**Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC)**

## MINUTES for Tuesday, April 5, 2016

### SEAC – Representatives and (Alternates) Present:

Association for Bright Children Diana Avon

Autism Society of Ontario – Toronto Lisa Kness

Brain Injury Society of Toronto *regrets*

Community Living Toronto Clovis Grant

Down Syndrome Association of Toronto Richard Carter

Easter Seals Ontario *regrets*

Epilepsy Toronto Steven Lynette

Learning Disabilities Association Toronto Mark Kovats

VIEWS for the Visually Impaired David Lepofsky

VOICE for Hearing Impaired Children Paul Cross

TDSB North East Community Aline Chan Jean-Paul Ngana

TDSB North West Community Jordan Glass *regrets*

TDSB South East Community Diane Montgomery *regrets* (Dick Winters)

TDSB South West Community Nora Green Paula Boutis (Colin Ballosingh)

TDSB Trustees Pamela Gough Alexander Brown

Regrets: Easter Seals Rep Deborah Fletcher, SE Community Re Olga Ingrahm, NW Community Rep Phillip Sargent, Brain Injury Society Rep Cynthia Sprigings, Community Living Alternate (Margarita Isakov)

Staff Present: Uton Robinson, Executive Superintendent, Special Education and Section Programs

Ian Allison, Coordinating Superintendent, Special Education and Section Programs

Dr. Carol Farrenkopf, Coordinator, TDSB Vision Program

Dr. Carolyn Lennox, Chief of Psychology, West Region Area B

Recorder: Margo Ratsep, SEAC Liaison

MINUTES

## Call to Order

## SEAC Chair David Lepofsky called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m. He invited SEAC members and staff in attendance to introduce themselves to the guests in the gallery.

## Declaration of Possible Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest were noted.

## Confirmation of Minutes for the March 7, 2016 SEAC meeting

On motion of Dick Winters, the Minutes of the March 7, 2016 SEAC meeting were approved.

## Digital Accessibility (Priority 3 – Barrier Free and Inclusive School Board)

Chair David Lepofsky gave a brief introduction to the discussion and noted his own difficulty trying to access information on the TDSB website. He introduced the topic, pointing out that under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), TDSB has to become fully accessible before 2025. TheRegulations also relate to digital accessibility, not just physical accessibility – plans and processes need to be in place to ensure digital accessibility and websites should meet an internationally established standard. TDSB policy commits to digital accessibility and in board purchasing. He commented that Ontario and TDSB lags behind USA in procuring and deploying accessible technology.

## Executive Superintendent Uton Robinson informed SEAC that he has arranged for Information Technology staff to attend the May SEAC meeting to speak about plans in place to improve digital accessibility. He introduced Dr. Carol Farrenkopf, Coordinator for the TDSB Vision Program, to provide insight into the topic.

Dr. Farrenkopf provided insight into the topic based on her experience as Coordinator for Toronto and Toronto Catholic District School Boards’ Vision Programs:

* Experience working with the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) on improving digital accessibility revealed some of the barriers impacting on readability: poor colour, low contrast, too small size, visibility of icons and buttons.
* The use of pdfs is problematic – accessible to certain degrees depending on the kind of reader programs and the age of hardware and software.
* One option is to use appropriate software to create the original documents in an accessible format. Discussions with experts who are blind/low vision assists in identifying and eradicating barriers. New products are being investigated following “Clear Print Accessibility Guidelines”.

**4.1 Procurement**

Mr. Robinson provided the following information in response to questions and comments:

There are procurement rules/processes for digital purchases. These may involve purchase agreements or site licensing requirements, such as customized apps with Special Education Amount (SEA) claims. Central requests must go through vetting and meet specific criteria through the TDSB Information Technology (IT) procurement process. In some situations, it may be possible for a school to make a purchase for a single student (i.e. of an app). School councils sometimes purchase apps, but do so through the IT procurement process. If a significant app is evaluated as preferable, then the central procurement process follows for wider distribution.

