

Prepared by:  
Ganaaboute Gagne and Prasith Wijeweera

# Student Trustee Bi-Annual Report

June 22nd, 2020



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## A YEAR IN REVIEW

Pages 1 - 3

## MENSTRUAL EQUITY

Page 4

## COVID19 RESPONSE AND STUDENT SUPPORTS

Pages 5 - 9

## 2020 CONFERENCES

Pages 10 - 11

## RACIAL INEQUALITIES IN THE OCDSB

Pages 13- 17

## CLOSING REMARKS

2019/  
2020

# A Year in Review: the Student Senate



## Increasing Student Senator Representation on OCDSB Advisory Committees:

Acting on recommendations from previous student trustees, senators were actively encouraged to participate on the OCDSB's advisory committees. Allowing senators to actively participate on these committees is an essential and tangible step towards the board's strategic goal of increasing student voice. Senators have not only had the opportunity to raise concerns that may only be apparent from a student perspective but they have also brought back pertinent discussion topics to senate meetings. This opportunity is also an essential professional development opportunity for senators. Having seen the tremendous success of this program, it is of paramount importance that trustees and senior staff continue to engage and include student senators who choose to volunteer their time for the betterment of equity and student voice within the board.



## The Student Senate and Senior Staff:

This year the student senate had an opportunity to consult with a variety of senior staff ranging from CFO Carson, Dr. Duschner, and Superintendent Towaij on a diverse range of topics such as school facilities, mental health and education in mathematics. These consultations were two-way discussions where both staff and senators had the chance to ask questions and present discussion topics. These consultations ensure that the future plans of the board are practical and address student needs. From a professional development perspective, these consultations have proven beneficial to senators by increasing their knowledge of board affairs and developing transferable leadership skills. It is therefore recommended that senior staff continue engaging with the senate in meaningful consultations in order to develop cohesive and visionary policies.

## Town Halls, One Year Later:

In the 2018-2019 school year, student senate had focused on encouraging town halls as a realistic, tangible and cost-effective measure to enhance student voice within OCDSB schools. These plans have had an overall positive effective which can be seen by the increasing prevalence of townhalls in OCDSB schools. This year, senators at many high schools organized town halls, involving school staff, system superintendents and some trustees. These meetings offer a chance for students to raise concerns directly with school leadership and provide an opportunity for system staff to learn more about district issues. As such, it is recommended that future student trustees, trustees and senior staff continue to find and create opportunities for direct engagement.



## Quotes from our Senators

Change doesn't happen by chance. It happens by choice.  
Daniel Bersyniow, Sir Robert Borden High School

I can't lie: this group of people taught me a lot. I grew as a leader but also as a person, I'm very thankful for that. I'm forever grateful to have the opportunity of being a student senator and to hold a position at the board level. It's been a great term! We, as a group, have accomplished lots for all the schools in the district and at the board! To our student trustees: thank you for working so hard and being amazing leads to the senate. I appreciate you both. To the adults on the board, thank you for teaching me something new every meeting and being great role models. Wishing the best of luck to next year's senate.

Amina Elsharif, Earl of March Secondary School

I joined the student senate this year and my favourite part was getting to work with other senators to provide feedback to the various board officials who visited our meetings to consult us. In my school, I was able to take on a greater responsibility in communicating information from the board to the student body and opening up that new communication channel, which both other students and I valued a lot.

Joy Liu, Colonel By Secondary School

Being a student senator gave me a reason to spend more time getting to know the students at my school and how to figure out what they needed. The skills I learned communicating with students at my school and fellow senators will be useful in many situations throughout the rest of my career.

Billy Mott, South Carleton High School

# Menstrual Equity in the OCDSB

Starting in January 2020, Student Trustee Gagne began preliminary work on a menstrual equity project in the OCDSB. After consulting with other boards about their policies, and looking around the OCDSB, it was revealed that a grade 7/8 class at Featherston Public School had spent the current academic year piloting a trial program. Meanwhile, a roundtable discussion with Bell High School's Rainbow Alliance Club further elucidated the perspective of 2SLGBTQ+ students on this topic. Due to the onset of COVID19 in mid March much of the deliberation at the board level has been put on hold. Continuing into the 2020-2021 academic year, Student Trustees Elect, Joy Liu and Charles Chen, have indicated that this project will remain a priority. From this program came three components that will need to be considered as this project moves forward:

1

## Central and unsupervised placement and access

Ensuring that at least one dispenser of feminine hygiene products is key to ensuring students who need to access the resource are able to regardless of where in the building their class may be located. It is also important to include a minimum of one dispenser at an alternate location for students who identify as male and require access to the products.

