

November 14, 2011

To the members of the North ARC,

Please bring this piece of correspondence forward at the beginning of your meeting on November 15th as I hope it will help add to some very important discussion.

I am the current school council chair at Mountain and I have been following the board proposals to close Parkview and Mountain schools very closely. While I write to you as a parent, I am also a member of the South ARC.

***I am writing to you to ask you to make space in the North ARC proposal for a stand-alone 'transition' school for the vulnerable populations of both Parkview and Mountain students.*** I am requesting that the specialized school be in the North ARC rather than the South ARC as the majority of Parkview students are from the area, while the majority of students at Mountain are bussed. Mountain students are used to being transported to school via school bus and city bus whereas the students in the North ARC are not.

As the parent of a child with MID, and as school council chair at Mountain for the past 3 years, I have been able to learn a great deal about the needs and desires of our MID student population. Many of the students come from segregated classrooms that are as small as 6-16 students in the class. Many have been supported by Educational Assistants, some on a one-to-one level. Nevertheless, these children have experienced extreme bullying and a sense of exclusion in their mainstream schools before high school. When they come to a specialized high school staffed fully with teachers and administrators who understand their many issues, the students feel safe. In their own words, they feel they have "family". The students speak of their experiences at the specialized high schools and they say they love the small class sizes, they really like the fact that everyone in their program has similar needs and experiences, and that they know that their teachers are well trained and care a lot about each and every student.

As well, I have heard the voices of the Mountain parents who are calling for a continuation of a small, safe, and nurturing environment for their children. The parents do not want their children to be 'forced' into a larger school environment in which the opportunities for their children to be excluded, neglected, ignored, or bullied increase.

I am not personally against supporting students to attend their local schools *if they so desire*. Some students with MID have the social skills and/or the confidence to handle the experience of a larger, more diverse secondary school. However, it is crucial to the wellbeing of our students to keep in mind that many of our MID students are also lacking in age-appropriate social skills. The average grade 9 student with MID does not have the maturity of a grade 9 student with an average or above-average IQ. Nor will the MID student mature in highschool at the same rate. "Readiness " for integration/inclusion/transition will be met on an extremely individualized basis. In short, these children need *time*.

I must be honest in saying I have met excellent teachers and administrators in the greater system who are ready and willing to meet the needs of our MID students. However, within this greater system, I have also witnessed a lack of compassion, creativity, understanding, flexibility, time, and resources - all attributes which put our vulnerable students at risk. I believe that the kind of inclusion the board is currently proposing requires a level of cultural, structural, administrative, and attitudinal change that as a society we are not yet ready for. We have to truly learn to encourage, measure, and celebrate success based upon the potential of some very beautiful yet compromised individuals before we are ready to take the steps of no longer having a specialized school for our MID students.

It is vital that we keep in mind that when we talk about equity for all our students, we are not just talking about accessibility to programs. *Children who are frightened cannot intellectually access what is offered to them. Students who are vulnerable intellectually, socially, emotionally, and often financially, require small, protective environments in which to flourish. They must be allowed the opportunity to stay in a small environment for longer so they can be prepared to transition, if they are able. They must be allowed to integrate only if and when they are ready to do so. **Please make space in the North ARC proposal for a stand-alone 'transition' school for the vulnerable populations of both Parkview and Mountain students.***

This is the right thing to do. Please help send a message to our trustees that the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board has an opportunity to be a

leader in the education of special needs youth and that leadership requires resources, creativity, compassion, and a true understanding of the needs of our youth.

I thank you all for your hard work. While I cannot speak for the South ARC, I can tell you that I am not alone in my support for this endeavor.

Sincerely,

Anne Pollard