

Monday, March 27, 2017

Queen Elizabeth ARC
ARC Subcommittee Response Letter

To whom it may concern,

As representatives of the six school subcommittees we are writing to express our significant concerns with the Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) process currently underway in Prince Edward County. While we acknowledge that the status quo is not an option due to enrollment figures and funding cuts, the current process has been structured in such a way as to inhibit subcommittee collaboration, to (unintentionally) foster a feeling of competition between schools and communities, and which has failed at the most basic aspects of quality community consultation. At this time, we feel that the outcome of this consultation process will not reflect the subcommittees', students', parents' or other stakeholders' input to the process nor will it yield the best option for the broader community or the board for that matter.

For the reasons outlined below, we are requesting that this review process be extended to permit the kind of quality community consultation contemplated by the Ministry of Education's recent letter regarding provincial accommodation reviews, and its' 2015 Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines (PARG).

When the HPEDSB initiated this process in November 2016 it proposed extremely aggressive timelines in order to begin rollout of *proposed* changes for the 2017/18 school year. In an effort to stay within its imposed timeline, the HPEDSB have struggled to provide information requested by the public or by individual school subcommittees in a timely fashion – with subcommittees receiving large documents at the very meetings at which they are expected to discuss that information (despite having been told it would be received in advance). Having only two working meetings to review the substantial proposal by the board, and with limited responses to the public's and subcommittees' questions in advance of those discussions, subcommittees have found themselves wasting valuable time reviewing materials during the meetings, preventing any sort of analysis and discourse on the proposals.

The meeting process itself has also been cause for concern. Firstly, members of the subcommittees feel they have received little guidance from staff on site about how to approach the task at hand. Further, the meetings have no apparent agenda or structure, leading to confusion and a growing sense of frustration with the process. Subcommittees also feel that they have been discouraged or at least inhibited from working with each other which has fostered a sense of competition between schools and communities. Lastly, citizen members are concerned that teachers and other Board staff on the subcommittees are being placed in an awkward and unfair position by having them participate in proposals that their employers has brought forward – especially when members are unhappy with the process or the proposals being presented.

At the initial ARC orientation meeting, members of the subcommittees were led to believe that the consultation process would be clear, transparent, and that communication would be prompt between the HPEDSB and the members of the subcommittees. The information contained in the School Information Profiles (SIP's) lacks consistency and in some cases is out of date. For example, community members have visited a number of the facilities and have discovered that numerous renewal requirements have already been completed. The subcommittees are extremely discouraged that the information on which the Board's current proposal is based, and which they are being asked to consider, may be out of date and inaccurate.

As the primary conduit between the general public and the school board, some members are feeling exposed without the resources or understanding of the information necessary to answer questions from the public. This has fostered a growing sense of resentment at a process which has placed members as buffers between the communities and the school board. Many members feel they will be held responsible for a plan that they cannot support but which they feel has been forced upon them. In short, there is a sense that the outcome of this process has been somewhat pre-ordained and that it is satisfying minimum policy requirements and community optics rather than striving for meaningful and potentially impactful community discourse.

Despite these significant issues, the subcommittees still recognize that accommodation changes must occur due to decreasing student populations and Ministry funding changes; however, if the current proposal comes to pass there are serious logistical challenges and questions regarding the transition which have not been addressed and which could negatively impact students of the affected schools. In the HPEDSB proposal for instance, PECl will require a renovation to accommodate elementary students as early as September 2017. To date, there is no information, plan or proposal provided that identifies how the school board is going to ensure that the facility is ready to host the elementary students before they arrive in September. Given the unrealistic timelines for renovation and other requirements of consolidation of multiple schools into PECl, there is real angst among subcommittee members about the prospect of students in an already unfamiliar setting, having to navigate construction, dust, noise and other issues created by such a rapid transition, and its impact on students learning and development – not to mention the greater costs incurred by attempting to perform such renovations within an operating school environment.

Further, the Board's own Report No. B-3 speaks to the importance of transition and states "it is essential for students to feel welcome at their new school" and that PECl "can be ready to welcome students for September 2017." But with a final decision on the recommendation not expected until June 19, 2017, subcommittee members are skeptical that the facility will be ready. Furthermore, there is concern that opportunities during the summer holiday season will not exist "for students and parents from the consolidating school(s) to come together, prior to consolidation, to engage in activities together and to build a renewed sense of community" as report No. B-3 outlines. Finally in the case of PECl and the potential consolidation of Queen Elizabeth, Pinecrest and Sophiasburgh, the staggered transition of Queen Elizabeth and Pinecrest initially, with the students of Sophiasburgh arriving at a future date, would create conditions that disadvantage the students of Sophiasburgh and potentially disrupt the learning

environment; Sophiasburgh students may have difficulty integrating and feeling like members of the new school community.

In closing, the subcommittees are asking at this time for a slowing of the current process based on a number of factors. They would like the school board to provide time and opportunity for the subcommittees to come together to try and develop a solution with the Board that meets the fiscal and programming needs of the Board, while taking into account the social and economic impact on the broader Prince Edward County community – a potential win/win. The subcommittee is also asking that the process be expanded to include the Massasauga – Rednersville School since those students and families will be impacted by the current proposal and should be considered in any alternatives that are considered.

On March 6, 2017 the Minister of Education circulated a letter with regards to the school consolidation process in Ontario. The letter assures all of their community partners that the Province is committed to finding solutions "that meet both Community needs and the educational needs of Ontario students". As a result of overwhelming feedback from stakeholders across the province, the Ministry has committed to "launch an engagement on new approaches to supporting education in rural and remote communities" this spring. With the benefit of time and this engagement of the Province, we feel an approach that addresses the needs of all stakeholders can be developed. We urge the Board to delay this process so that a community-based proposal can be developed – one informed by accurate information, realistic timelines and student impacts, and a community consultation process which provides stakeholders a real opportunity to participate in shaping one of its most important community institutions.

Regards,

Queen Elizabeth ARC Committee
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