

Ms. Wynne,

I am writing to request your immediate intervention regarding York Region District School Board's (YRDSB) decision to change the eligibility criteria for board provided bussing from a distance criterion to an 'availability of public transit' criterion. This decision was made without an impact analysis and without consultation or debate. This decision results in significant barriers for students who wish to attend the French immersion (FI) program due to cost, service issues related to York Region Transit (YRT), and the fact that the best model to deliver FI is through magnet schools. These factors result in a disproportionately negative impact on FI students. In addition, this decision exposes a broad equity of access concern for any student who wishes to attend a specialty program and who does not have the financial resources to do so.

We are requesting your intervention into this matter and ask that you require the Board to conduct an impact analysis (including financial, program, staffing and resources) and a parent consultation process, regarding this decision. In the interim, we request you require the Board to return to pre-October 2008 decision, re-instating bussing until the process is complete.

Background – YRDSB Changes Bussing Eligibility Criterion

The Board policy on transportation services has been changed twice since its inception. A Board initiated review of the transportation policy concluded in late 2005 which resulted in the language change being adopted in early 2006. This review concluded that the then transportation policy was meeting students' needs and no changes were recommended to be made to the existing transportation policy. Inexplicably though, the committee minutes note that while no changes were recommended, a minor change in language was recommended. This minor change re-defined bussing eligibility from a distance criterion to an 'area served by public transit' criterion, thereby downloading transportation costs onto parents. This change impacted 581 students in October 2008 alone, likely hundreds more in 2006 and some number prior to 2006 when certain students were denied board provided transportation in an adhoc manner when the Board determined that YRT was available in a given area. This change resulted in legal action against the Board in 2007 by parents of Arts York students. While the Board stayed their decision for one year and conducted a consultation process, of which CPF was not a part, the Board has not addressed the equity of access concern and instead chose to dismantle and re-align a very successful and sought after program.

Board Failed to Conduct an Impact or Financial Analysis

When this decision was made, under the guise of a minor wording change, there had been no discussion or notification to parents or CPF, that such a major change was contemplated. There has been no financial analysis done. Student trustees raised concerns about the cost of bussing, but there appears to have been little if any effort to address those concerns. Had we known about the Board's plan in this regard, we would have asked to have input into the decision. Board representatives have

indicated that a of grade 1 students into the FI program, the failure to examine the costs in all manner is unacceptable when making a decision of this magnitude. The failure of the Board to conduct an impact analysis is one reason we are asking for your intervention to direct the Board to conduct the necessary analysis to provide the basis for informed financial decision making.

The Board Failed to Follow Any Process to Inform and Gather Input into This Decision from Parents

The Board, without notice, review, debate or consultation has decided to change bussing eligibility which fundamentally shifts financial responsibility onto parents for getting their high school students to school when YRT is deemed by the Board to be available to the student. The decision to withdraw board provided bussing has been made without a process for input. It has significantly impacted many families the point of financial hardship during one of the worst economic times in recent history.

The Decision to Change Bussing Eligibility Criterion has a Differential, Negative Impact on French Immersion Students

As you know YRDSB has created a very successful and robust FI program. We congratulate the Board on creating, supporting and improving FI. CPF has provided input into many decisions which affect the program and has helped parents understand the reasoning behind certain decisions which ensure an excellent FI program. One of those decisions which ensure an excellent FI program relates to having magnet schools where FI students, resources and teachers are concentrated until a critical mass of students can be achieved. Once there is a critical mass of students, the creation of an immersion centre occurs; a single track FI School which serves a large geographic area of students who are drawn into the immersion centre. CPF fully supports this model as the most effective way to have a rich immersion experience on all measures for students. A predictable result of this program model is that it draws its students from a large geographic area. Thus the average FI high school serves a geographical area some 5 times the size of an English high school. This means that FI students face far longer commutes to access the FI high school. It also means that some 85% of FI students are bussed. This long distance reality is now coupled with an added financial cost to attend a FI high school. This means that cost and the length of time on a public transit bus are two significant barriers which disproportionately affect FI students. Equity of access cannot be provided under these circumstances. As a result of this decision parents are desperate for other solutions as service issues with YRT mean that kids are spending over an hour commuting each way, in the dark in the morning and evening, standing without bus shelters, walking without sidewalks or lights, with massive traffic intersections and less safety and security on a YRT bus. Parents are very concerned about their children's safety on YRT busses given the geographic realities of York Region.

The Board has Pursued Specialty Programs without Ensuring Equity of Access to Those Programs

As you know the Board, at significant cost, has embraced a sports high school and offers several other 'specialty programs'. As you may know we do not consider the French immersion program a specialty program. French is an official language of Canada and any child who wishes to become bilingual, ought

to be able to access the curriculum in French and be provided with that opportunity. As you know, employment and other benefits exist for those who have French as a language.

When parents inquire about the specialty program the Board tells parents that no bussing is provided. The Board has stated that the adoption of specialty schools and programs is predicated on the fact that parents are financially responsible to get their children to school. However, the Board has failed to address the inequity resulting from that decision, as not all children live in the area of the specialty school and many students will not have the chance to attend that school due to the cost of transportation. At this time there is no process in place for parents to access financial assistance for transportation costs. This presents a barrier to attending the program. As the Bill Crother's school is located in south Markham, it is difficult to imagine many students from the northern and western end of the Region will be able to attend the school, particularly those of limited financial means. Some parents pay \$50 per week for private bussing – How accessible is that? Who knows how many students have not applied to attend the program because of the cost of the bus pass (\$70 per month for one zone and \$120 for a two zone pass). We believe the issue of equity of access to FI (or a specialty program offered by the Board either currently or in the future), needs to be addressed by the Board. We are requesting your intervention to direct the Board to address this issue through an impact analysis.

In Summary

We are aware that bussing to high school students is not required under the Education Act, however, we believe that public education ought to be accessible. Given that public boards are struggling with declining enrolment, and YRDSB's 1% growth was entirely made up of French Immersion students, accessibility to this program is vitally important to attract and maintain students. Furthermore it makes more sense to focus on improving transportation rather than cutting it and a good place to start is with the areas of focus identified by the E and E report. Despite surpluses since 2004, no cuts to transportation funding from your Ministry and significant inflows from the pay per use service, the Board has chosen to cut bussing and is not providing the service. Instead the Board has used those funds for programming we are told. While the decision to use transportation dollars for other than transportation is a board decision, parents ought to be consulted and the Board ought to conduct a proper analysis to understand the impact of the decision being made. As well the Board ought to provide a process whereby parents are able to have input into a decision of this magnitude. We request your immediate intervention.

Sincerely,