## Education around use for all students


Educating all students in the building allows for the stigma surrounding periods to be disrupted which can create a safer environment for students who may have questions. Eliminating this stigma has also been shown to decrease rates of toxic shock syndrome. While tampons and pads can be shunned in some cultures, ensuring that access to these resources is a personal decision is critical.

2

## Continuity of the program and the larger picture

Ensuring that students are aware the program is here to stay deters from "hoarding". In addition, ensuring adequate education and infrastructure will allow for the sanitary disposal of used products which is important to personal health and school cleanliness.

3



# **COVID19 Response and Student Supports**

As student trustees, we recognize and appreciate the immense amount of work that went into the COVID19 response, and the ability to ensure online access to nearly all of our students is something that can not be overlooked. With that being said, there is always room for improvement. The following three categories are areas of focus that have been exasperated by the current crisis. Acknowledging the existing work and effort being undertaken, we would like to highlight them once again on behalf of our constituents.

**“We are not just working from home, but trying to work at home during a global crisis.”**

**“It is not enough to to make the resource available, we must ensure it is accessible and known”**

# Community

The OCDSB must expand beyond our current model of outreach and promote online community.

Collaboration and play are commonly accepted as cornerstones to effective education, but also to a fun and welcoming environment. Throughout the tenure of the school closures due to COVID19, student initiatives such as coffee houses, talent shows, and club meetings were reworked to take place virtually. The district's involvement and pro activity in moving communications and thought sharing onto new virtual formats was appreciated by students, but the OCDSB can do better by taking steps to proactively engage with students. Online engagement will continue to be a reality for students moving forward; how can the school board support and encourage more digital engagement centred around collaboration and fun? To create a community, we as a district must not only focus on thought sharing and data gathering, but also on facilitating students' abilities to socialize, build school spirit, and continue to participate in events that are important to the experience of school in an on-line experience.





# Accountability

Students require a uniform and transparent process to address accountability

There must be an avenue where students are able to pursue worries and anxieties of ill treatment, racism, harassment, or negligence on behalf of staff, not limited to the district's teaching staff. Without a formalised way to raise awareness of issues students may face with staff, we risk silencing already vulnerable voices. The importance of a transparent process in which students are able to keep staff accountable, not just to work norms, but also to standards of inclusivity is integral to promoting student success and student safety within the district. Under the current structure in our schools, this role falls on school administrations but specifically principals. We have observed this system repeatedly fail students which is why we have chosen to focus on student access to this process. In an ideal world, such systems would not be necessary, but the lived reality of students district wide has shown a need for a consistent, formal, and honest process through which students can seek outside help.



# Meaningful Communication

The OCDSB must recognize that intentional and purposeful communication with minority groups must be prioritized.

COVID19 disproportionately affected certain sectors of society; this fact has only been reinforced as the situation worsened across much of Ontario. As a school board which is dedicated to inclusivity and equity, it is vital that communication with these groups takes place not where the district would like, but where students are able to. We cannot expect marginalised groups to come to us, we must meet them where they are at and ensure that it is purposeful and action oriented so as to not repeat the mistake of listening for the sake of listening, but instead listening for the sake of learning.

While these sections may be broad, we would recommend that they are areas worthy of additional discussion and the consideration of next steps would benefit from actively seeking input from students with lived experience.



# COVID19 Communications to Students and Families

Student Trustees would like to thank the OCDSB's communications department for timely and cogent information sharing across email, social media and website platforms. The messaging sent out by staff was vital in ensuring that students were up to date with COVID-19 education changes. The Student Senate was also a vital communication piece, relaying updates to student bodies and clarifying misconceptions and confusions about evaluation and learning. Staff are recommended to continue exploring how the Student Senate can be used to enhance communications within the OCDSB. Despite these successes, it must be noted that certain communications were open to interpretations and caused confusion to many students. Students from English Second Language programs were especially affected. As such new methods should be explored to share important communications with ESL students through local school staff. The OCDSB should endeavour to use direct language and be mindful that the inadvertent use of vague language may lead to confusion among students, as demonstrated by the comments raised by Student Senators. For future OCDSB communications that are student centered, staff are recommended to give opportunities to student trustees to give feedback from a student perspective.

