

## **Report from the TDSB SEAC Chair David Lepofsky for the February 1, 2016 SEAC Meeting**

Date: January 25, 2016

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

May I again thank SEAC members for entrusting me with the chairperson's role for SEAC. At all times, I welcome your feedback and ideas.

As I announced at our January meeting, I aim to take actions to ensure that our monthly meetings make the best use of the time that you generously donate as volunteers. I want to maximize the time for us to discuss priority issues that matter to the children and youth for whom we are mandated to advocate.

To that end, I will try when possible to provide a Chair's report in advance of our monthly meetings. I also invite SEAC members to use email between SEAC meetings as a way to raise issues and inform SEAC members about important events and opportunities. Email is also a great way for SEAC members to propose topics for upcoming SEAC meetings. I will track those proposals for agenda items, and address them as I schedule our work on the priorities we approved last year for SEAC.

### **2. POSSIBLE SERVICE CUTS IN THE TDSB BUDGET FOR NEXT YEAR**

As a general matter, I have asked Special Education Executive Superintendent Uton Robinson to alert us well in advance of any upcoming issues or decisions at TDSB, that may impact the 43,000 "Special Education students" for whom SEAC advocates. I will use the term "Special Education" but I want to make it clear I consider the terms "special education" and "special needs" to be quite troubling.

SEAC must have an opportunity to give input into these decisions before they are made. That means we need to have sufficient prior notice that these issues are coming up, and access to important information that will let us consider them.

As an initial example of this, as I understand it, the TDSB Board will meet on March 22, 2016 to set the budget for the next year. I am also given to understand that the provincial "High Needs Funding" amount (I may have the term wrong) is expected to be reduced by the Ontario Government in an amount in the range of \$3,000,000 for the upcoming year. TDSB staff are examining what staff cuts it may institute in the Special Education area as a result. I appreciate Uton Robinson giving us the heads up on this issue. This illustrates the way we hope to work together on our issues.

I have placed the topic of possible Special Education staff cuts for next year as a priority topic on the agenda for our February 1, 2016 SEAC meeting. I have suggested to Uton Robinson that TDSB should explore any and all avenues for addressing this budget reduction without cutting staff that provide or directly supervise direct services to students with special needs. In a school board of this size, TDSB should be able to investigate options for spending reductions somewhere in its operations that do not reduce the number and hours of TDSB staff that provide services to these students. Whether it be a thinning of the excessive number of levels of administrative positions, or cuts in other areas in TDSB, there should be other areas of spending that are a lower priority, especially given the many barriers that still exist for students with special needs in TDSB, including, for example, barriers in the mainstream classroom setting.

I encourage SEAC members to consider their thoughts on this, and exchange ideas on the email list if they wish, in advance of our February meeting. I invite SEAC members to consider our passing a resolution with a recommendation to the Board, stating that there should be no staff reductions in positions that provide or directly supervise services to students with special needs, and that savings should be found elsewhere, e.g. through a thinning of the many layers of administrative positions in the TDSB hierarchy and reductions in other areas of TDSB operations that are a lower priority than direct services to students with special needs.

To assist with that discussion, I propose a text below of a resolution that a SEAC member may wish to propose, if they wish, either as worded here, or in some other form:

### **DRAFT RESOLUTION**

*The TDSB Special Education Advisory Committee recommends to the Toronto District School Board that:*

- 1. In its budget for next year, the Toronto District School Board should not cut any positions of any staff who provide or directly supervise direct services to students with special needs, and*
- 2. Before any cuts are contemplated to staff who provide or directly supervise direct service to students with special needs, the TDSB should first exhaust all other possible areas for budget reductions elsewhere within the TDSB, that address lower priority items than services to society's vulnerable and disadvantaged children and youth, including thinning its layers of administrative bureaucracy, and*
- 3. TDSB should publicly report on steps it has taken to avert or avoid the need to cut staff who provide or directly supervise services to students with special needs.*

### **3. TDSB INCLUSION STRATEGY**

Uton Robinson has been invited to report to SEAC at our February 1, 2016 meeting on the implementation of the TDSB Inclusion Strategy. To maximize time for discussion, I have asked Uton Robinson to circulate a written report in advance.

As well, TDSB's Inner City Advisory Committee has expressed an interest in this topic. To that end, ICAC members were invited to attend our February meeting, prior to my becoming SEAC chair. In the interests of being inclusive, I am happy to have ICAC take part in the discussion, in a way that allows for SEAC members to also fully take part. I am asking TDSB to send this report and Uton Robinson's inclusion strategy report to ICAC in advance.

I invite ICAC to formulate any questions they have for Uton Robinson, and either send them to him and us in advance, or select two or three ICAC members to raise them at our February 1, 2016 meeting. I thought it would be worthwhile to try out this form of including them at our meeting on this occasion, so we can have the benefit of their perspective.