***SEAC input: It would be helpful to have an inventory of recommended apps with summaries of their features so teachers across the system can know about them and how they can be used.***

**4.2 Current Student Support in TDSB Vision Programs**

Dr. Farrenkopf spoke about the TDSB Vision Program, which is seen as a recognized leader in Canada in the use of assistive technology for blindness/low vision. All students in the Vision Program can access all sites, have the assistive technology they need and are able to use the technology. Staff and the technology vendors provide one-to-one training to students and their teachers. Students who need assistive technology are assessed and a Special Education Amount claim is put together. Equipment is refreshed every 3 years. The students are regularly reassessed to ensure the assistive technology is appropriate. Vision Program staff are in the schools on a weekly basis, inviting continuous feedback, from students, school staff and parents/guardians.

**4.3 Accessible Information for Parents**

Chair David Lepofsky explained that AODA applies to all disabilities (such as LD, MID and DD), as does accessibility to information in schools. TDSB is required to ensure that information is fully accessible to all parents. Mr. Robinson suggested that the Information Technology (IT) staff attending the May meeting would respond to questions, including those raised at this meeting, about responsibility for addressing digital accessibility, a style guide that supports accessibility, and about IT procurement processes and how they address barriers.

***SEAC input: It is important that the TDSB website can be accessed universally.***

**5. Special Education Budget Update**

Mr. Robinson had provided in advance to SEAC, a copy of his report “Special Education Staff Allocation 2016-2017 – Elementary”, which had been presented to all TDSB senior staff and school administrators. Information shared in his responses to questions and comments are recorded in the minutes by general topic:

**5.1 Cuts to Staff Allocation**

Mr. Robinson reported on the decisions of the March board meeting around special education staff, with no cuts for next year to school-based special education teaching staff, educational assistants, special needs assistants and Professional Support Services. History suggests attrition could result in redistribution to meet specific needs.

***SEAC input: It would be helpful if SEAC could receive updates from Professional Support Services, especially when the topic is relevant. Someone responsible for accessibility should attend SEAC meetings.***

**5.2 Ministry Funding Changes for Autism Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI)**

The ministry of Children and Youth has announced significant changes in the delivery of Autism Services. Information can be found at:

<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/specialneeds/autism/ontario-autism-program.aspx>

Mr. Robinson undertook to take questions forward to the TDSB Coordinator for Autism Programs regarding the funding changes and Autism program responses:

1. What it could mean for staff in trying to meet student needs.

2. How schools are being prepared for the change in IBI provision.

3. Under new pressures, would current number of EAs be sufficient.

***Action: The Chair suggested that the Coordinator provide information through email on the impact of the funding changes on kids who use these services and what TDSB can do to support them***

**5.3 Restructuring at the TDSB**

Mr. Robinson explained that while there is conversation around the impact of TDSB restructuring on Special Education, information is not yet prepared sufficiently to be shared. Trustee Gough drew attention to details provided in an article in The Star and emphasized the guiding principles passed by the board, which are aimed at placing more resources closer to the schools

***SEAC input: TDSB should brief SEAC on any major restructuring changes, so they can be examined through the lens of students with special education needs. SEAC would like to hear about how students are being prepared for the changes or ideas about how SEAC/the community can support them better through the change.***

***Action: Trustee Brown undertook to send the SEAC Liaison a synopsis and update on the changes, to distribute to SEAC and post on the SEAC website.***

Chair David Lepofsky called the discussion to a close, though open to be revisited at the next meeting and invited individuals to email questions to Uton.

## 6. Parent Survey

Chair David Lepofsky reported that he had met with the SEAC work group in developing a draft parent questionnaire and invited input. Uton Robinson has confirmed that funding is available for the survey. Survey Monkey will be used. The following suggestions were made:

* The survey is too detailed, too complicated for the average parent to answer in 5 minutes. Suggest there be a long form and a short form. The number of respondents will likely be limited without a simpler survey.
  + The question about coming to Toronto to be able to obtain support should include whether families come specifically to access medical or other services for their child.
  + In terms of first contact and first diagnosis – did parents make contact long before their child came to school
  + Ask whether the child is now receiving support as the result of something that happened after the family came to Toronto District School Board

Members were asked to send any other comments to Chair Lepofsky or to SW Community Representative, Paula Boutis by Friday.

