

**West ARC Proposal: Social Communications Classroom for Middle and High School  
Asperger Syndrome, NVLD and Similar Youth**

**May 31, 2011**

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**West ARC Proposal: Social Communications Classroom for Middle and High School Asperger Syndrome, NVLD and Similar Youth**

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We are proposing to establish a Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) Social Communications Program for youth with complex needs which could include Aspergers Syndrome, Non-Verbal Learning Disorder (NVLD), High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (HF-ASD) or similar conditions, but who are doing grade level work and are university and/or college bound. Many of these youth simultaneously face issues with anxiety and depression. Furthermore, some of these youth may also have ADHD, OCD, Tourette's, Sensory Issues, whether formally diagnosed or not, which would make the social, academic and emotional factors of high school life increasingly difficult to deal with. This program should not be restricted to official diagnoses, as Aspergers Syndrome, High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder, Pervasive Development Disorder and Non Verbal Learning Disorder are all under-diagnosed for numerous reasons.

We are proposing that the HWDSB implement a three year middle-school and a five-year high school for this cohort of youth. In both programs, the model would involve the students generally taking three academic courses each term plus a Social Communications Class. The program would be designed to be a continuous middle school and high school paired program; one pair for each of the three HWDSB clusters, including Cluster West. It is important the paired program be housed in natural neighbourhood-progression schools to facilitate on-going relationships with neurotypical classmates. The HWDSB may wish to begin with a pilot version of the program in a pair-location to be determined, given space allocations, staffing, high needs and other considerations. Possibly, the program could be placed at an International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program school. Currently, there is no specifically designed program for this cohort. We are only aware of programs for moderate and lower functioning Autism youth and like conditions.

Ultimately, the program would have 6-8 students in each class from Grade 6-8 in middle school, as well as in years 1-5 of the high school program. To staff the program at the middle school level, the program would need one and a half teachers plus two child and youth workers/teaching assistants (for Grade 6-9 combined). At the middle school level, the class would teach the students' core subjects, as well as support the students' social communication needs. At the high school level, we propose two teachers and four child and youth workers/teaching assistants (for years 1-5 of the high school cohort combined). This class would support all academic course work, as well as the students' social communication needs.

For each age group, the social communication classroom period acts as a place and time where the youth may discuss and expand whatever they need to discuss/digest that day or week (e.g., sexuality, dating, parents, employment); or, if there is no pressing need, the teacher and child and youth workers/teaching assistants can provide the extra support and skill learning to achieve success in their coursework. If the students choose not to eat in the cafeteria, they are free to eat in their physical classroom (all four age groupings). Additionally, the classroom could be used as a space where a student from one age group could retreat if need be during the day; even if it is a different age

group's class time. Furthermore, the teacher and child and youth workers/teaching assistants are there as a resource for the academic course-load teachers.

Models of this program already exist in multiple boards in Ontario offering varying degrees of support. Models, that we are aware of, include:

- Peel District School Board (PDSB)
- Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (DPCDSB)
- Thames Valley District School Board District School Board (TVDSB)
- Toronto District School Board (TDSB)
- Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB)
- York Region District School Board (YRDSB)
- Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board (HWCDSB)

The "Transition Program" offered at the PDSB most closely mirrors what we are proposing. At the high school level, currently eleven high schools offer programs for this cohort and they are looking to add more. Five of these schools are for youth who are hoping to go on to university while the other six are for less academically inclined youth. Both types of high school programs have 1  $\frac{2}{3}$  teachers and four child and youth workers/teaching assistants assigned to four age groups and the lunch period over the course of the day. As an illustration, Streetsville Secondary School (academic stream) has 20 students total this year and in the past has had up to 28. Both the academic stream and the applied stream allow for flexibility for some youth to stay up to 21 years of age, as there may be a cohort within the group whose anxiety is too high for them to carry a three classes per year academic/applied/apprentice course-load. Students enrolled in the more academic stream typically complete their requirements in five years.

At the PDSB middle school level, they offer all sorts of placements, but specifically for this cohort: they offer a number of classes throughout their region where they have one teacher and two child and youth workers/teaching assistants for 8 youth.

Below, is a description of some of the ways in which the PDSB "Transitions" program operates.

Peel District School Board's High School and Middle School Transition Program  
(created in 1999)

"Because AS students learn and process information in a manner generally incompatible with the way it's usually presented in class, they need a reduced course load. AS students tend to lack general high-level thinking and problem-solving skills and have difficulty with recall related to problem solving.

The reduced load lets them spend time in the integrated classroom to interact with other students and learn the regular curriculum, often at the academic level. It also lets them return to the home-base class to get extra help through re-teaching, breaking down assignments into manageable pieces, having deadlines extended and having access to computers or scribes.

Wherever possible, efforts are made to match AS students with teachers who have a teaching style and personality that supports their learning style. Another benefit of a reduced course load is that the maturity level of these students is about two-thirds of their chronological age, so it makes little sense to rush them through high school.

Homework is often a major problem. School is already stressful, and if they take the stress from school home with them as homework, their family life can become even more difficult. AS students need time during the day to do homework.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of the Peel program is that these kids are succeeding and even enjoying school, many for the first time, and they are doing so in a traditionally inflexible learning environment-the local high school. According to Richard Hales, head of the Peel District School Board's innovative Asperger's program, the key to their success is ensuring the "maximum flexibility for students who tend to be rigidly inflexible. For many teachers, this has required a significant paradigm shift, but this is the foundation of the program and it's working."