### **4. THE SEAC PARENTS OUTREACH WORKING GROUP**

On behalf of us all, may I thank those SEAC members who have volunteered to take part in our SEAC Parents Outreach Working Group. They include:

David Lepofsky  
Alexander Brown  
Paula Boutis  
Nora Green  
Margarita Isakov  
Diane Montgomery  
Ginny Pearce

We have asked TDSB to provide facilities for a telephone conference call on Wednesday, January 27, 2016 so we can brainstorm ideas for SEAC to discuss at our February SEAC meeting. If any SEAC members have

ideas for us, email them to me at any time. We will want TDSB to be able to support the work of volunteer SEAC members, by making conference call facilities available from time to time. This can help future working groups that we may create.

Also on the topic of reaching out to parents and families, at our January meeting, I announced a brand-new Twitter hashtag for the TDSB SEAC. It is #TDSBSEAC it is starting to pick up on twitter. Two tweets I have sent out several times, and which have gotten re-tweets, include:

#TDSBSEAC New hashtag for TorontoDistrictSchoolBoard #SpecialEducation Advisory Committee  
#accessibility #specialneeds @TDSB

Got ideas on how @TDSB can better serve kids with disabilities or special needs? Tweet us! Use  
#TDSBSEAC #accessibility

I also want to thank several SEAC members who have already started tweeting, using that hashtag. Any SEAC members who are on Twitter are also encouraged to use that hashtag if they want to live-tweet any parts of our meetings.

I have also established a general feedback email address for our SEAC. It is meant to be a place where members of the public can alert us to their stories. It is [seacfeedback@gmail.com](mailto:seacfeedback@gmail.com)

We have not yet publicized this email address, as I am not yet set up to track incoming emails. We will want to emphasize to the public that we may not be able to do anything more than send a standard response. We cannot give advice, or lodge complaints with TDSB, or investigate issues, or advocate in individual cases. However we can track input we receive as part of our effort to gather input from parents. These can help inform recommendations that we bring forward to the Board.

A big thank you to Diane Montgomery who went to a Ward public meeting shortly after our last SEAC meeting, on very short notice, to reach out to parents and families on behalf of SEAC. More on this as our Parents Outreach Working Group brings action ideas forward to SEAC.

## **5. A GREAT NEW RESOURCE TO HELP SEAC**

I am delighted to let you know of a great new resource I have secured for SEAC. I am a visiting professor at Osgoode Hall Law School. A group of Osgoode Hall law students, who must do a 40 hour Public Interest placement, have volunteered their services to me. Some of the public interest work I shall be assigning to them relate to education accessibility issues and will be helpful to SEAC.

While this has not been finalized at the time I wrote this report, I am aiming to get research done on different options for an ombudsperson or other internal board position to deal with cases where a family of a student with special needs is having difficulty ensuring that their child's needs are met in TDSB. This builds on the great exchange on this topic via email in the past week. I will connect these students with SEAC members who have shared ideas on this, so we can discuss it all at a future SEAC meeting.

I am also aiming to have work done on exploring what information a family can get, and how easy it is to get, when approaching TDSB with inquiries about meeting the needs of a student with special needs. I aim to share the results of these efforts with TDSB, and welcome any suggestions that you may have for students involved in this. To avoid too much email going to everyone on the SEAC list, you may wish to simply email me.

## **6. TEARING DOWN RECURRING ACCESSIBILITY BARRIERS AT TDSB**

It seems that TDSB may have dealt with special education on the one hand, and becoming a barrier-free school board on the other, in somewhat separate silos. We on SEAC are in a position to try to change that.

To that end, I have asked Uton Robinson to reach out to senior TDSB staff with responsibility in that area, to ask them to regularly attend our SEAC meetings in the next months. This will be especially important as we expand our work to include our Priority #3. That priority focuses on what TDSB needs to do to become a fully accessible school board, by removing and preventing disability accessibility barriers to equal educational opportunities. Becoming fully accessible is required by the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Even though that topic is addressed in our Priority #3, it will of course arise in much of our other work.

Rest assured that we will be focusing significant attention on this topic over the coming months. However, just as senior Special Education staff regularly attend our SEAC meetings; it seems appropriate for senior TDSB staff responsible for ensuring compliance with the AODA, the Human Rights Code and the Charter to also regularly attend. They would have hugely benefitted from our discussion at our January meeting.

## **7. RECENT CORRESPONDENCE**

Because these do not require any action, I am asking the ever-helpful Margo Ratsep to list below any correspondence that SEAC has received, so it will be included in the record of our February 1, 2106 meeting without needing to eat up scarce meeting time.

- 7.1 Letter dated January 11, 2016 from Trustee Sheila Cary-Meagher, Trustee Jennifer Story and Ingrid Palmer, Co-Chairs of the Inner City Advisory Committee, in support of improved consultation between the board and SEAC
- 7.2 Email dated January 13, 2016 from Ciara Behan, Executive Assistant to the Chair of the Board forwarding the Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education (MACSE) Update.
- 7.3 Email dated January 21, 2016 forwarding a message from Dr. John Malloy, Director of Education for the TDSB regarding a newly designated P.A. Day on Friday, April 15, 2016.
- 7.4 Email dated January 23, 2016 from Ying Ong, chair for Cluster Parent Academy Committee (CPAC), inviting attendance to observe at a Special Education Discussion Night for parents in for a Scarborough cluster of schools, on Wednesday February 10<sup>th</sup> from 6 – 8 pm at Wexford Public School.