

**Name: Scott Bardsley**

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

I would like to address concerns around inclusion in the EPR.

Dear Trustees,

I am writing to express my deep concern about the lack of true inclusion in the plan to eliminate alternative schools. Inclusion is not just about physical presence; it's about creating environments where everyone feels they belong and where children feel safe to be themselves and engage in the vulnerable work of learning.

The one-size-fits-most approach of a community school did not work for my neurodiverse son. When he asked to do things differently, he was told there was a 'right way'. He was discouraged from using strategies that deviated from the 'norm' – strategies that helped him complete tasks. This led to feelings of shame and an inability to participate, resulting in outbursts and impacting his social relationships and mental health.

The classroom environment became very hard for him. The school's solution was to provide him with a chair with a roof to pull down when he needed a break. He spent more and more time in this chair, often falling asleep to escape an inappropriate classroom environment. This led to jealousy and mocking from peers. Spending his day isolated in a specialty chair, not learning, in the physical presence of other children, was not and is not inclusion.

My son's psychologist warned us about how this would go: He is young and wants to please his teachers. As he gets older, he won't. His outbursts will get more pronounced, and he will fall through the cracks.

Moving to an alternative school changed everything for my son, like it did for others featured in the Alternative Schools Advisory Committee report "Stories of Difference from the OCSDB Elementary Alternative Program". He feels safe to be himself and to engage in learning again. He feels he belongs. All because the environment is fundamentally different from the community school—it encourages alternative ways of moving through the world and multiple ways of achieving academic goals. This is true inclusion for neurodiverse children like my

son. The trajectory of his life is forever changed, thanks in part to an OCDSB alternative school.

The [OCDSB's page on inclusive education](#) says schools “strive to ensure that all members of the school community feel safe, comfortable, and accepted”. The plan to eliminate alternative schools contradicts this commitment for neurodiverse and alternative learners. My son did not feel safe, comfortable, or accepted in the community school environment, nor did many of the students mentioned in the committee’s report.

I worry that the Board and some trustees have not recognized the impact this will have on generations of learners in Ottawa and the families who will be left picking up the pieces. This is a bad decision for the mental health, learning, and well-being of not only neurodiverse and alternative learners across Ottawa, but also for the other children in the already under-resourced community classrooms, and for teachers who will be asked to do even more.

At the least, decisions with such enormous impacts should not be made without firm plans for making these spaces more inclusive. As the aforementioned report demonstrates, many neurodiverse and alternative learners do not receive these spaces as inclusive. Ideologies that these spaces should be more inclusive do little without actual action to make them more inclusive.

Alternative schools foster curiosity, well-being, and civic leadership among students. They excel in addressing the complex needs of neurodiverse and alternative learners with remarkable efficiency, maintaining the same class size ratios and funding as community schools. The holistic environment of alternative schools is key to creating this inclusive atmosphere. The proposed plan to place these students in environments that are ill-suited to their needs will have significant repercussions not only for the students themselves but also for their peers and teachers. Moreover, this approach will be fiscally burdensome for the Board, as it will necessitate addressing numerous individual needs and applying temporary solutions to the fundamental issue of an unsuitable environment for these children.

Alternative schools are models for inclusive and fiscally responsible education. Touting what the community classroom should be without a clear research-informed plan to get there does little but leave families behind.

Thank you,  
Scott Bardsley