The Middle School Transition Program at David Leeder Middle School in Mississauga follows the same approach as the secondary school program and focuses on preparing the AS students academically and socially for the transition from elementary to secondary school.

The contained class of eight students, taught by one teacher with two teaching assistants, works on priming the children for the work, routine and stresses of the regular classroom. Students spend about 35 per cent of their time here each day, preparing for what they will learn in their classes, which helps reduce their anxiety. They also learn social skills, like sharing, dealing with obstacles and interacting with other children, both in the classroom and on the playground. They are excused from gym classes, as open spaces cause tremendous anxiety.

According to Hales, putting the AS students in one location has allowed a peer group to develop. The students in the Peel program, who were socially marginalized in their previous schools, have also gradually developed friendships with mainstream students. For some AS students, it's the first time in a long time they have been invited to parties (the invitations tend to stop coming early in the elementary years). These friendships also reinforce their academic success, as the students are more eager to attend school so they can have fun with their friends. Hales says, "The increased enjoyment of the overall school experience has resulted in reduced levels of stress and anxiety, fewer meltdowns and a more relaxed approach to academic tasks."

Hales views students with AS from several perspectives. He has a 13-year-old son with Asperger's in another board, and as the pervasive development disorder (PDD)/autism itinerant in Peel, he can compare the progress of students in the Peel Region transition programs with that of AS students in various other settings. He says, "I can say with confidence that the approach taken in the Peel program is the best. It balances mainstream integration with intensive smaller group support, and this has allowed students to achieve academic success while reducing stress and anxiety." <sup>1</sup>

This cohort of youth is susceptible to a number of mental health co-morbidities and a program as described above would generally be more able to support these youth than full inclusion with little or no direct support. "Some children develop depression and anxiety as they get older, possibly because they start to understand that they are being teased or rejected. Anxiety tends to be more long lasting than depression."<sup>2</sup> "It appears that those who present with psychiatric disorders are the children who have better communication skills, specifically language comprehension. It seems that the better the language, the more likely the teenager will experience an anxiety disorder or depression. It could be because children with better language have a better understanding of social-

emotional situations and this greater insight leads to depression.”<sup>3</sup> Studies within the last fifteen years report rates of co-morbid mental health disorders from 40-60%, 67%, 70.8% and between 93.3% in HF-ASD and 100% in Aspergers.<sup>4 5 6 7</sup> Studies have shown that Asperger’s individuals are at even greater risk than HF-ASD for depressive disorders and ADHD, though both have high rates.<sup>8</sup> In fact, “those most at risk for co-morbidity of challenging behaviours and psychiatric illness are those with better cognitive and language skills, and Asperger individuals with co-morbidities outnumber HF-ASD individuals with co-morbidities.”<sup>9</sup> Clearly, this cohort is very prone to co-morbid conditions; an implementation of a program such as we are proposing can help the board support these students’ needs.

Youth diagnosed with Asperger’s are also at risk in multiple areas, besides mental health co-morbidities, including:

- “Poor school performance, attendance or drop-out
- Failure to transition successfully to post-secondary education
- Problems with the law and inappropriate behaviour
- Social isolation and development of unhealthy relationships
- Physical and emotional bullying and other forms of victimization
- Poor organizational and life skills
- Unemployment or under-employment”<sup>10</sup>

Supporting these youth must be a priority, as this cohort has difficulties in adulthood in terms of independent living and employment and the crucial ingredient for success is the appropriate supports early on. Professor Peter Szatmari (Chedoke Health Chair in Child Psychiatry at McMaster University) notes “Current supports are more important than childhood predictors, as there is little or no predictive ability for those with IQ>70.”<sup>11</sup> Implementing a program of this type will give the board a way to support the multiple areas of risk that these students present.

The needs of this cohort are not going away. Rates of ASD are increasing 10-17 percent annually<sup>12</sup> for numerous reasons from better diagnosing and awareness to increasing environmental triggers.<sup>13 14 15</sup> “There has been an increase in the percentage of children with AS/PDDNOS, resulting in an increasingly greater proportion of individuals with a typical IQ vs. ID (Intellectual Delay). As Canada has invested in early intervention in childhood, this will increase the IQ/Language profiles of those with ASD. However, early intervention is not sufficient to address the needs of young adults; predictors of childhood outcome are NOT the same predictors of adult outcome.”<sup>16</sup> A program, such as we are proposing, will allow the HWDSB to support this growing cohort.

AS & PDDNOS comprise the largest component of the ASD population<sup>17</sup> and are the target of this proposal. Other boards of similar size have implemented programs such as this with great success. We believe that in HWDSB we have the numbers to make this program viable. We are familiar with many parents and students at three elementary schools and two middle schools that feed in to one of the HWDSB West High School ARC high schools. Informally, we know of approximately 20 children between Grade 1 and Grade 8 among those three elementary and two middle schools that would benefit from this program supporting this type of higher functioning spectrum student (or, approximately, 2-3 children per grade across these schools). Assuming that these rates hold throughout the West Cluster (and the other two clusters), there would certainly be

enough students. The members of our delegation outside of this particular high school's bounds are in similar situations and can all report the same informal rates and needs. Add in students outside of the board, who are pursuing other school options, the population increases even further.

