

May 12 2005

To: Board of Trustees of Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board

From: Judith Bishop

Regarding: **Background Material to Support Motion regarding High Needs Schools**

The Hamilton-Wentworth District School has a considerable problem in its midst, which it has neither fully acknowledged nor tackled in a holistic manner. It has some schools, which have a large and overwhelming number of students experiencing a variety of social, emotional, physical, and cognitive problems. There is little discussion concerning how poorly some of these students are doing academically, and if there is any, there is often a complete lack of expectations, by prefacing any remarks by such things as “ well what do you expect, this is a blue collar city”. Yet as Fiona Nelson, a well-known former Toronto trustee wrote, “children do not divide into winners and losers, unless we choose to divide them so” (*The Health of our Children- the Health of Our Community* excerpt from the Minutes of the Toronto Board of Education 1997). This memo to the Board is asking the trustees to consider and support what might be needed to make all of our students winners in the high needs areas of our city.

Disadvantage in Hamilton Concentrated in Lower City

The difficulties faced by some of Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board schools are not felt by all boards of education as the degree of disadvantage in Hamilton is only matched by Toronto. The Social Planning and Research Council’s disturbing report on poverty in Hamilton, *Incomes and Poverty in Hamilton*, 2004, show that nearly twenty – five per cent of all Hamilton’s children, and sixteen per cent of all families are living in poverty. The incidence of poverty is high in some areas, particularly in the lower city. In Wards 2 and 3, 38% to 42% of all persons are living in low-income households.

There is an overlap with areas of poverty and the Social Index score. Statistics Canada identifies areas where social vulnerability exists using variables such as unemployment, low income, income derived from social assistance, residents without a high school diploma, recent immigration, residents who do not speak English or French, residents who do not own their own home, residents who have moved within the last year, and lone parent families. These neighborhoods are then given one social index score. The higher the index number the greater the vulnerability. Certain neighborhoods emerge with high index scores: Central Lower Hamilton (9) East Lower Hamilton (8), South West Lower Hamilton (7) West Lower Hamilton (7) and North Lower Hamilton (7).

Most of these same neighborhoods also show low scores in the Early Development Index (EDI) that measures readiness for school. Children with low scores on two or more EDI domains are likely facing difficulties in school. The proportion of students with low scores was highest in North Lower Hamilton, and Central Lower Hamilton (*Early Child Development in Hamilton 11: How Our Children are Making the Transition to School: Highlights of the Data*. 2004).

Students from Low SES may struggle in school.

Students from low socio-economic status backgrounds do less well in school than those from the general population. Levin, Ross, Scott and Smith have shown that in grade school children living in poverty score substantially lower in standardized tests and are more likely to be identified as special needs students. *The Canadian Fact Book on Poverty* asserts that they are twice as likely to drop out of school. R.W. Cowell believes that they are up to four times less likely to access post-secondary education. Using data from the *Canadian Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth*, Doug Wilms has shown that, for children under eleven years of age, the odds that a child from a low socio-economic status (SES) background will have more cognitive difficulties and behaviour problems are about a third higher than for a child from an average SES background, and these differences are seen early. Speech and language difficulties are also associated with low socio-economic status. These facts do not mean that low SES students are incapable of doing well in school, only that more supports are needed to do so, both in the school and the community. When disadvantaged students are congregated together this places especial demands on schools.

Schools with a High Concentration of Students with Needs

All schools have some children who need especial attention. However, the schools in the low income neighborhoods, which also have high social index scores, whose children come to schools behind in skills shown by other students in the district and below the Canadian average, have such a high concentration of needs that they place a great deal of stress on the ability of schools to cope. J Doug Wilms, Director of the Canadian Research Institute, describes the strain on teachers. He believes that in any regular classroom of 25 students, a teacher is likely to have about 7 students who are vulnerable. In circumstances where there are large concentrations of vulnerable students, then teachers could be faced with 10 to 12 vulnerable children.

“ Moreover there would be fewer children who served as role models for acceptable behaviour and engagement in academic pursuits. I believe most teachers would agree that under these conditions, it is nearly impossible to meet the needs of all children” (J.Douglas Wilms *Vulnerable Children* p 373, 2002).

