

DEFEND DEMOCRACY AND COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Thursday, February 5, 2015

The recent Review of the Toronto District School Board by Margaret Wilson and the consequent 13 directions from Education Minister Liz Sandals are troubling to say the least. There is no doubt that the intervention by the Ontario Government into the affairs of the TDSB is as much about closing schools and reducing the democratic role of Trustees as it is about fixing any dysfunctional relationships between Trustees and senior staff.

The review was set up to study operational issues that developed in the few years. While the behaviour of a small group of Trustees and Board staff was rightly called into question, the fact is that half the TDSB trustees are newly elected by the public. Democracy has worked in renewing the composition of the Board.

The report shifts the debate away from the ongoing problems created by the government's inadequate funding formula. It focuses on closing and selling off a staggering number of schools and childcare centres to solve the TDSB's financial difficulties. The misleading list of "under-utilized schools" fails to account for adult learners, childcare, or other uses which mark these locations as vital public spaces held in trust for this and future generations. It's clear that the drive for a mass sell-off reflects the global austerity agenda of privatizing public assets as well as services.

Toronto schools would be very different if past generations of Trustees had not fought for the quality of education for everyone in this city. Toronto's schools have been on the cutting edge on issues of equity and services for immigrant families for many years because of the efforts of parents and activist trustees. From creating alternative schools within the system; to English as a Second Language Programs, to Heritage Language and Black and African Heritage Programs; to LGBT equality; to school community outreach programs – all these measures are essential in making our schools inclusive and inviting.

Trustees represent the same number of residents – more than 100,000 – as our elected MPPs. Yet MPPs have both an office in Queen's Park and one in their riding, along with three full-time staff of their choosing. Why should trustees be evicted from their offices and stripped of their part-time assistants? Where are they to meet constituents, keep records and notes, and carry out their interactions with TDSB staff? Experience shows that every education system that shuts out grassroots input ends up failing significant sections of the population in societies as diverse and complex as ours.

The minister is suggesting that the TDSB is too big to operate effectively, yet the Liberals have centralized control of nearly all decision-making in an education ministry that oversees the operations for over two million students. The only accountability for this massive bureaucracy is during Question Period at Queen's Park. The Liberal government's own record inspires no confidence given the debacle of Bill 115 and the billions wasted on Public Private Partnerships,

gas plant closures, the ORNGE, e-Health and welfare payment fiascos. One thing is clear – no Liberal MPP campaigned last May on a program of closing Toronto schools.

This report and its recommendations will affect all who work in or with the public education system, parents whose children attend public schools, and the vitality of communities that surround schools. We all need to be concerned and be vigilant to oppose closing of local schools and support Trustees in their role as advocates for the local education system.

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