

Response to the OCDSB 2019-2023 draft Strategic Plan

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Contents

Summary Comments

Comments

1. The need for true leadership towards a new age for public education
2. Growing awareness of real alternatives
3. Research, genuine consultation and transparency

Summary Comments

Despite the OCDSB projecting that it is serious about wanting to find solutions to serious problems plaguing the board, its draft of the 2019-2023 Strategic Plan gives little hope that significant changes will occur. The draft is devoid of substance and presents no clear vision of what is happening on the education landscape. Presented in the form of a sketchy four-page brochure, it can be seen as making light of serious business. Even the Survey Monkey feedback method is far from adequate for acquiring feedback on a matter of such consequence. That money was spent providing the draft in its colour printed form leads one to wonder if the board is actually viewing the draft as a fait accompli hoping to slide it by an inattentive public. It raises the prospect that the board is more interested in selling its plan than determining if it got it right. If this is not the case then it needs to explain why it thinks it was necessary to spend what it did on the brochure.

My greatest concern is that the draft reads like the work of people who do not know what they are doing and who are attempting to buy time until they get things figured out, and therefore serves as a reminder of past criticisms that the board is disingenuous and lacks transparency when dealing with the public. It needs to avoid being subject again to these charges, and to do so it must aim at more than making our schools better. It needs to rise to the challenge of making them different. I also find that the draft has a sloppiness about it that should be regarded as beneath the standards the public is entitled to expect for senior staff. The draft highlights the intentions of the board to drive for a cultural shift to one of caring, yet the exit outcomes it lists do not include anything about healthy relationships and student well-being.

The draft says to me that we are in for more of the same failure to address issues. I suggest that the board add to its lists of areas for cultural shifts and cultural shift at head office, and I strongly recommend that the OCDSB exercise a little humility and return to the drawing board with a fresh determination to get things right.

Comments

1. The need for true leadership towards a new age for public education

Before offering some views on how the draft strategic plan leaves the board vulnerable again to the above past criticisms, the following is offered as a possible explanation as to why it is in such an unfortunate situation.

Ultimately the board must accept that it cannot keep perpetuating our current education system. In her article published in *The Ottawa Citizen* May 7th, Jacquie Miller describes the unacceptable state of OCDSB classrooms¹. My wife and I are retired teachers who spent years in these classrooms, and our contacts still in the system tell us things are getting worse, not better. Often when school boards are confronted with this kind of criticism they resort to blaming policies and funding cuts by provincial governments, but that does not speak to the heart of the problem. The OCDSB has the power to make real change happen. With more imagination and entrepreneurial spirit, it can lead us towards a better system that is more cost effective and that adheres to Ministry guidelines.

Leaders in the board are well aware of alternative thinking on education, but they are acting like proponents of dominant old paradigms who refuse to admit the system that made them successful, and that they have perpetuated for decades, is deeply flawed. The process of coming to realize that what you have believed in all your life is proving unworkable is deeply personal and painful. Thomas Kuhn², who people might agree is the greatest contributor to our knowledge on paradigm shifts, observed that some people are quick to see the benefits of a different paradigm, others take varying amounts of time to see them, and some never get it. He adds that it is generally the young or the new to a field who bring about change. We need to sympathize with people faced with having to adopt new paradigms when they have been highly committed to an old one, but compassion for handfuls of adults should not deter us from doing what is right for endless thousands of students.

Complaints about traditional school systems were well articulated over fifty years ago in the Hall-Dennis Report. It stands out as possibly the best report on education ever commissioned by an Ontario government, and it states:

*"Today, on every side, however, there is heard a growing demand for a fresh look at education in Ontario. The Committee was told of inflexible programs, outdated curricula, unrealistic regulations, regimented organization, and mistaken aims of education. We heard from alienated students, frustrated teachers, irate parents, and concerned educators. Many public organizations and private individuals have told us of their growing discontent and lack of confidence in a school system which, in their opinion, has become outmoded and is failing those it exists to serve."*³

It sounds far too familiar, and for good reason. Last year, professors at OISE published the results of a survey that showed only fifty percent of people were somewhat or very satisfied with the school system⁴. This leaves fifty percent thinking otherwise despite educators having had more than half a century to address the problems identified by Hall and Dennis. The situation looks even worse when we take a close look at those who say they are satisfied with the public system.

Satisfaction levels are often an expression of whether or not students are on track to go to university, but there is considerable evidence that graduates of public systems are ill prepared for life after high school, as discussed more further down.

The study of paradigm shifts reveals that an old paradigm can be abandoned even before a good alternative is available out of frustration with its inability to address persistent problems, and we see this happening in education. Teachers who believe in public education are creating private schools such as Blue Sky⁵ and Revel Academy⁶, both recently founded in Ottawa, because the public system is failing to offer students what they need. And then there are the parents who are resorting to home schooling.

These alternatives are not ideal for most people, nor are they good for a democracy. They put financial strain on families, they eat up teacher time with the tasks of running a small business, they favour the more privileged, and they lead to the ghettoizing of community schools. We need to keep in mind the power of public education to be a nation builder, but there is plenty of evidence suggesting that our schools are doing a poor job of cultivating the citizenship needed for a healthy democracy. For example, voter turnout rates are poor, and we need to consider that an autocratic school system that excludes students from meaningful decision-making and discourages them from assuming responsibility for themselves, a system that in the words of John Gatto⁷ keeps people infantile, is not the way to cultivate a population of good democratic citizens. Dorothy Nolte in her poem "Children Learn What They Live"⁸ speaks to this. It might be added that if children are raised in authoritarian environments, they will learn to power over others (bully), and if they are prevented from making meaningful decisions they will become complacent.

In their book *Paradigm Shift*⁹, Don Tapscott and Art Caston share the following quote:

*If you want to control, you design organizations for accountability.
If you want to accomplish, you design for commitment.*¹⁰

It well describes the difference between our dominant authoritarian education model steeped in accountability and the democratic learning model that invites commitment. I submit that it is time for the OCDSB to begin a serious investigation of how the democratic learning model offers answer to all sorts of problems in public education that have persisted despite the protracted efforts of talented disciples of the old paradigm to find solutions. To not start down this path will leave the board vulnerable to having to defend the indefensible, which sets it up for more charges of being disingenuous.

2. Growing awareness of real alternatives

The growing awareness that public education can be different is found in a recent post to the Ottawa-Carleton Assembly of School Councils (OCASC) