OSSTF Limestone District 27

735C Arlington Park Place, Kingston, Ontario K7M 8M8
Tel: 613-546-6985   Fax: 613-545-1295   E-mail: d27osstf@gmail.com

Response to the "Limestone Alternative Sites & Continuing Education Plan"

May 31, 2016

The Teachers' Bargaining Unit has reviewed the Limestone District School Board Report regarding the Alternative & Continuing Education Plan and we wish to document our concerns formally.

Not only did we have immediate concerns with the plan, but we were contacted by alarmed and disheartened Teachers by phone, letter and email, who expressed a wide variety of concerns. We met with the Teachers who have taught in Alternative Centres following the Board's information meeting to that same group. We have summarized our collective concerns in the report below.

At our regular Board-Federation Committee, with the Superintendent of Human Resources, we let the Board management know that there is "zero buy-in" for the Plan. We hope that this feedback will cause the LDSB to re-think the implementation of its plan and to invite OSSTF Teachers to inform any plan going forward. Our fears and concerns mainly stem from the needs of the students.   We are the experts that deal with students day in and out, year after year. Many of our Teachers have dedicated their professional careers to deliver a supportive education to the students at Alternative Centres. Each student's needs are unique while at the same time having a commonality of being focussed on the personal interactions of Teacher and student.

The report begins with our General Concerns and then is formatted to respond heading by heading to the Board's Report.

GENERAL CONCERNS

Professional Judgement

Article C3.5 of the Central Table Agreement between OSSTF and the School Boards states that "'Professional Judgement' shall be defined as judgement that is informed by professional knowledge of curriculum expectations, context, evidence of learning, methods of instruction and assessment, and the criteria and standards that indicate success in student learning. In professional practice, judgement involves a purposeful and systematic thinking process that evolves in terms of accuracy and insight with ongoing reflection and self-correction."

The insistence of the administration to use the Desire2Learn[TM] platform is an infringement on Teachers' professional judgement. Teachers must be able to choose the mode(s) of delivery for students in their course as informed by the criteria above. It is our position, therefore, that members be able to choose whether to use the electronic platform exclusively or in combination with other modes of delivery or at all.

There can be no requirement that a Teacher be trained in the Desire2Learn[TM] platform in order that a Teacher deliver courses at an Alternative Centre, even if they choose to use the D2L[TM] to teach. We have a process outlined in the Collective Agreement for staffing. The staffing is to be done as agreed to by the Board and Federation.

IT support

Teachers report to us that the internet traffic is exceedingly slow in the schools and centres. This delay already causes tremendous frustration for staff and students. Many students will simply give up if they cannot access the internet reliably as Self-Regulation is a common weakness among Alternative Centre learners. We recommend a hardwired solution for faster internet and more reliable access. Even with that addition, the internet will create frustration, especially now that it will apparently be needed by more people.

Currently there is a desperate lack of IT support for all Teachers and staff in our Board. Many Teachers who can deliver their courses without the use of technology opt to do so. By forcing all Teachers to use a computer platform for the delivery of their program, this option is removed and will be substituted with frustration and loss of learning time. There will be times when productivity will come to a grinding halt. Instead of being independent learners, this direction will create enslavement to the technology.

An additional issue not recognized is that of registering students. It is our understanding that with the Desire2Learn™ platform, each student must be registered by a central administrator. If this is the case, a student may not begin course work until a central administrator successfully adds a student. This creates additional work and delays in beginning courses. Students who try to register and who are not able to begin with materials as soon as they arrive very often do not return. These students have mustered all their confidence and humility to ask for help at an educational institute. Often delaying their entrance back into education destroys their confidence and they are lost for more time.

Corporatization of Education

The aggressive push for technology is largely driven by corporate interests and the promise of lower cost, not by caring about or understanding the children and adults we teach. While medical associations recommend reducing screen time for children, the move towards greatly increasing screen time at school flies in the face of a balanced, healthy lifestyle.   Not one of our Teachers believe that this is the direction to move for our students. Their expertise has not been valued, however, on social media, we have witnessed our Board Leaders buying into corporate language and policies. Often when they have been at corporate-run conferences.