The external reviewers of special education who visited Hamilton schools in 2004 commented that they visited schools where there were large student needs. From equity standpoint there is concern that a student with a difficulty may not receive support there while they might in other schools, as they are lost in the large range of problems the high-needs school face. The review of Canadian findings from the 2000 OECD PISA study found that low SES students perform worse in literacy if they are in a school of students only from low SES backgrounds than if they attended a school with a student population from a higher range of SES. (*Variations in Literacy Skills among Canadian Provinces: Findings from the OECD PISA*). All this evidence points to the need for special attention and focus to be paid to schools with a large number of high needs students.

Compensatory Education

There has been recognition of the special requirements of schools with large numbers of children of low socio-economic status for a long time. The Plowden Report defined areas

of geographic disadvantage where extra resources were needed for the schools there if their students were to succeed. It described the limited experiences that poorer children were likely to have had in relation to those from more middle class homes. The report particularly drew attention to the weaker vocabulary of children from poor families, and the use of speech at home which might differ from standard English. (*Children and Their Primary Schools Department of Education and Science, U.K 1967*) Recent research confirms that there are indeed differences in vocabulary between young children from different socio-economic classes that have profound effects on future learning and literacy. The concept of compensation for educational disadvantage was adopted in Ontario, and there have been provincial grants, now called Learning Opportunity grants, at least since the 1980s.

Hamilton identified areas of educational priority in the late 1960s, called originally Educational Needs of the Old City (ENOC). 10 elementary schools were so identified in the north end, increased by a further 7 in 1984. Extra resources were made available, such as smaller classes, full time school social workers, and small grants for field trips and emergency food. They housed the first junior kindergarten programs in the district.

Hamilton's Compensatory Education Reports

There have been several reports that reflect changing concepts of the relationship between education and poverty. The 1984 report concentrated largely on social aspects of education. Solutions were seen in terms of provision of social workers, school nourishment programs, and social skills programs for badly behaved students. No mention was made of curriculum or pedagogy. (*Compensatory Education 1984*).

In 1989 a report on high needs schools in the north –west considered work from the *Ontario Child Health Study*. In 1991 an Action Team report re-examined many of the issues facing compensatory education, including the need to include secondary and as well as elementary schools, and recognizing that “ the school building represents a major resource as a site for the organising of supports for children and or their families”. The recommendations that included surveying schools based on socio-economic factors, a pilot all- day kindergarten, and an increased emphasis on literacy, were not implemented. With amalgamation of the city and the county boards of education all schools received junior kindergarten (all city schools have had the program since 1980), compensatory schools lost their full time social workers, the number of specialized ESL teachers dwindled, funding for nourishment programs disappeared, and extra funding for smaller classes was temporarily disbanded to be re-instated later.

In 2001 a policy on compensatory schools was passed as a pilot. It provided an objective tool for determining which were the highest needs schools, and this is to be evaluated periodically for its validity and used annually. The pilot asked for an annual report on compensatory schools and suggested using the extensive work of the Canadian School Boards Association “ *The Poverty Intervention Profile: 1999*, and “ *Action Against Poverty: School Boards Making a Difference” 2001*, which stressed early childhood education, partnerships with the community, curriculum and instructional issues as well as the need to address staff development and teacher recognition in these schools.

However, although the data for determining high needs schools has continued to be used and refined, the pilot itself was never implemented.

Present situation

Since 2001 there has been an increased instructional focus with the placement of special literacy assignment teachers in most high needs elementary schools. Schools have some extra social work support, but not the full time social workers of the past. There are full-day pilot programs for kindergarten in four schools. Extra resources for supplies are still provided along with some extra staffing, which will be cut back this coming budget year. Secondary high- needs schools have been included in some extra resources and provided with staffing for at risk students. However, the main development is the leadership that has come from individual principals. They have taken advantage of any community resource they can find to support the students in their schools, and with little system support, have developed strong community ties with their neighborhood agencies that really place their schools as hubs in their communities. The new pilot Best Start program, which will largely encompass these schools, gives promise of further development of children's services around the school in a neighborhood. As this project will have City leadership, there should also be development of joint city and board planning for children.