# Recapping 2020 Conferences

## OSTA-AECO

### Virtual Annual General Meeting and OSTA-AECO Equity Project

Both Student Trustees Wijeweera and Gagné gained high quality professional development and networking opportunities. Student trustees were given opportunities to develop their public speaking skills, learn about current topics in education advocacy and participate in engaging workshops. Later on in May, OSTA-AECO organized an online General Annual Meeting, where student trustees had the chance to welcome incoming student trustees and participate in leadership workshops online. This year OSTA-AECO released an equity survey with the goal of quantitatively identifying specific student groups underserved by Ontario's Public Education System. The survey received over 3,300 responses and will be compiled into OSTA's annual position paper featuring recommendations for the Education Ministry. The current student trustees recommend that senior staff, trustees and incoming student trustees read the publication, once published, to gain an updated understanding of inequities in public education.

# Recapping 2020 Conferences

## OSTA-AECO

### French Relations Conference 2020

This year OSTA-AECO's French Relations working group co-chairs, Prasith Wijeweera and Dylex Suan (Halton Catholic District School Board), had planned to hold the first French Relations Conference, at the Bayview Innovation Yards, with the goal of identifying issues present in Ontario's French as a Second Language programs (FSL). The conference was planned as a first towards OSTA-AECO's expansion into FSL advocacy. The full day event had scheduled workshops, guest speakers and roundtables, all with a goal of collecting student voice on the issues faced uniquely by students in FSL programs. While the conference was cancelled due to COVID-19, OSTA-AECO remains hopeful that the conference will take place in the future once the public health situation has improved. The French Relations working group would like to thank the work of Superintendent Hardie, who assisted in logistical matters and navigating the challenges with organizing conferences in the midst of labour action.

# Recapping 2020 Conferences

## Other Conferences

### OPSBA Public Education Symposium

In January 2020, Student Trustee Wijeweera had the chance to attend the Ontario Public School Board's Association's Public Education Symposium. Here he had the chance to attend workshops focussed on student voice and the future of the role of school board trustee. He also had the chance to represent OSTA-AECO's Public Board Council at the Education Program Work Team meeting where he was able to provide student insight on topics such as cyber-bullying and curriculum modernization.

# **Racial Inequities within the OCDSB**

Following the recent tragic death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, local advocates have raised numerous concerns of systematic and implicit racism within the OCDSB. Noting the sheer volume of inquiries, social media publications and complaints received surrounding this topic, it was deemed important to include this topic in the final report. The student trustees are highly concerned by the continued challenges faced by students of colour, including those from Black, refugee, immigrant; and Indigenous student populations.

The events have galvanized discussions on social media about alleged incidents of discrimination endured by past and present students over the last three decades. Having seen the ideas and concerns shared by students, it is worth noting that these community concerns should be used as an opportunity for the OCDSB to identify areas of improvements and continue discussions on how to create a more equitable education system. Specifically, the social issues arising from these student-led campaigns raise concern on four key areas for improvement and discussion for the OCDSB.

## **The difficulties Students Face in Raising Allegations of Discrimination Against School Staff Members.**

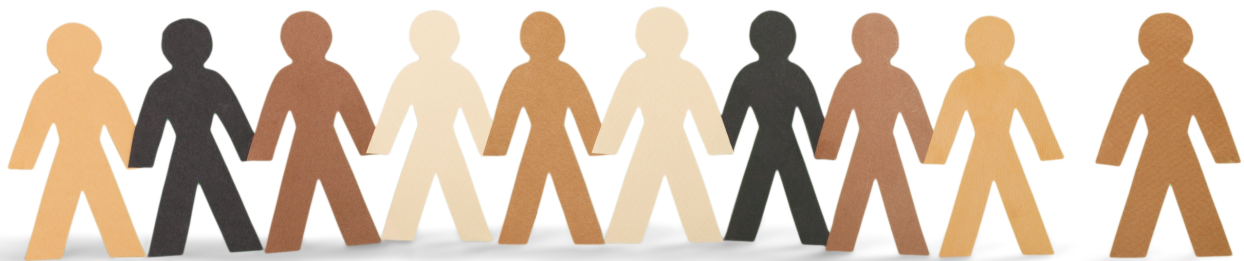
Students continue to lack the information and skills they need to respectfully self-advocate and raise concerns about issues they may face within a school system. Specifically, when students lack parents who have navigated the school system, it is intimidating, confusing and stressful for students to correctly raise concern about perceived staff malpractice within OCDSB schools. It is therefore recommended that start of year assemblies, at all OCDSB schools, inform students about the appropriate procedures to signal inappropriate staff behaviour. It must be noted that these should be done in an age appropriate manner and OCDSB staff must be afforded a right to privacy in such matters.