These companies know that in order to sell as much of their product as possible to the massive market of educational systems, they need to drive every level of education reform from curriculum to pedagogy. Apple, Microsoft, Google and Cisco all fund education research and try to influence curriculum and the tools teachers will use to deliver it. Certainly the dream of the "Teacherless Classroom" is not far-fetched and enticing to Boards who are willing to pinch pennies for the Government. One only needs to refer to Cisco's 2008 white paper laying out the plan for "*Equipping Every Global Learner for the 21st Century*" to see the roots of this corporate drive.[1]

While we all understand the need for technological literacy and keeping up in the modern world, we must constantly question who benefits from the reforms we make? Is it the students and educators first, or are we unknowingly pandering to a larger agenda? Let's respect the work of our Teachers who have worked with this unique group of students and use their knowledge and expertise to inform how to move forward. The voices of Members are completely ignored in the Board's plan and instead it seems that the Board is promoting the goals of privatization.

SECTION 1 OF BOARD'S REPORT: BACKGROUND

The Federation understands the need of the Limestone Board to review its Alternative Site and Continuing Education Programs. We believe that all stakeholders want to have the best programming possible for our

students.   OSSTF has been integral in their development and financial viability since their inception. We have the documents that enabled their continuation during the difficult Harris years. Our Board works best when it works together with OSSTF. This document has demonstrated another, misguided path.

The OSSTF was invited to participate on a consultation committee as part of this process. However, to say we were on the "work team" is a bit of a stretch and generally speaking this report does not reflect the input that OSSTF gave to the committee. Therefore, we do not wish OSSTF or Teachers (for whom we are the spokesperson) given credit in any way for the Board's report.

SECTION 2 OF BOARD'S REPORT: MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE LEARNERS IN OUR ALTERNATIVE SITES AND CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAM

The OSSTF Limestone District 27 Teachers seriously call into question the sound pedagogy of the use of the Desire2Learn^{TM} platform – a "learning management system" for the delivery of Alternative Education.

The authors of the report recognize the need to prepare students "to develop and extend skills in the following areas: communication, problem-solving, collaboration, creativity, innovation and critical thinking." It is interesting to note that these skills are straight out of the CISCO's white paper for education. Not that these skills aren't inherently excellent skills to foster, but one needs to question the drivers for reform. Our point is that it is up to the professional judgement of the Teacher to best foster these skills.

The report says that "The attainment of these skills is best achieved through engaging, relevant, current and interactive learning experiences." However, in the following paragraph it refers to "employing current research-based pedagogical practices." This is in reference to the Desire2Learn^{TM} (a private corporation) platform. Whose research deduces that this is sound pedagogy?

Teachers know and will state that students do not learn this way. By simply insisting that each Alternative Centre Teacher deliver at least one course per semester using Desire2Learn^{TM} starting September 2016 will not change this fact. Learning is best done by interacting with a human, not a computer. Computers are merely a tool to facilitate learning, but the over-reliance on them is concerning. Putting computers first in this design is not the correct direction to head. Again, it us up to the professional judgement of the Teacher to determine when and how to use computers and software.

The deadlines proposed in the Plan are unrealistic. We do not believe that all courses at Alternative Centres can be delivered on D2L starting September 2017. To begin with, not all courses students wish or need to take are suitable for the platform. Additionally, to amalgamate schools (Second Chance and Streetsmart), close Amherstview, and shift to an electronic platform concurrently is too much change all at once. The Second Chance and Streetsmart move alone will require an enormous amount of time. To expect Teachers to learn a new mode of delivery (and new course content with it) and adapt their courses at the same time is a huge burden and is destined for failure.

Many Teachers have created or adapted their own courses to best meet the needs of the students. These courses have taken years to be molded. There is no recognition of these excellent resources, many of them with fabulous hands-on activities.

Another overriding problem is that of the actual physical technology. What will be the plan when the "Chromebooks" are lost, stolen, broken or sold? Who will be responsible for their upkeep? Any policy or procedure in this regard will need to be created with OSSTF as the Teachers representatives.

