

York board takes action in response to ministry report

By Mark Pavilons

Trustees with the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) responded quickly to a much-anticipated, and somewhat harsh Ministry of Education report on the YRDSB conduct.

The report is the culmination of several months of interviews with board staff, trustees, parents, and students, and was initiated at the direction of Ontario's Minister of Education, Mitzie Hunter.

"Message received, loud and clear," said YRDSB board chair Lorelea Carruthers, speaking on behalf of all YRDSB trustees. "We are grateful the Ministry's report has been released, and would like to thank the Ministry of Education staff for their dedication and professionalism.

"... as a board, we have immediately begun discussions on how to implement some of the report's key recommendations. We have seen within the report some significant errors of fact that we have raised directly with the Minister. In addition, we are seeking clarification on a number of points," Carruthers added. "That said, we want parents and students to be assured this report will not be ignored in any way, shape or form. Our primary mission has been, and continues to be, the education and well-being of our students. On behalf of the board of trustees, I apologize. As the elected chair of the board, I take responsibility for what happened, and for what will happen next.

"I can say that all of the trustees - every one of us - are on the same page. We are united, working together on a clear path, and will begin taking action immediately.

"It won't be action behind closed doors. There have been too many closed doors. We are committed to moving forward in an open and transparent manner to restore public confidence in our Board and ensure we are providing our students with a safe, inclusive and welcoming learning environment."

The board has established committees to immediately deal with racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia and Islamophobia.

They are ceasing international and jurisdictional travel immediately for senior staff and trustees.

"We have met with respected equity experts to commence action to develop and implement a full equity plan.

"We have taken action on a comprehensive equity audit.

"We are hiring an integrity commissioner.

"We have agreed to a tough arm's-length trustee assessment process.

"We have committed to a comprehensive equity training strategy."

The recommendations in the Ministry's report cover a range of issues such as racism, equity, transparency, accountability, as well as the work of senior board staff and trustees.

Ontario Minister of Education Mitzie Hunter said she is "very pleased" with efforts the trustees made in dealing with complaints related to bias and mispending at the school board.

"I am very pleased to see that (trustees) are moving forward and want to take action in a positive direction," she said. "They understand the need to restore confidence in the York Region School Board."

In January, Minister Hunter appointed Patrick Case and Suzanne Herbert to conduct an urgent review of the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) and asked them to provide observations and recommendations regarding concerns around governance and equity, which have impacted public confidence in the board.

The results "deeply concerned" the education minister. "In particular, the report describes feelings of alienation, marginalization and discrimination expressed by many of the board's students, parents, staff and members of the community. The board's leadership - including the trustees and the director - must take the actions necessary to address these concerns.

"Let me be clear: racism in our schools and school boards is not acceptable. Ontario's students and parents must have assurances that their schools are safe and welcoming places to learn, and that they are environments of inclusivity and respect."

Hunter called the issues within the YRDSB "as severe." The eight immediate remedial actions were ministry directives.

Hunter vows to closely monitor the progress and compliance on each direction carefully.

"And if I have concerns that the board is not complying, or may not comply with the directions, I may exercise my authority to take further action against the board.:

The board worked with ministry staff throughout the review.

"We saw this report as an opportunity to develop a more welcoming and inclusive environment for our students, while maintaining the high academic standards our students are well known for," Carruthers said.

While the review was still being conducted YRDSB took several steps to show a greater dedication to diversity and respect for the

diverse community the board serves. A monthly public forum for community feedback was reinstated; community working groups have been established to report to Trustees on addressing classism, anti-black racism, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism; and board meetings now begin with an acknowledgement of traditional Indigenous lands.

“There is no more time to waste,” concluded Carruthers. “Our kids need an education that is the best we can give and an environment free of bias. We pledge today, unequivocally, to give them that.”

York Region District School Board is the third largest school district in Ontario with over 123,000 students in 176 elementary schools and 32 secondary schools.