Currently, this cohort is under-served in our board. Many youth leave our system to attend private special needs schools, including: TALC Academy, Woodview Learning Centre, Wildwood Academy, The Pine School, Missing Links Academy, Colin Macdonald Community School and Chisholm Academy High School. Many others are enrolled in various independent and religious schools in the greater Hamilton region, as well as the greater Halton region. In addition, many other youth switch to the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board, especially at the high school level. Many leave mainstream education completely and opt for homeschooling. By offering an appropriate program for these youth, the HWDSB would help to stop the attrition out of the board and potentially even reverse the flow.

Such a program would be in-line with the HWDSB's Core Commitments:<sup>18</sup>

- Vision - all students achieving their full potential
- Mission - Providing relevant, responsive education so that each student becomes a life-long learner and contributing citizen in a diverse world
- Values – Respect, Creativity, Excellence and Citizenship

Additionally the program would be in-line with the Special Education Department's commitment "to providing appropriate educational opportunities for improved student learning for all students"<sup>19</sup> and with the Board's endeavors "to meet the needs of all special education students in the most enabling environment, in accordance with parental preference."<sup>20</sup> This program also has the advantage of being proposed during the ARC process<sup>21</sup> and fits in perfectly with the Board's Learning for All: HWDS Program Strategy.

"Our Program Strategy is rethinking the way we offer programs and facilities, so that we can best meet the needs of each of our students in the 21st century. We want students to have choice, support and direction as they benefit from the knowledge and skills acquired from their educational program. We are restructuring what we offer, where we offer it and how we can help all students achieve their full potential. We know today's learners require new approaches, and that we must respond with engaging programs and safe, nurturing and innovative learning environments.

We envision a school system in which all students can find what they need at any of our schools. A place where the placement of programs, supports and facilities makes strategic sense. A place where students feel safe, welcome, included and energized as they are moving closer to their goals. This is about providing a pathway to success for every single one of our students."<sup>22</sup>

Specifically, this program would be accommodated under Tier 3 of the Board's Learning for All: HWDS Program Strategy, "Students with mental health, anxiety, and/or behavioural needs and students with socio-communication disorders."<sup>23</sup>

We wholeheartedly agree with Autism Ontario's statement in Autism Ontario's Education Policies 2007, but would like to highlight two specifically: #3, "Education for students with ASD includes not only programming for an academic curriculum, but also programming

to address the communication, social skills and behavioural challenges associated with ASD, while leveraging student strengths.”<sup>24</sup> And most significantly, #5, “Students with ASD have access to a range of placement options based on individualized student needs, regardless of geographical location. This will include all ranges from full inclusion to full segregation at all school boards.”<sup>25</sup> The program we’re advocating incorporates lessons from both the inclusion and segregation models.

Hamilton is fortunate to have many experts in relevant fields in our community at McMaster University, Chedoke Hospital, The Offord Centre for Child Studies and Mohawk College, Brock University and Woodview Mental Health and Autism Services; all of whom may be of consulted in setting up this program.

It is proposed that a trial paired program for the HWDSB be implemented in Cluster West in the 2012-2013 school year, with a simultaneous start for both the middle and high school programs. Quickly followed by expansion of a second academic, three year (middle school) and five year (high school) program pair in the next cluster. While, simultaneously, initiating a trial for a similar program pair for the applied, three year (middle school) and seven year (high school) program stream. Ultimately, the goal would be to offer, at least, two program pairs per cluster for youth of this nature; one pair per cluster for the academic stream, as well as another program pair for the applied stream. Following the PDSB model, housing the applied and the academic program at the same school may not be optimal. Where necessary, the youth may need to be bussed in. As per funding, we cannot comment on the direct cost per fiscal year, as we do not have that data. Perhaps, this data could be collected at the Board level from PDSB colleagues.

“The protective influence of a positive high school experience for these students cannot be underestimated. Teachers and school communities can play an essential role in recognizing and addressing not only the academic needs of these youth, but also their social and emotional needs. Attention to work skills and life skills are a vital aspect of the curriculum for this population and are thought to increase their resilience and adaption to adult life. We have witnessed the results of a positive high school experience that sets these youth on a positive course into adulthood, but unfortunately, this is not the experience for many.”<sup>26</sup> By creating a supportive and appropriate program for these youth is not only protective to their mental health and self-reliance skills, but it is crucial for this cohort’s future adulthood. Certainly, our delegation would be happy to assist in anyway possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, Leanne, “Asperger’s syndrome: the invisible disability”, *Professionally Speaking: The Magazine of the Ontario College of Teachers*, Dec. 2002, <[http://professionallyspeaking.oct.ca/december\\_2002/aps.asp](http://professionallyspeaking.oct.ca/december_2002/aps.asp)>

<sup>2</sup> CAIRN, Canadian Autism Intervention Research Network, “Developmental Trajectories Among Children with Pervasive Developmental Disorders: Summary of Findings from a Follow-Up Study of Children with Autism and Asperger Disorders”, n.d., <[http://www.cairn-site.com/en/print/documents/articles/follow\\_print.html](http://www.cairn-site.com/en/print/documents/articles/follow_print.html)>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Szatmari, P., Stages of Autism: Adolescence & Beyond, 3<sup>rd</sup> Biennial Conference, (April 20, 2010, 2:40 pm – 3:40 pm Special Presentation & Closing remarks),

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Variation in the Outcome of ASD; Implications for Public Policy

<<http://www.woodview.ca/wp-content/uploads/Special-Presentation-Dr.-Peter-Szatmari.pdf>>

<sup>5</sup> Simonoff, E., Pickles, A.C., Chandler, S., Loucas, T., & Bird, G., (2008), Psychiatric disorders in children with autism spectrum disorders; prevalence, co-morbidity, and associated factors in a population-derived sample, *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 47, 921-929.

