

Ministry of Education

Office of the ADM
Financial Policy and Business Division
20th Floor, Mowat Block
900 Bay Street
Toronto ON M7A 1L2

Ministère de l'Éducation

Bureau du sous-ministre adjoint
Division des politiques financières et des opérations
20^e étage, Édifice Mowat
900, rue Bay
Toronto ON M7A 1L2



SEP 12 2014

Sarah Warry-Poljanski
33 Welbourn Drive
Hamilton, ON L9A 3N1
sarahwpoljanski@gmail.com

Dear Ms. Warry-Poljanski,

This letter is in response to your request for an administrative review of the Central Mountain Accommodation Review Committee (“ARC”) process conducted by the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (DSB), which included Cardinal Heights Middle School.

Due to the importance of accommodation decisions to students, families and communities, we share your desire that accommodation review processes follow the policies developed and approved by local school boards, and that community members feel that their concerns are understood. However, based on the Ministry’s review of your administrative review request package, the Ministry has decided not to appoint a facilitator in this case. We will take this opportunity to discuss the points raised in your petition.

In one of your first points, you ask that the decision to close Cardinal Heights be reversed. To clarify, the Ministry does not overturn school boards’ decisions. Trustees are an elected level of government and have the responsibility to make such decisions.

A second point that you make is that the school information templates (“school information profiles”) used in the Central Mountain Accommodation Review process were incorrect. However, the school information profiles are available on the board’s website, and appear complete. According to the ARC minutes and to the board’s response, the school information profiles were discussed and finalized by the ARC members, as required by the board’s policy.

A third point that you raise is that ARC members were not given enough time or information to make proper decisions. You explain that about 30 options were developed during this review, and insufficient time was provided to properly explore them. You add that ARC members asked board staff for more meetings, but the request was declined. However, the board has indicated in their response that the request for additional meetings was granted, and that the schedule was amended. A total of 11 working meetings were held, plus four public meetings over the course of this ARC. This approach was reasonable.

You indicate that the policy set by the board is to accommodate their own agenda, and that Cardinal Heights MS should never have been included in an ARC. However, school boards have the responsibility to develop accommodation review policies and they have the right to configure an ARC according to their parameters.

You have indicated that many parents affected by this ARC were non-English speaking and as a result, may not have understood the process. You explain that these parents may have experienced transportation and childcare barriers as well, and in general, were not properly engaged in the process. The board's response indicates that child care services and bus tickets were available by request for each of the four public meetings. This information was publicized through local newspaper advertisements announcing the public meetings. The board's response indicates that requests for translation services were not received during the Central Mountain ARC, however, translation services were available, and that such services had been provided at previous meetings. A scribe was requested and provided for a member of the public who was hearing impaired (public meeting #4, minutes). This approach is reasonable, and indicates the intent to accommodate a range of needs to allow community members the possibility to participate in the process.

Another point raised in your petition states that communication with community members during this ARC process was lacking. You explain that notes sent home in children's backpacks may not have reached their parents, and that people without internet access would not have been able to keep up with information posted on the board's website. In their response, the board indicated that in addition to all documents being posted on their website and notices being sent to parents through the individual schools, the board also used automated phone messages to notify parents, school signage had postings about the ARC meetings, and articles and advertising in local media were used to notify parents of ARC meetings. This appears consistent with the intent to keep the community involved and informed.

Another point raised in your petition states that community members who were not parents were not able to voice their concerns through this ARC. However, four public meetings were held where community members could provide input. Public delegations were heard on May 6, 2014, and a video recording of the delegations is available on the board's website. These were reasonable opportunities for community members to voice their concerns.

You explain that at the start of the ARC process parents were instructed to sit in small groups to collaborate, voice concerns, create options and develop ARC materials, rather than being offered an open forum to voice questions. The board explains that notes from these small groups were collected and provided to committee members for review. The approach seems reasonable, and was intended to allow participants to communicate easily in front of a smaller number of people. The information from these sessions was shared, which indicates the intent to utilize the information meaningfully. Also, as stated above, the opportunity for an open forum was provided during the public delegations (May 6, 2014).

You further explain that the process for community consultations and public meetings was not being followed. You state that meetings were not used effectively, that the process often ran

late and resulted in discussions being rushed. The board's response indicates that all public meetings were completed before 9 p.m. Of the 11 working group meetings, all but 3 adjourned before 9 p.m. Although meetings may have been challenging, it appears that board staff endeavored to keep meetings on schedule. A 9 p.m. conclusion for working meetings is reasonable.

You also indicate that the facility condition index data used in the Central Mountain ARC was wrong. You explain that some schools had recently been given capital investments, but they were labelled as being in poor condition, and you suggest that negligence or omissions occurred to make some schools appear to be in worse condition. However, the board handled any data errors effectively, by re-issuing the corrected information.

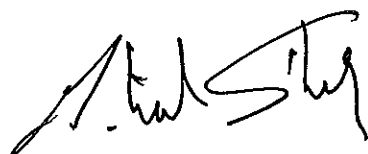
Additionally, you express that the required walkthrough visit for Cardinal Heights MS did not take place, which resulted in a low facility condition index not being questioned by the ARC. You add that the missing walkthrough visit did not let parents see the unique environment at Cardinal Heights MS that would be lost to students transferred to a JK-8 setting. The board indicates that the walkthrough at Cardinal Heights MS was rescheduled and that committee members were notified that a walkthrough visit could be scheduled for any time during the school week. This was reasonable management of the situation, and shows the intent to allow participants the opportunity to view each of the schools in the ARC.

Based on the Ministry's review of your petition, all of the concerns raised were in fact reasonably dealt with through this ARC process undertaken by the Hamilton-Wentworth DSB.

I appreciate the level of engagement that you and your community have shown through this process. I encourage Cardinal Heights MS community members to remain involved with the transition process as the Hamilton-Wentworth DSB develops its plans. Your continued involvement can help to ensure that the best outcomes are realized for your children, and for all students of the schools included in the Central Mountain ARC process.

Should you have further questions, please contact Sabina Bredin, Senior Policy Analyst, Capital Policy and Programs Branch, Ministry of Education at 416-325-2024.

Sincerely,



Gabriel F. Sékaly
Assistant Deputy Minister
Financial Policy and Business Division

c: John Malloy, Director of Education, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board
Jeff Moser, Regional Manager, London Regional Office, Ministry of Education