Concerns:

a) Student needs and Teacher strengths should dictate what courses are offered at the Alternative Centres. There is a concern that the D2L^{TM} platform will limit the courses offered. Alternative Centres need to be able to tailor the courses offered to student need, not the other way around.

b) Teachers have been able to develop their own courses, from their own strengths, using creativity and inspiration. This work and expertise is undermined if the Board insists that all courses be done on the D2L^{TM} platform. Who will design/write the courses chosen?

c) How will the D2L^{TM} courses be assigned to each Teacher? If a teacher has all Math, for example, see d).

d) Some courses seem extremely ill-suited for an electronic platform: for example Math, Science, and Art.

e) There is added work, stress on the system and expense involving the logistics of many devices being used and lent.

SECTION 3 OF THE BOARD'S REPORT: SUPERVISION OF ALTERNATIVE AND CONTINUING EDUCATION SITES

OSSTF strongly objects to the hiring of another Principal for Alternative and Continuing Education. We believe that more services directly aimed at students would be more effective and efficient, especially during a time of reduced funding. For example, there is a need for secretarial support, guidance, LPS and Student Success. One of the Vice Principals could have Community Education as part of their portfolio. There need to be fewer silos, not more of them. Many of us have worked in environments which do not have clear delineation of roles. Invariably, this confusion results in frustration, conflict, and sickness. This plan seems to have this problem as a fundamental building block. Let us use our knowledge and experience to avoid the inevitable pain. There is already supervision in place for Alt Ed Centres – it is done through the school to which the Centre is attached. This additional administrator position will be unnecessary duplication and bureaucracy. Teachers are concerned about who they will go to for support are worried that there will be reduced accountability for following through on problem-solving. With this model, we will have an administrator who will have edict rights with no direct responsibility for fall-out of their decisions with the students. We could discuss a model of supervision for the Instructors that would better integrate community education with alternative education.

SECTION 4 OF THE BOARD'S REPORT: ALTERNATIVE SITE LOCATION CHANGES FOR 2016-17

We understand and agree that the Board can save money by reducing some of its leased property. In that respect, we do not object to moving Alternative Centres away from rental properties. We do believe that it is vital to have centres which are accessible by students. Many of the students who attend Alternative Centres have experienced challenges with education; we need to make their return and success attainable. We are very concerned about the closure of viable alternative centres in communities where they live. For example, we are concerned that by closing the Amherstview site and sending students to either Napanee or Kingston, fewer students will participate in these programs. Students want and deserve to learn in their own communities. If they are not successful in the traditional school and now must travel significant distances to another site, many of the students will simply not attend, thereby reducing enrolment in the Board. While with fewer opportunities for students, it means fewer Teachers and fewer financial resources for the Board. Most importantly, it is harmful to the community as the people are no longer well-served. If administered

properly, the Alternative Centres can have robust enrolment, providing valuable revenue for the Board, providing more jobs and most importantly, success for students and communities.

Concerns:
a) Alternative Learning Centres have always paid for themselves. It doesn't make sense that any should be closed if managed properly.

b) What is the communication plan for students regarding the site closures, especially Amherstview, since the timelines are very short?

c) Time must be given to plan and pack up for moving.

d) At least one Alternative Learning Centre needs to be made accessible for staff and students with disabilities.

e) Tracking of students from the growing Amherstview community needs to be recorded to demonstrate the need for a site nearby.

SECTION 5 OF THE BOARD'S REPORT: MODE OF DELIVERY (E-LEARNING, BLENDED LEARNING, HYBRID LEARNING, ILCS, SIX-WEEK MODULES…)

The Limestone Board has offered e-learning courses for several years. The number of sections dedicated to e-learning has not changed. We believe the reason is that this electronic platform provides success for a very select few students. The drop-out rates for these courses is very high because even highly motivated students find learning difficult through this delivery method.

Again, we wish to express concern with over-reliance on technology to deliver courses. We already have tremendous problems with technology implementation and support in the Limestone Board. We are very concerned that there have been debilitating cuts to the IT department, further reducing support at the same time that we move to greater dependence on technology.

The delineation of program delivery by age does not make sense. Also, the six-week modules does not make sense and does not work with the model of funding used in Limestone – Adults as regular day-school students. How will the Board receive funding for someone to come in for one six-week course? How will the registration for these courses be administered and monitored? There are many nuances to this plan that are pedagogically problematic.

Teachers who have used the Desire2Learn™ platform report that:

- It is compartmentalized and confusing.
- Learners with literacy issues find it very frustrating, partly due to the amount of reading.
- Learners with emotional issues lose patience with the technology quickly, diminishing their confidence.
- Even tech-savvy learners find the platform frustrating.
- More time is spent supporting the students with the IT issues than the actual course content, creating a significant workload increase for the Teacher.
- Tech support is extremely slow and student engagement is lost while waiting.
- Students sometimes post confidential and sensitive things in public groups. Privacy is a concern.
- Formative assessment isn't built into the platform.
- Accountability isn't assured because assessments aren't done "in front of the teacher". Board policy difficult to uphold.

Another concern is one of workplace health and safety – that is, currently the learning/teaching environment is not designed for extensive computer use. In order that teachers/students do not develop health problems related to poor ergonomics, we recommend the Board do an ergonomic assessment for workstations at the Learning Centres and install proper equipment or furniture to make them ergonomic.

Further to the health and safety of our students, many studies are now beginning to show that screen time is not healthy for kids, including teenagers. For many of the under-18 learners, face-to-face time with the teacher is extremely important. Replacing Teachers with screens isn't beneficial. From an article entitled "Kids and Screen Time: What Does the Research Say?" published at nprEd online in 2014:

> *""We really need to be sure that children, and probably older people, are getting enough face-to-face interaction to be competent social beings," Greenfield says. "Our species evolved in an environment where there was only face-to face-interaction. Since we were adapted to that environment, it's likely that our skills depend on that environment. If we reduce face-to-face interaction drastically, it's not surprising that the social skills would also get reduced."" [2]*

Thousands of scientific studies have raised concerns about adverse health effects from the wireless signals emitted by laptops and Wi-Fi routers (see the Bioinitiative Report)[3]. We are asking that the Board only install technology and infrastructure that supports wired internet access. There are many advantages of this including:

Speed: wireless broadband network speeds are generally slower than fiber optic networks. In addition, the greater the number of users accessing a wireless access point at once, the greater is the degradation of service.

Capacity: Wired connectivity can offer over 15 times higher bandwidth.

Security: Wireless systems are easily intercepted, tapped and hacked.

Reliability: Wired systems do not have transmission and interference issues like wireless.

Cost: Wireless infrastructure must be continually upgraded and modified.

Energy: Wireless devices emit radiofrequency energy continuously if not used in "airplane mode" or "flight mode". Minimizing radiofrequencies saves energy.

Health: Wired systems emit far less radiation and do not pose health risks. [4]

Concerns:
a) We would like to see the evidence or data showing that this method of learning is superior to classical classroom instruction.

b) Proper ergonomic workstations for teachers and students need to be provided.

c) Increased IT support at Alternative Centres will be needed, but there is already a desperate lack of IT support everywhere in the system.

d) Workload will be increased related to the logistics of managing the equipment. Some issues anticipated: lost or damaged equipment, such as power cables; devices that are not returned; software malfunctions. Who is accountable and what is the cost of this?

e) Students who want to work at home may have no internet access.

f) If tech support is needed from home, it is another barrier to getting work done.

CITATIONS

1   *Equipping Every Global Learner for the 21st Century*. Rep. Cisco Systems Inc, 23 Apr. 2008. Web. 10 May 2016.

2   Summers, Juana. "Kids And Screen Time: What Does The Research Say?" *NPR*. NPR, 28 Aug. 2014. Web. 10 May 2016.

3   "BioInitiative Report: A Rationale for a Biologically-based Public Exposure Standard for Electromagnetic Fields (ELF and RF)." *The BioInitiative Report RSS*. Dec. 2012. Web. 10 May 2016.

4   *Best Practices with Children and Wireless Radiation a Review of Science and Global Advisories*. Rep. Environmental Health Trust, 08 Oct. 2015. Web. 10 May 2016.