

March 17, 2011

Dear Mrs. Judith Bishop and Mr. Tim Simmons,

My name is James Elston and I have the good fortune of holding the position of Visual Arts Teacher at Dalewood Middle School. Cognizant of the rapidly approaching ARC process, I would greatly appreciate if you would take a few moments to consider the proceeding letter as testament to my ongoing commitment to this institution and the many specialized, professional programs offered within.

Recognizing that the needs and values of all school communities are different, it is vital that any decisions and new developments for the Dalewood Community earnestly consider the inherent or existing values of the many learners and families in this area. Throughout the preceding years, Dalewood Middle School has come to be known as a centre for academic excellence and a cultural hub. In all subject areas of study, Dalewood students continue to achieve to their highest potential and consistently shine in all academic and extracurricular endeavours. It is my belief that the staff at Dalewood is also deserved of accolades as their dedication, subject knowledge, and professional practice continue to support an environment that promotes success for all. Regrettably, under the Accommodation Review Committee (ARC), there appears a distinct possibility that Dalewood Middle School will no longer exist. Furthermore, rumours abound concerning a wide host of prospective outcomes including a complete overhaul and resurrection of the existing Dalewood Middle School structure or even the construction of a new K-8 facility on the existing Dalewood site. Regardless of the decision taken by the HWDSB, I feel I would be personally remiss if I were not to extol the value of the differentiated programs offered through the Specialized programming at Dalewood, with a particular focus upon the Arts including the Visual Arts and Music. It is my sincere hope that the ongoing contribution of these Specialized programs will carry significant weight in any decision making process including facility location, amenities, and classroom dedication or design. Location, facility and classroom design considerations include: an Art Room with Sinks, Storage, and Kiln; a dedicated space for Music and an Auditorium for performances; a well-equipped Science Lab that allows for genuine investigation; a Gymnasium and Sports Field that reflects our school's ongoing dedication to healthy living through athletic pursuits. Such basic needs, amongst a host of other necessities, are the key building blocks to genuine learning.

Ultimately, regardless of a rebuilding, relocation, or rebranding of Dalewood School, I believe it to be paramount that we preserve the integrity of the Specialized Programs. It is these programs that provide unique, content-rich learning opportunities to students of all abilities and backgrounds. Furthermore, Specialist Teachers can provide instructional enthusiasm, personal zeal, and a professional knowledge base that, due to both time and resource constraints, can become diluted within a Generalized Instructional philosophy. In my humble opinion, there exists amongst a few pedagogical circles a movement towards Generalized Elementary Teachers within the Junior-Intermediate divisions. I sincerely believe that it is our students who will miss out in the long run. A Specialist

Teacher offers personal knowledge steeped in the traditions, acquired skills, and ongoing subject specific research in select areas of study. As a result, Specialist Teachers of Middle School learners consistently provide all students with diverse learning opportunities; opportunities rooted in both best practices and true in-depth experiences. It is my fear that a site re-location or the creation of a K-8 School will, ultimately, result in the demise or dilution of these programs.

I untiringly advocate for the preservation and inclusion of a genuine Arts program within the Junior Intermediate division. I have great concern that our lauded dedication to the Arts and understanding of the many benefits inherent in an Arts education may, quite simply, fall short if we were to lose our Specialist programs. We must continue to genuinely extol the values of artistic ventures to further self identity, self-awareness, and understanding of our place in the world. To do so, we must back up our stated commitment to the Arts through genuine learning opportunities for those in the Junior Intermediate grades. Ultimately, we can not allow the Arts to be pushed to the fringes of pedagogical experience.

As a Specialist Teacher at Dalewood Middle School, I am afforded the opportunity to lend my great enthusiasm and experience within the Visual Arts to my students on a daily basis. Each student receives 80 minutes per week of instructional time within the Visual Arts classroom. At any given moment we are thoroughly engaged in any number of artistic pursuits that make use of all forms of media including paint, clay, wire sculpture, linoleum prints etc. Each day I am fortunate to truly observe the development of self-identity and confidence through student participation in genuine hands-on explorations, creative expression, and artistic excellence. I wish to bring this to your attention for I feel that such experiences are under increasing threat. Like all the instructors of 'Specialist Programs' at Dalewood (Art, Music, Science, Phys.Ed/Health), I truly love my vocation as a Specialist Junior-Intermediate Teacher. It is my sincere hope that throughout the coming years, once the ARC has finalized their intentions, that I will be able to continue to offer my students and community with a genuine, professional Visual Arts program within a building that continues to foster the importance of the Arts alongside other subject areas of study.

Thank you for both your time and your consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Elston', written in a cursive style.

James Elston
Visual Arts Teacher
Dalewood Middle School