<sup>6</sup> Ghaziuddin, M., Weidmer-Mikhail, E. & Ghaziuddin, N., (1998), Co-morbidity of Asperger Syndrome: A preliminary report, *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 42, 279-283.

<sup>7</sup> Mukaddes, N.M., Herguner, S. & Tanidir, C., (2010), Psychiatric disorders in individuals with high-functioning autism and Asperger's disorder: similarities and differences, *World Journal of Biological Psychiatry*, 8, 964-971.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Szatmari, P., Stages of Autism: Adolescence & Beyond, 3<sup>rd</sup> Biennial Conference, (April 20, 2010, 2:40 pm – 3:40 pm Special Presentation & Closing remarks), Variation in the Outcome of ASD; Implications for Public Policy

<<http://www.woodview.ca/wp-content/uploads/Special-Presentation-Dr.-Peter-Szatmari.pdf>>

<sup>10</sup> Sotddart, K., PhD., High School Students with Asperger Syndrome: Are the Youth at Risk? *Autism Matters, A Publication of Autism Ontario, Fall 2009, vol. 6, no. 2, Page 22* <

[http://www.autismontario.com/Client/ASO/AO.nsf/object/AM+Fall+2009/\\$file/AM+Fall+2009.pdf](http://www.autismontario.com/Client/ASO/AO.nsf/object/AM+Fall+2009/$file/AM+Fall+2009.pdf)>

<sup>11</sup> Szatmari, P., Stages of Autism: Adolescence & Beyond, 3<sup>rd</sup> Biennial Conference, (April 20, 2010, 2:40 pm – 3:40 pm Special Presentation & Closing remarks), Variation in the Outcome of ASD; Implications for Public Policy

<<http://www.woodview.ca/wp-content/uploads/Special-Presentation-Dr.-Peter-Szatmari.pdf>>

<sup>12</sup> Autism Speaks, "What is Autism?: How Common is Autism, What Causes Autism, n.d., <<http://www.autismspeaks.org/whatisit/index.php>>

<sup>13</sup> Autism Speaks, "What is Autism?: How Common is Autism, What Causes Autism, n.d., <<http://www.autismspeaks.org/whatisit/index.php>>

<sup>14</sup> Hertz-Picciotto I., Delwiche L., (2009), The rise in autism and the role of age at diagnosis, *Epidemiology*, 2009 Jan;20(1):84-90.

<sup>15</sup> UC Davis Health System, "UC Davis M.I.N.D. Institute study shows California's autism increase not due to better counting, diagnosis", 2009, <[http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/welcome/features/20090218\\_autism\\_environment/](http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/welcome/features/20090218_autism_environment/)>

<sup>16</sup> Szatmari, P., Stages of Autism: Adolescence & Beyond, 3<sup>rd</sup> Biennial Conference, (April 20, 2010, 2:40 pm – 3:40 pm Special Presentation & Closing remarks), Variation in the Outcome of ASD; Implications for Public Policy

<<http://www.woodview.ca/wp-content/uploads/Special-Presentation-Dr.-Peter-Szatmari.pdf>>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, About us @ HWDSB, About HWDSB, n.d., <<http://www.hwdsb.on.ca/aboutus/>>

<sup>19</sup> Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, Programs @ HWDSB, Special Education/Student Services, n.d., <<http://www.hwdsb.on.ca/programs/specialed/>>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, Secondary Accommodation Review Committee, n.d., <<http://www.hwdsb.on.ca/arc/>>

<sup>22</sup> Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, Staff @ HWDSB, Strategic Directions, Learning for All: HWDSB Program Strategy, n.d., <[http://www.hwdsb.on.ca/staff/strategic\\_directions/learning-for-all/](http://www.hwdsb.on.ca/staff/strategic_directions/learning-for-all/)>

<sup>23</sup> Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, Learning for All: HWDSB Program Strategy, Page 17, n.d.,

<[http://www.hwdsb.on.ca/staff/strategic\\_directions/learning-for-all/documents/Program-Strategy.pdf](http://www.hwdsb.on.ca/staff/strategic_directions/learning-for-all/documents/Program-Strategy.pdf)>

<sup>24</sup> Autism Ontario, Educational Policies, Approved by the Board of Directors: January 2007, Global Education Vision for Autism Ontario,

<[http://www.autismontario.com/Client/ASO/AO.nsf/object/Autism+Ontario+Education+Policies+2007/\\$file/Autism+Ontario+Education+Policies+2007.pdf](http://www.autismontario.com/Client/ASO/AO.nsf/object/Autism+Ontario+Education+Policies+2007/$file/Autism+Ontario+Education+Policies+2007.pdf)>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Sotddart, K., PhD., High School Students with Asperger Syndrome: Are the Youth at Risk? *Autism Matters, A Publication of Autism Ontario, Fall 2009, vol. 6, no. 2, Page 22* <

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**Appendix: Delegation**

**S.B. - Parent of one HWDSB child, Grade 8 (Asperger's)**

Our son was diagnosed with Asperger's when he was seven and was also 16 weeks premature. He is doing well academically, but socially, he struggles. He has high anxiety and is sometimes withdrawn. Many of his friends are from the Woodview Manor Social Life and Skills groups (three times a month during the school year). Unfortunately, his peers live all over the city and go to middle and high schools all over as well. A program such as the one at the Peel District School Board would be amazing for my son. The idea of a peer group that could support him and his self-esteem would make all the difference for his high school experience. If the HWDSB were unable to provide a classroom where he would be supported, then we would have to investigate placing him with the HWCDSB or elsewhere where there are classroom and EA supports for him. We would prefer to keep him with the HWDSB where he already has connections with other students.

