their child. Instead of eliminating the Alternative program, the OCDSB should explore how it can be used to draw families to the OCDSB. Just imagine the untapped market of families outside of the OCDSB that would consider the Alternative Program to be the best program for their child, if only they knew about it! This could include families:

- From the OCSB (or perhaps even the french boards) who are unsatisfied with their inclusion model
- From Montessori schools or required to pay tuition to a school board
- Who homeschool because the mainstream program does not fit their children
- Whose children are only able to be accommodated part of the day, or not at all, in mainstream - but might require a lower amount of EA support time in the Alternative Program.

The OCDSB should also consider that true inclusion can only be achieved from the ground up as the Alternative Program has done by fully embracing all 7 tenets. It cannot be achieved by providing a few courses on UDL to mainstream teachers in the hopes that they might cultivate an inclusive culture in 10 years. I expect that the OCDSB might then realize that they made a mistake only after it is too late to bring back the Alternative Program.

I urge you to vote against phasing out the Alternative Program. Instead: 1) Work with ASAC

on options to keep this program, and 2) Begin promoting it widely, to actualize its untapped potential for the OCDSB.