

Monday, November 16, 2020

An open letter to the Interim Director of the TDSB

Dear Kathy Witherow,

It is now very apparent that almost every high school in Toronto will be required to offer in-person and online simultaneous instruction to at least some students. I am writing to urge you to put a stop to this grand experiment with the education and future of the students of the TDSB.

Put simply, there is no pedagogical evidence that this approach works for students; however, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that it does not. Moreover, it is an affront to all of the equity practices the TDSB stands for.

I ask you to consider the following:

1. How is a teacher to build the trusting relationship required for high quality education with each of their students when a portion of them are there in-person, while the rest are on a small screen situated in one area of their classroom?
2. How are the students on the very small screen going to feel a part of a larger community when they cannot see or interact with their fellow classmates? How will this impact the mental health of those students, especially if their need for virtual learning is already the product of disadvantage, a lack of privilege, or even of disability or illness experienced by someone in their own home life?
3. While differentiated instruction to meet the various learning needs of students has been a professional requirement of teachers for many years, asking teachers to simultaneously provide instruction in what basically amounts to two different classrooms at the same time is asking the impossible of teachers and putting their ability to continue to offer high quality, excellent instruction at great risk.
4. As the TDSB itself has acknowledged through the hours and hours of professional development offered to teachers so that they were able to hone their online teaching skills, teaching online and in-person are two completely different modes of teaching, and require very different approaches. Asking a teacher to do both simultaneously is like asking someone to play soccer on a field, while simultaneously playing soccer on a device.

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We understand that the TDSB is attempting to offer a full breadth of programming in two different educational settings and without additional funding from the provincial government. There comes a point at which, as educators, we have to say that the experiment of running a dual education system during a pandemic crosses a bridge too far when it puts access to high quality education at risk, especially when that risk will most certainly have the greatest impact on its most vulnerable students. OSSTF Toronto believes that in implementing simultaneous instruction/learning, that risk is real.

We urge you to hire the number of teachers necessary to provide programming in a pedagogically responsible way or to adjust programming so that students can continue to be taught based on pedagogical evidence and in a mode of instruction that will enhance the students' learning experience.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Leslie Wolfe".

Leslie Wolfe  
President  
OSSTF Toronto

cc: Alexander Brown, Chair, TDSB

LW/ml