**S.D. - Parent of three children, two HWDSB Grade 1 (NVLD) and JK, as well as a future student**

A specialized ASD program would benefit my child in a huge way. Many of the issues that face children diagnosed with NVLD don't emerge until grade 3 in the school curriculum; however the neuropsychologist who diagnosed my child told us that the most important intervention for him is to work on spatial and social skills now. To this point, we have been unable to access any help for our child either in the community or through the school board. His paediatrician was so dismayed at the lack of support that he suggested we consider a Montessori school where he can get the instruction he needs now, rather than waiting until much larger issues develop. He is a child who developed NVLD as a result of high doses of chemotherapy. He has dealt with many, many health problems to this point in his life. Anything that can be done for him, or any other child requiring accommodation for that matter, to either help or avoid further problems, should be done.

**B.J. - Parent of two HWDSB youth, Grade 10 (HF-ASD) and Grade 12**

I have been hoping for a program that would meet more of my son's unique needs. It has been a struggle to get the programs and supports in place just to help him to realize his academic potential. Often this has meant private schooling and a host of extracurricular programs in the kindergarten through grade 8 years. Now that he is in a public secondary school all my efforts have been focused on having the academic needs met at the expense of social and extracurricular activities. What I like about the proposed program is that it offers an opportunity for HFA and Asperger kids to develop social skills and relationships in a stable, long term, accepting and nurturing environment. This would allow them opportunities to fully participate in the activities of high school, developing friendships that span the years, being part of clubs that promote their often unique

interests and coaching them in the volunteering and cooperative aspects of high school life in preparation for participation in the community.

Additionally, the program would help students identify the kinds of modifications and accommodations that could help them cope, such as extensions, rewrites and alternatives to written tests, which they could be coached to go to their teachers and request. This is good preparation for later studies in college where they will need the kind of independence and self-analysis they will only have if it is explicitly taught. This is also true for the 40 hours volunteering that is part of the expectations for graduation. The program could help them identify what kinds of volunteering they could do, help them set it up and coach them in the necessary skills to be successful.

Right now my son is doing fairly well academically but high school produces a lot of anxiety for him without the friendships that make the experience easier. He is only the second student with autism in the school and any of the modifications required have to be reinvented with each new teacher. If a school was dedicated to meeting the needs of a cohort of kids it would quickly develop the expertise required and the result would be a more well rounded individuals graduating with the skills necessary for a productive future.

**L.K. - Parent of 4, one with ADHD and NVLD, transferred out of HWDSB, attending TALC Academy**

When my ADHD son was diagnosed with NVLD in grade four, it became apparent that his elementary school could not effectively accommodate the recommendations in his IEP. The class sizes were simply too big and the resource staff stretched too thin. After taking 3 months off work and devoting ourselves to trying to make the HWDBS elementary school work for him, we decided to leave the board and enrolled our son in a private school in Burlington. With small class sizes, and teachers familiar with my son's unique learning needs he has thrived. We are fortunate to be able to afford both the financial commitment and time commitment needed to drive him to and from Burlington. Due to the ADHD he has some unusual social mannerisms, which left him open to bullying at HWDSB. Additionally, we had to pick him up from his old school on several occasions because his escalating anxiety in relation to schoolwork and/or other students would eventually result in an outburst. In private school, with its smaller population, every teacher is familiar with his emotional triggers and anxiety has never escalated to high levels. In a program such as the one proposed with its small class sizes and teachers familiar with ADHD/NVLD, I am confident he could be successful.

One disadvantage to attending a school so far from our home is that his school friends are too far away to easily make after school/weekend arrangements with. To attend a middle school and secondary program such as the proposed program, he would be able to successfully attend a school within his cluster, potentially with his neighbourhood friends.

There are three children at my son's private school from our immediate neighbourhood, so we are not alone in searching for a program that meets the needs of our special children. I am very excited about the prospect of the proposed program and support it wholeheartedly!

**S.L. - Parent of two HWDSB children, Grade 4 (HF-ASD/Aspergers) and Grade 1**

Our son was first diagnosed when he was two and a half years old. He does well academically. He has difficulties with handwriting, processing speed and organization. Socially, he has many difficulties, as wants to fit in and be accepted, but his classmates do not reciprocate. He is often rebuffed, ignored and taunted, which results in frustration and anxiety. We fear that, as puberty approaches all the negatives will become that much more pronounced in him (and the other children). Something must be done to support children like our son. It is the right of every child to receive not only an education, but also a safe and secure education.

**L.M. - Parent of two children in both boards, HWCDSB Grade 9 (ASD) and HWDSB Grade 8, the Grade 8 will be joining sibling at the HWCDSB next year**

My oldest is diagnosed with ASD features. Both of my children have been in the HWDSB since their JK year. Upon entering high school, the HWDSB did not offer support for my son, so we moved him to the Catholic Board. At the Catholic Board, my son is in the 'locally developed' classes for special needs students of all sorts. He is doing locally developed and applied level work. This is not exactly the student this proposal is written for as my son is doing more applied work, but I am fully in support of this proposal and would have liked a similar program for students such as my child.