## **Implicit and Unconscious Racial Bias in OCDSB Schools**

Moreover, the student trustees are highly concerned about unconscious bias, profiling and other forms of implicit racism within the OCDSB. These incidents are difficult to identify and there is not much cohesive research data as a result. These incidents can range from certain racial groups being disproportionately questioned by school administration in the hallway to inadvertently patronizing behaviour towards the parents of minority groups. As the OCDSB continues to develop it's plan on the topic of equity, staff workshops are needed which address these issues. It is important that staff and students all work collaboratively towards reducing such biases.



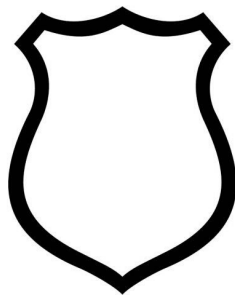
## **The Need for Greater Student Voice from Disadvantaged Student Groups**

While the Student Senate and Presidents' Council effectively address mainstream issues in education advocacy, it must be noted that these committees do not accurately represent all student demographics. Nevertheless OCDSB senators and student council presidents have worked on using their own voices to elevate the voices of minority groups through charitable events and social media campaigns. As a next step for improvement, the OCDSB should explore new methods that can allow students underrepresented in board committees to raise their concerns and develop their leadership skills.



## **The Re-Evaluation of the School Resource Officer Program (SRO)**

Noting that there is not much Ottawa specific data that illustrates student perspectives on the SRO program, the OCDSB should pause the program and conduct a review of the program and the impact (both positive and negative) that it has on student populations. While no specific recommendations are presented currently, staff should consider board wide student consultations on the project similar to the consultation by the Toronto District School Board in 2016. This is of salient importance because this would allow staff and trustees to be aware of the relevant statistics before making a decision. Ultimately, such an action plan would allow the OCDSB to make a data-based decision that is most beneficial and appropriate for students. Any research which does take place must however also be critical of abstract data; stories and experiences which can carry truths are not always seen in numbers.



# Closing Remarks

## Prasith Wijeweera

Having started in this position with very little experience in advocacy, I have been able to learn from the talented staff and my fellow OCDSB trustees. Since my first speech in September when I could not get my microphone to work, I have learned about the complexities of working in an office environment and the nuances of advocacy. I would like to thank Trustees Ellis, Bell, Scott, Lyra and Blackburn for attending Student Senate meetings. While they may not realize it, their willingness to listen to students was well appreciated by me and the student senators. Next, I would like to thank Superintendent Hardie and Vice-Principal Gagnier for their work in guiding the senate, providing advice to the student trustees and being open to new ideas. Finally, I would like to recognize Myra Wells in Board Services and the staff in the OCDSB Printing Services for their role in supporting the logistics of my work. The OCDSB's Board of Trustees remains a professional institution with some very inspiring staff and I would like to thank the board for this role and the related professional development opportunities. Having seen the tremendous work undertaken by OCDSB senior staff to increase equity and diversity, I'm confident that this school district is on the right track towards their strategic goals. As previously mentioned, coming into this role, politics was something that I was quite unfamiliar with, but throughout my term I have come to appreciate the OCDSB's supportive work environment. To close, the advice that I give to staff and trustees is to not be afraid to explore new experiences, whether it be a hobby, career pathway or skills. You may find yourself pleasantly surprised by the outcome.

Kind Regards,

*Prasith Wijeweera*

## Ganaaboute Gagne

Having come into this role last September as an individual who for the most part harboured negative feelings for this institution, I can say this year and the district is much more complex than either I or my colleagues thought. The board has seen and observed that I will not hold my tongue, and this is no exception. The OCDSB is moving in the right direction, but not fast enough. Students in our district still grow up fearing their schools, they still grow up thinking they will never graduate, myself included. Acknowledging the hard work that is being done, I challenge the district to do better, and I am not the one to tell you how to do that.

I would like to thank several people though, primarily Superintendent Dorothy Baker, and the entirety of the Indigenous Education Team, not only for their supportive role this year but their continued agreeance to engage with me. I would also like to highlight the profound efforts of Student Senator Amina Elsharif, from EOM. She not only kept Prasith and me in check, but also pushed us towards new initiatives forcing us to become better people.

My parting task for the board is to connect with your constituents in a meaningful way; the inclusion and talk of diversity I have seen at the board are not reflected in our schools. Find those students and allow them to force you to be better people, and listen not for the sake of saying you listened, but for the sake of taking action.

*Ganaaboute Gagne*