

May 10, 2016
Kelly Amos, Chair, and all Trustees
Halton District School Board
J.W. Singleton Centre
2050 Guelph Line
Burlington, Ontario
L7R 3Z2

Dear Chair Amos and Trustees:

RE: Minority Report to HDSB Special Education Plan 2016/17

Please accept this letter as Halton Down Syndrome Association's Minority Report to the Halton District School Board's Special Education Plan 2016-2017.

Although we appreciate the supports that are available to students with Down syndrome, and we are pleased to see the board's ongoing commitment to the development and implementation of the Employability Skills Certificate and the Community Skills Certificate, we cannot support the 2016/17 Special Education Plan for the following reasons:

- Cuts are being proposed to vital special education programs without any assessment of how students will be affected, and without any plan to support those students in alternative ways;
- Cuts have been chosen with minimal rationale to support them;
- The Learning Centre is a vital program that supports students with learning disabilities, and is one of the board's success stories. We have heard how it has transformed lives, and how without it students have struggled with learning, with self-esteem, and have even dropped out of school. The proposal to cut this program is reminiscent of the landmark Moore case from British Columbia. A school board recommended a program for a student with learning disabilities and then cancelled the program. Parents sent their child to private school. The Supreme Court ruled that there was discrimination, ordered sweeping changes, and ordered the school board to pay the total cost of private school tuition. In its ruling, the court found that cuts were made without proper assessment of their impact, with no alternative plans to replace the cancelled program, and without consideration to eliminating less fundamental optional programs.
- Superintendent Zonneveld's comment at the May 4 board meeting that the board should not consider parent and student testimonials when making decisions because the board would receive such testimonials with any program cut, were disturbing. The testimonials coming forward about the Learning Centre are describing how it has turned lives around, reshaped students' understanding of themselves as learners, given them confidence for the first time in their lives. We have not heard any such testimonials about the ELDC, and we doubt that

testimonials regarding optional programs such as French Immersion would be nearly so powerful.

- For years SEAC has heard how Itinerant Teachers play a vital role in building capacity with our classroom teachers, and how the board has invested in their professional development to enable them to provide this support. We have seen the work of Itinerant Teachers transform behaviours in the classroom and help create successful environments for all learners. We are concerned with the recommendation to decrease this support and put more responsibility on the classroom teacher. This year alone we have heard of two classroom teachers who have gone on leaves of absence due to health reasons. When this happens, there is stress for families, major transitions for students, increased behaviours in the classroom, lags in learning, and a loss to the board's investment in professional development. We are concerned that the board will be adding to the workload of our already overburdened teachers and SERTs, and what this will mean to vulnerable students.
- All that has been proposed to compensate for the loss of 5 Learning Resource Teachers, 4.5 Itinerant Teachers, and 8 Learning Centre teachers is \$300,000 in professional development. Professional Development as the only alternative support is inadequate, as is the \$300,000 allocated.
- We feel that there are areas of the board where efficiencies could be made without directly impacting students with special education needs. Unfortunately the board has not undertaken any review process to determine where those efficiencies might be made. In fact, there are several management positions that oversee the programs and services being recommended for elimination, yet no consolidations or reductions to those areas have been considered.
- The Special Education Plan was not updated last year to reflect changes in the system, such as FDK and the new Itinerant Teacher model. To catch up this year, SEAC had to identify outdated sections and request that they be updated by Student Services. Some changes have been made at the very last minute without SEAC having adequate time to properly review them. Other changes that we were told would be made did not make it into the Plan.

Our goal as an organization is always to collaborate and build relationships with our community partners. In the past we have supported the Special Education Plan, even in years when cuts were made to special education programs and services. However this year we lack the confidence that the board has done its due diligence in protecting the needs students with special education needs.

We urge the HDSB Chair and Trustees to consider:

- conducting a full review of special education programs and services next year, as recommended by SEAC, so that informed decisions can be made to address budget shortfalls in 2017/18;
- keeping the Learning Centre open;

- maintaining the current number of Itinerant Teacher positions;
- looking for efficiencies at the board level so that students with special education needs are not directly impacted.

We appreciate the opportunity to be a member of SEAC and to add our input for consideration. We are available to further discuss our concerns if needed.

Respectfully Submitted,

Leanne Tovey
HDSA Chair

Lori Aker
HDSA SEAC Representative