**S.M. - Parent of two HWDSB children, Grade 4 (Asperger's) and JK**

My son would benefit greatly from a specialized program for ASD students. In addition to living with Asperger's, he suffers from anxiety. Large class sizes and transitions are extremely difficult for him. A smaller class size with greater one-to-one supports would provide him with the best environment for optimal learning. Staff trained in ASDs would also help to diminish the misunderstandings and frustration he faces with other students and staff who may not understand his condition. We are currently investigating private schooling for our son, as there are very few resources for us in the public system. We would be fully supportive and actively involved in a program that would meet his needs as a child with Asperger's.

**K.M. - Parent of two HWDSB children, Grade 7 and Grade 4 (ASD)**

My younger child is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and is considered fairly high functioning. He is currently in Grade 4, has classmates that are kind to him and with a lot of one to one support and accommodation of his sensory sensitivities, among other issues, he has been improving academically. We have hope that he will one day attend a post-secondary program but this depends of course, on his progress through middle and secondary school. Adolescence presents social challenges for most youth, but I am concerned that added to these for my child are significant social communication difficulties that could serve as potential barriers to his success in middle and high school. I ardently support this proposal for a program in the HWDSB that would support youth with social communication difficulties to realize their academic potential by providing a learning environment which accommodates their unique needs, including sensory integration difficulties, social communication curriculum, and other supports necessary to

optimize learning for these students. And a proposal that supports these students to connect with one another may help to allay the anxiety so often experienced by youth with Asperger's Syndrome and High-Functioning ASD. Furthermore, I wholeheartedly support a similar program for the applied stream.

**T.S. - Parent of three ASD youth who are currently attending Woodview Learning Centre, one in Grade 9, twins in Grade 8, all will be enrolled in the HWCDSB**

My eldest son attended the Woodview Learning Centre from Grade 6 through to Grade 9. He is extremely high functioning, bordering on Asperger's. He does not have that formal diagnosis, as he was diagnosed years ago and has had a great deal of intervention. He does well in his course work in most areas, particularly math and geography. When investigating an appropriate high school placement for him, but keeping in mind my slightly lower functioning twin boys, I investigated the HWDSB and found that there were more supports for my children in the HWCDSB. At the HWCDSB my son will attend one resource class a day, an 'organizational' class with youth with a host of issues. In this classroom, their schoolwork is supported. He also will have the support of at least one EA placed in every single class; at HWDSB he would have received no support at all. The HWCDSB program is not specifically designed for Asperger/NVLD/or similar disorders however at least their program is providing supports within the classrooms. Having a program that would support Asperger/NVLD/or similar disorders and their unique issues would have altered my decision as to where to send my children.

**C.V. - Parent of two HWCDSB children, including Grade 7 extremely HF-ASD child**

Our family has always been in the HWCDSB. However, if a program such as the one described in the submitted proposal was to exist in the HWDSB, we would seriously consider switching boards. These children need to be supported and a program like the Peel program has always been my dream for my child.

**D.W., Parent of two HWDSB students, Grade 12 (Asperger's) and Grade 10**

Our son attended multiple schools (private and independent) before high school to address his uneven skill development and academic abilities. This took a toll on him socially where he was always the new kid in the class or school. When Asperger's is your diagnosis "reaching out" to community is particularly difficult. We've realized "looking normal" can be a double-edged sword with judgments being made routinely about what you should be able to do in the social world. While I feel the academic piece in high school has been attended to mostly well, this has come at the expense of organized outside social support because of his homework load, as he learns and processes information differently than his peers.

Having a school program where staff and the environmental set-up recognize the different academic, social and medical needs of these students would be wonderful, so that they can learn that people interactions don't always have to be scary as they develop their confidence to navigate beyond home and the school walls. Explicit instruction in these social aspects and access to consistent staff with whom they have

developed positive relationships with would help these students to better manage their ongoing anxiety and stress, reducing the secondary mental health issues that have resulted with our son.

**K.W. - Parent of three HWCDSB children, Grade 5 (Asperger's), Grade 7 (Gifted) and Grade 2**

Our son was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome at age 5, prompted by difficulty with social interaction in HWCDSB kindergarten. His teacher and the principal were very helpful in directing us toward resources. At the time of the diagnosis we considered a number of education alternatives, but chose to remain at HWCDSB because of the support we received from the board ASD resource and the school. Our child is now in Grade 5 and does very well academically with support and understanding from the school SERT, the classroom teacher and an EA shared with other students in the class.

While his social integration is improving, invitations to get together with friends outside of school are few and far between. I have no doubt that high school will present overwhelming challenges for him, as he is already an outsider in what I consider to be a reasonably supportive network. We have discussed sending our other children to the public board for high school, and I would prefer our son to be with his siblings. If the proposed program were available in the HWDSB, I would certainly contemplate switching all of our kids.