There are some common themes in the local approach to compensatory education. There is some recognition of the distinct needs of high- needs schools in some areas. Programs providing early childhood education and development were recognized early on as especially needed for these high-needs schools. However, apart from Scott Park, no child care centre was ever placed there, even when the funds were available during the NDP government years. There has not been a sustained emphasis on improved attainment and instructional support, and there has been little accountability for the funds given. There is a pattern of giving supports and then removing some of them. Recommendations are made in reports but some are not implemented. In the 1960s support was more substantial for the compensatory school compared to other schools than now when all schools have junior kindergarten and some social work support. As the late Dr Dan Offord used to say, programs designed for the children of the poor are taken over by the middle classes. There is a lack of a consistent, coherent and integrated approach to the needs of these schools.

Seriousness Academic problems in Hamilton's High Needs Schools

But another reason why the approach of HWDSB to high needs schools must be re-examined is because students in these schools are doing very poorly academically.

Peter Moffat is the former director of the Grand Erie Board of Education. He has compiled data covering the Grand Erie, Hamilton-Wentworth and Halton boards of education. He uses a tool called a Socio-economic Marker (SEM), which is derived from census material, measuring average family income, lone parent families, percentage mobility in the previous year, percentage of adults with no high school diploma, and the percentage who are unemployed. Most of these indicators are the same used to compile

the Social Index described earlier, and like that tool, each school is given a single score for all the indicators. He has taken HWDSB's top ten schools, middle ten, and lowest ten schools by socio-economic marker, if the school had four years of EQAO results available. His ten lowest SEM schools correlate with acknowledged schools with high needs.

His findings are these:

On three assessments over four years,

- The top SEM group of schools reached or exceeded provincial scores 90 times out of a 120 opportunities
- The middle SEM group of schools reached or exceeded provincial scores 66 times out of 120 opportunities
- The lowest SEM group of schools reached or exceeded provincial scores **2 times out of 120 opportunities.**

(HWDSB students as a whole reached the provincial average 2 times out of 12).

There are schools where more than three-quarters of the school is not reading at the provincial level. A high reading level is a strong indicator of success at high school, and these students are at risk of not getting a diploma. Students in HWDSB's highest- needs schools are being allowed to fail, and their opportunities for using education as a means to lift themselves out of poverty are diminished.

Schools can make a difference.

We can whenever and wherever we chose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us; we already know more than we need to do that; and whether or not we do it, it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact we haven't so far"

Ron Edmonds a teacher in Lord Dufferin Public School Report 1993 from Educational Programming for Children living in Poverty: Possibilities and Challenges, Bill Maynes in The Erosion of Democracy in Education. 2001

The literature on the correlates for effective schools identifies the following

- Safe & Orderly Environment
- Clear and Focused Mission
- Climate of High Expectations for Success:
 - This seems to be especially important in schools with a large number of disadvantaged students. For example, a fairly recent study by the U.S. Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence of top-scoring Kentucky schools with large numbers of poor children, found that these schools succeed because teachers believe all children can learn. They have high expectations for students and staff.
- Opportunity to Learn, Time on Task
- Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress
- Positive Home-School Relations
- Strong Instructional Leadership.

In addition students living in poverty can achieve if there are comprehensive school-wide programs (Slain and Fashola 1998), pedagogical approaches which focus on higher

levels of thinking (Knapp and associates 1995), and the presence of tutoring programs such as Reading Recovery (Slain and Fashola 1998).