**7. TDSB Screening for Giftedness**

Coordinating Superintendent Ian Allison spoke briefly to the slide presentation he had circulated in advance to SEAC about the new screening process for Giftedness and responded to questions and comments. Over the past year, SEAC has heard from staff about TDSB plans to carry out new and more comprehensive screening for Giftedness across the board. He shared the following information:

* This step is being taken to address concerns about equity and fairness in detecting giftedness, by moving away from an outdated nomination process to a more effective screening process and to bring TDSB more in line with what other boards are already doing.
* The screening test is the first step in a multi-step process. It is a group test versus an individual test of intelligence. Parents must give consent. The plan is to carry out the assessment early in fall.
* The process has stepped criterion. Students who meet specified criteria set under the Canadian Cognitive Abilities Test will move forward for an individual test (WISC-V).
* The screening process has additional benefits – the verbal, non-verbal and quantitative tests gives the teacher class profile information of demonstrated strengths, enabling better programming in the classroom.
* The rating scale will give teachers feedback about intellectual, achievement, leadership, motivation, perseverance, creativity, etc.
* It is a universal screener with different scales, which can screen information about LD and MID.
* This is not the only point of information teachers will have, since students will have been in school already 4 years. Teachers also use other kinds of assessment tools in elementary grade classrooms.
* The need is to assess more abstract skills and the available assessment instruments are not considered adequately reliable for children at an early age, so TDSB waits until grade 3 to screen for giftedness. TDSB continues to watch the assessment literature.
* Accommodations can be provided to facilitate taking the test, (i.e. an adult reading the questions). Generally teachers have identified these kinds of needs by grade 3.
* The In-School Team (IST) and School Support Team (SST) is a TDSB process focused on identifying and helping students who are having challenges.

***SEAC input***:

* ***Support for TDSB moving from a nomination process to systematic screening, addressing SEAC’s previously expressed concerns about inequity.***
* ***Support for a universal screener as one path in, but not the only path. Concern that kids with learning disabilities (LD) or who are English Language Learners (ELL) are being missed. External tests should also be considered. (However, SEAC does recognize the equity issue of privilege, where wealthier parents can more easily afford to opt for external assessments.)***
* ***Concern that there is screening for one kind of exceptionality but not others who would also benefit from early identification, such as students with learning disabilities who could be missed for years.***
* ***SEAC expressed a serious concern that TDSB is focusing on one exceptionality. If there is a need for screening for giftedness, there is a comparable need to screen for the other exceptionalities. This need not be done all at once, or by the same tool.***
* ***Concern that the screening tool being used should be barrier free (hearing, vision, other disabilities) so that students of all disabilities can take part in the screening effectively. ADHD or autism impact on assessment results.***
* ***SEAC also asked what steps TDSB has taken to ensure that the screening tool is fully accessible, and that it does not include any barriers.***
* ***The TDSB procurement process should have a requirement ensuring accessibility for all purchases.***
* ***Concern about increased assessment demands on Psychology staff, which also include assessment requirements by Developmental Services Ontario (DSO) for access to funding***
* ***Understanding that there is a legal obligation to screen for all exceptionalities and recognizing there are already screening tools in place on enrolment. It’s good that the proposed assessment tool is more informative than just for gifted screening – it might be worthwhile to relabel its use.***
* ***Interest in knowing what the process will be moving forward for those kids for whom a learning disability shows up in the assessment.***
* ***Interest in knowing if there is a training piece for administrators and teachers to identify LD using the scores***
* ***Some parents of young children who are bright but struggling in kindergarten would like to see access to Gifted programs for their children.***
* ***Concern that young students moving to Toronto from primary Gifted programs in other boards do not have access to Gifted programming.***
* ***Interest in knowing about any appeal process for parents who disagree with the screening findings.***

The Chair requested that TDSB staff report back to SEAC on questions raised during the discussion.

A consensus vote extended the meeting by 5 minutes.

## 8. Other Business

8.1 Parent delegation at Program and School Services Committee (PSSC) – A recommendation was made to forward the delegate’s slide presentation to SEAC for discussion. Members were invited to join an ad hoc working group to dialog on the issue. Nora Green, Diana Avon and Jean Paul Ngana volunteered.

8.2 There is an ABC conference on May 7 at Toronto Catholic District School Board with resources on Giftedness.

8.3 Reminder of the April 16, Parents as Partners Conference. In this area, the transportation is from Earl Haig Secondary School.

8.4 The June meeting will move to June 13 from the 20th.

## 9. Adjournment

## By consensus vote, the meeting adjourned at 9:03 p.m.

Next Meetings:May 2, 2016 and June 13, 2016