# **West ARC Proposal:**

**Social Communications Classroom  
for Middle and High School Asperger  
Syndrome, NVLD and Similar Youth**

**May 31, 2011**

# Delegation

- **S.B.**, Parent of one HWDSB child, Grade 8 (Asperger's)
- **S.D.**, Parent of three children, two HWDSB Grade 1 (NVLD) and JK, as well as a future student
- **B.J.**, Parent of two HWDSB youth, Grade 10 (HF-ASD) and Grade 12
- **L.K.**, Parent of 4, one with ADHD and NVLD, transferred out of HWDSB attending TALC
- **S.L.**, Parent of two HWDSB children, Grade 4 (HF-ASD/Aspergers) and Grade 1
- **L.M.**, Parent of two children in both boards, HWCDSB Grade 9 (ASD) and HWDSB Grade 8, the Grade 8 will be joining sibling at the HWCDSB next year
- **S.M.**, Parent of two HWDSB children, Grade 4 (Asperger's) and JK
- **K.M.**, Parent of two HWDSB children, Grade 7 and Grade 4 (ASD)
- **T.S.**, Parent of three ASD youth who are currently attending Woodview Learning Centre, one in Grade 9, twins in Grade 8, all will be enrolled in the HWCDSB
- **C.V.**, Parent of two HWCDSB children, including Grade 7 extremely HF-ASD child
- **D.W.**, Parent of two HWDSB students, Grade 12 (Asperger's) and Grade 10
- **K.W.**, Parent of three HWCDSB children, Grade 5 (Aspergers), Grade 7 and Grade 2

# **A Social Communications Classroom for Middle and High School Asperger Syndrome, NVLD and Similar Youth**

Could possibly include (besides above):

- HF-ASD, PDD-NOS or similar conditions
- This program should not be restricted to official diagnoses, as many conditions are under-diagnosed

# Student Profile

- Grade level work and are university and/or college bound, including, possibly International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program students
- Difficulties with social connections, social understanding and bullying
- Simultaneous anxiety, depression and/or other co-morbidities

# Continuous Middle School and High School Paired Program

- One pair per cluster
- Each middle school/high school pair in a natural neighbourhood progression to facilitate on-going relationships with neurotypical classmates.
- Pilot pair to be determined, given space allocations, staffing, potential population for classroom and other considerations.
- Currently, there is no specifically designed program for this cohort (to our knowledge)

# High School Program Design

- Five-year degree program, possibly at an International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program High School
- Five years worth of students distributed among four classes
- Students take:
  - Three academic courses per term
  - One Social Communications Class per term
- 2 teacher and 4 child & youth workers/teaching assistants (4 classes a day and lunch)
- 6-8 students per class

# Middle School Program Design

- Three-year program at a neighbourhood school naturally leading to the paired high school
- Three years worth of students distributed among three classes
- One Social Communications Class
- Other academic courses
- 1 ½ teachers and 2 child & youth workers/teaching assistants (3 classes a day and lunch)
- 6-8 students per class

# Program Classroom Supports

- Academic Coursework
- A place for youth to discuss and expand whatever issue is at hand (e.g., sexuality, parents, teachers, employment, etc.)
- A place for lunch (if the cafeteria is too overwhelming) for all age groups
- A retreat, if need be, no matter which age group's class time.
- Resource for the academic course-load teachers

# Models of Similar Programs Offering Various Degrees of Support

- Peel District School Board (PDSB)
- Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (DPCDSB)
- Thames Valley District School Board District School Board (TVDSB)
- Toronto District School Board (TDSB)
- Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB)
- York Region District School Board (YRDSB)
- Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board (HWCDSB)

# PDSB High “Transition Program” High School

- 11 high schools
  - 5 Academic Stream Programs
  - 6 Applied Stream Programs
- Will be adding more schools
- 1 2/3 teachers and 4 child and youth workers/  
teaching assistants assigned to four age  
groups and the lunch period over the course  
of the day
- 6-8 students per class.

# **PDSB “Transition Program” Middle School**

- A number of classes throughout their region
- Will be adding more
- One teacher and two child and youth workers/  
teaching assistants
- 8 students per class
- Identified for this program in Grades 3 & 4

# Why a reduced course load?

- Learn and process information in a manner generally incompatible with the way it's usually presented in class
- Lack general high-level thinking and problem-solving skills and have difficulty with recall related to problem solving.
- Reduced load allows integration with other students at the academic level
- Communications class offers extra help through re-teaching, breaking down assignments into manageable pieces, having deadlines extended and having access to computers or scribes
- Maturity level is  $\frac{2}{3}$  of their chronological age
- Homework is difficult and bringing the day's stressors home makes family life difficult

# Benefits of the PDSB Program

- Friendships are developed (reinforcing academic success)
- Students spend 35% of time in classroom, preparing for and reinforcing what will be taught (reducing anxiety)
- Learn social skills (e.g., dealing with obstacles or interacting with other children)
- Kids are succeeding and enjoying school

# PDSB Flexibility and Balance

Richard Hales, head of the Peel District School Board's innovative program (2002):

“The key to their success is ensuring the maximum **flexibility** for students who tend to be rigidly inflexible. For many teachers, this has required a significant paradigm shift, but this is the foundation of the program and it's working.”

“It **balances** mainstream integration with intensive smaller group support, and this has allowed students to achieve academic success while reducing stress and anxiety.”

# Mental Health Co-morbidities

- “Some children develop depression and anxiety as they get older, possibly because they start to understand that they are being teased or rejected. Anxiety tends to be more long lasting than depression.” (CAIRN, Canadian Autism Intervention Research Network )
- “It appears that those who present with psychiatric disorders are the children who have better communication skills, specifically language comprehension. It seems that the better the language, the more likely the teenager will experience an anxiety disorder or depression. It could be because children with better language have a better understanding of social-emotional situations and this greater insight leads to depression.” (CAIRN)
- Studies within the last fifteen years report rates of co-morbid mental health disorders from 40-60%, 67%, 70.8% and between 93.3% in HF-ASD and 100% in Aspergers. (Szatmari, Simonoff et al, Ghaziuddin et al, Mukaddes et al)
- “Those most at risk for co-morbidity of challenging behaviours and psychiatric illness are those with better cognitive and language skills, and Asperger individuals with co-morbidities outnumber HF-ASD individuals with co-morbidities.” (Mukaddes et al)

# Risk in multiple areas

- Poor school performance, attendance or drop-out
- Failure to transition successfully to post-secondary education
- Problems with the law and inappropriate behaviour
- Social isolation
- development of unhealthy relationships
- Physical and emotional bullying and other forms of victimization
- Poor organizational and life skills
- Unemployment or under-employment  
(Sotddart)

# Difficulties in Adulthood

- Independent living and employment.
- Unemployment rate 95% (Autism Speaks)
- “Current supports are more important than childhood predictors, as there is little or no predictive ability for those with IQ>70.” (Szatmari)
- Implementing a program of this type will give the board a way to support the multiple areas of risk that these students present

# Rates of ASD

- Rates of ASD are increasing 10-17 percent annually for numerous reasons
- From better diagnosing and awareness
- To increasing environmental triggers

(Hertz-Picciotto et al, UC Davis Health System, Autism Speaks)

# Aspergers and PDDNOS

- There has been an increase in the percentage of children with AS/PDDNOS, resulting in an increasingly greater proportion of individuals with a typical IQ vs. ID (Intellectual Delay)
- As Canada has invested in early intervention in childhood, this will increase the IQ/Language profiles of those with ASD
- AS & PDDNOS comprise the largest component of the ASD population
- Early intervention is not sufficient to address the needs of young adults; predictors of childhood outcome are NOT the same predictors of adult outcome  
(Szatmari)

# Population

- We believe that in HWDSB we have the numbers to make this program viable
- Nine of the twelve in our delegation live within the bounds of the West ARC/Cluster
- Informally, we know of approximately 20 children between Grades 1 and 8 (in the bounds of one high school/two middle schools/three elementary schools); Approximately, 2-3 per grade over these specific schools
- The other three members of our delegation report the same informal rates and needs in their neighbourhood schools
- Add in students from private schools, potential gains from the Catholic system, as well as, the homeschooling population

# Leaving our Board

- Seven special needs schools (between Hamilton and Oakville)
- Various independent and religious schools in the greater Hamilton and Halton region
- Many switch to the Catholic Board, especially at the High School level
- Many leave mainstream education completely and opt for homeschooling

# HWDSB's Core Commitments

- Vision - all students achieving their full potential
- Mission - Providing relevant, responsive education so that each student becomes a life-long learner and contributing citizen in a diverse world
- Values – Respect, Creativity, Excellence and Citizenship

# Special Education Commitment

- “to providing appropriate educational opportunities for improved student learning for all students”
- “to meet the needs of all special education students in the most enabling environment, in accordance with parental preference.”

# ARC Process/Learning for All: HWDSB Program Strategy

- “Our Program Strategy is rethinking the way we offer programs and facilities, so that we can best meet the needs of each of our students in the 21st century. We want students to have choice, support and direction as they benefit from the knowledge and skills acquired from their educational program. We are restructuring what we offer, where we offer it and how we can help all students achieve their full potential. We know today’s learners require new approaches, and that we must respond with engaging programs and safe, nurturing and innovative learning environments.
- We envision a school system in which all students can find what they need at any of our schools. A place where the placement of programs, supports and facilities makes strategic sense. A place where students feel safe, welcome, included and energized as they are moving closer to their goals. This is about providing a pathway to success for every single one of our students.”

# **Learning for All: HWDS Program Strategy**

## **Tier 3**

- Students with mental health, anxiety, and/or behavioural needs
- Students with socio-communication disorders

# Autism Ontario's Education Policies (2007)

- #3, "Education for students with ASD includes not only programming for an academic curriculum, but also programming to address the communication, social skills and behavioural challenges associated with ASD, while leveraging student strengths."
- #5, "Students with ASD have access to a range of placement options based on individualized student needs, regardless of geographical location. This will include all ranges from full inclusion to full segregation at all school boards."

# Autism Researchers & Professionals

- McMaster University
- Chedoke Hospital
- The Offord Centre for Child Studies
- Mohawk College
- Brock University
- Woodview Mental Health and Autism Services

# Proposal Details

- Trial academic program in Cluster West in the 2012-2013 school year with a simultaneous start for both the middle school and high school programs
- Quickly, followed by expansion (simultaneously):
  - to the next cluster for a second academic program pair, three year (middle school) and five year (high school)
  - trial for applied stream program pair, three year (middle school) and seven year (high school)
- With the ultimate goal of (a minimum) of two pairs per cluster (serving both the academic and applied streams)
- Bussing where need be
- Funding, we cannot comment on the direct cost per fiscal year, as we do not have that data.

# Conclusion

“The protective influence of a positive high school experience for these students cannot be underestimated. Teachers and school communities can play an essential role in recognizing and addressing not only the academic needs of these youth, but also their social and emotional needs. Attention to work skills and life skills are a vital aspect of the curriculum for this population and are thought to increase their resilience and adaption to adult life. We have witnessed the results of a positive high school experience that sets these youth on a positive course into adulthood, but unfortunately, this is not the experience for many.”

(Sotddart)

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