Successful High- Needs Schools Initiative

In addition many boards have introduced special initiatives aimed at high-needs schools. Bill Maynes identified 145 Canadian Educational Poverty programs in 1998, of which 91 depended on temporary funding and most had not been evaluated. The most comprehensive, evaluated, educational-poverty-program in Canada was the Project School Initiative at Lord Dufferin and Park Public schools in the former Toronto School Board. The central goal was enhancing equity for children in poverty, as there was a concern that there was a disproportionate percentage of students from inner-city schools in vocational courses. The project schools were assigned additional staff in the form of a project resource team which co-ordinated project work and provided on-going site based staff development. An evaluation showed the project was successful in increasing the percentage of students achieving at benchmark level 3 or above. The elements of the project were

- Multi-leveled approaches e.g. homework clubs, volunteer tutor, literacy approaches; First Steps training for staff, storytelling project involving parents
- Approach was adaptive and responsive to the community.
- Leadership was democratic and anti-racism was incorporated into the schools.
- Attention to the hidden curriculum ” no words need to be spoken for the children in these schools to know that their parents are valued and respected members of the community, and that the life experiences of their families are honoured” Bill Maynes saw “that students see themselves and their experiences reflected in the curriculum” Boys, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, need to be helped to see connections between school and their own experiences, and curriculum should reflect their experiences.
- A collaborative culture and in-schools professional development was cultivated.
- Additional resources were provided: extra educational assistants, 3.5 project teachers, and 3 inner city teachers to each school.
- The orientation of the schools was to student achievement. Tests are taken seriously but they do not distort the curriculum towards the passing of tests. (Bill Maynes 2001)

Examples from Other School boards

Other schools boards also provide extra resources to their identified high needs schools: the Vancouver School Board provides extra funds for student trips; a hot lunch program for all students; extra time of a Counselors (social worker) 2 full days and 2 afternoons a week; youth and family worker 4 days; full time neighborhood assistant (community worker) with 5 languages; and inner City Staff Assistant who administered Roots of Empathy and other activities. All day kindergarten is provided for ESL, special needs and first nations students. There is also a project teacher (literacy teacher).

The Winnipeg School Board has a special assessment process which is used to combat the high mobility of students from school to school, and which aims to prevent students' falling through the cracks.

The Peel Board has introduced teams of teachers in 24 high-needs schools. Each school has a literacy coach, an ESL teacher with a literacy focus, and a Reading Recovery teacher.

The Upper Grand Board of Education has an action plan which links schools to community partners; links support, monitoring and accountability to school improvement plans; provides additional resources for instruction, field trips, and Child and Youth Counselor support; places skilled teachers in the schools and considers staff development; provides special programs and possible reduction in class size.

The Toronto District School Board, as reported in the Toronto Star on May 4 2005, is considering wrap-around services to seven inner-city schools which would serve as hubs for children's services. "Schools that address students' lives beyond the classroom level the playing field for children who struggle with poverty, language barriers and stressful home lives". It would also provide extra programming funds, and hand-picked staff, including a community outreach worker. There would be rigorous assessment of students' progress.

J Douglas Wilms lends his voice to the need for additional resources for high needs schools. Boards "can provide compensatory funding for schools in low socioeconomic areas". This might be achieved through increased funding, or through such means as ensuring that low SES schools are the first to receive new equipment, and obtain in-service training and other benefits to teachers in low SES schools. *Vulnerable Children p.373.*

In Conclusion

"Children do not divide into winners and losers, unless we choose to divide them so"

Hamilton has an exceptional number of students who live in poverty. They are concentrated in schools in the lower city. In response to the needs of these students, there has been a history of compensatory education in Hamilton to try to ensure that students can be successful. Schools with high proportions of disadvantaged students can make a difference and their students can be successful, especially if they work with their local communities. However, compensatory education needs to be strengthened as the number of disadvantaged students is growing, and because student achievement is weak. A firmer and more comprehensive commitment to high-needs schools by HWDSB is needed.

A suggested solution is to establish a committee with representation from identified high-needs schools, to develop:

1. Procedures to determine the degree of support and resources required to assure all students in these schools reach their potential, having consulted available best practices and research, and to be completed before January 2006;
2. An action plan to address long standing issues in these schools which include, but are not limited to: low student achievement; teacher recruitment and retention; staff development; teacher and principal professional recognition; student services

- support; gender issues; English-as-a Second language; and student retention and mobility; and be presented to the Board by December 2005;
3. A report on progress on the action plan and an updated plan for the following year in these high-needs schools to be presented to the Board annually each fall.