

Down for the count

Written by SHERALYN ROMAN

Teachers are on the ropes. Parents have already been knocked out. Kids? Well thank goodness kids are pretty resilient but honestly, how much more can our children take in terms of more change and being 'adaptable'? Where is the referee? I think we need a standing eight count right about now because to say that the DPCDSB has us dazed and confused is the understatement of the year. At this point, it's possible to say that proposed changes impacting local Catholic elementary schools have just about everyone feeling 'down for the count'.

If you're not sure what I'm talking about you must have children in the public school system. In that Board, they have been very clear about the Hybrid model and that it won't be implemented for elementary school aged children. Parents with children in the Dufferin Peel Catholic District School Board however, recently received notification 'with little warning' of this planned and significant change to their child's learning environment. Without full access to information on how the roll out would take place (and to my mind, without full consideration of its impact) both parents and teachers were notified by way of being asked to complete a survey about this new 'Hybrid' Learning Model, which will be implemented November 16th. Hybrid, for those folks who no longer have children in the school system, means teachers will now be required to teach children IN the classroom AND remotely, at the same time! Sounds plausible right? Not to me and apparently not to the approximately 800+ (and counting) parents who immediately joined forces to advocate for their children and another 1200+ who, within two days of this announcement, had signed a petition against this so-called 'solution' for providing safe and accessible education during these pandemic times.

The hybrid model calls for cameras in the classroom so that kids in class, and at home, can each fully participate in the learning. They'll only be focussed on the teacher for the 'privacy protection' of all apparently, so it's a good job teachers never walk around the classroom engaging one on one with learners at their desks. Children will have the option of attending school whenever they want, choosing virtual one day and in class the next as there 'will always be a desk available to them.' (Can we please have a moment of silence for the poor school secretary who has to track attendance?) Thankfully, children never speak out in class, muffling audio and making those at home struggle to hear the teacher and goodness knows, the proposed 'chat box' for at home virtual learners will work like a charm because in addition to handling all the students in class, the teacher will have ample time to answer questions in the chat box from the kids at home! This plan presupposes that the Internet is working which, let's face it, Caledon is working on it but we're not there yet. Concerned about privacy? Concerned about already overwhelmed teachers attempting to implement (and manage) yet another new style of teaching and learning? Concerned that perhaps, as a family, you made the very difficult decision to either keep your children at home, or to send them to school based on the best advice available at the time and now you are faced with yet another 'choice' that impacts that decision? Did you decide as a family to reduce your income, quit a job and stay at home for the year? There are so many ways in which both teachers and families are impacted by the pandemic already, this new model of learning may well be what actually puts everyone on the ropes or down for the count for good.

Where are the referees? Parents are reaching out to their Catholic school trustees throughout Peel Region asking them to act in their role as an advocate for parents. Many claim they are receiving minimal, or worse, conflicting, information. Some Trustees are answering emails, others not so much. Meanwhile, a nine-page document was released on October 14th to address parental concerns but many questions remain. How does one teach and engage kindergarten children both remotely and in person?

How do you teach 3-4 year olds while still helping to ensure physical distancing of the children IN school? Sure the Board sent a survey to parents asking which 'option' they would prefer but left out the option of refusing Hybrid learning, rendering the survey pretty much useless. This new modality will require yet another classroom/teacher shift meaning it's entirely possible a child will have a new teacher and classroom come November 16th. The provincial government has talked extensively about the importance of mental health and yes, that Sick Kids report released this past summer also referenced its significance. As a result, many parents chose a return to school in part to support their child's return to some sense of 'normalcy.' Now however, the kids will be uprooted yet again (one re-org has already taken place) and if this model doesn't work, what then? Talk about stress. What are we to make of the fact children can seemingly come and go as they please? There will 'always be a desk available' to them in the classroom but

didn't we talk in early fall about cohorts? and about keeping kids safe from COVID by grouping them together with the same cohort? What about the added danger of continually fluctuating classroom attendance?

I could continue but I'm sure by now you get the point. Some American regions attempted this style of learning and reports suggest it was an instructional nightmare. The PDSB is moving Secondary School students toward a hybrid model and while I still believe the teacher challenges remain, at least in high school, young adults are better equipped to cope and adapt. The PDSB move was made in part to help ensure continued access to a variety of course options that might not otherwise have been available given the number of high school students in that board who recently switched to online learning. Disregarding teacher workload, such a move makes sense and the rollout information was clearly articulated. It's important to note however, that PDSB is not rolling out Hybrid learning at the elementary level. If we don't see a large number of Catholic school elementary teachers going on sick leave, stress leave or simply retiring from teaching altogether I'll be shocked. Our provincial government needs to hear from parents. Minister Lecce needs to hear from parents. I'm not sure how much longer parents and teachers can hang on to the ropes before falling down for the count.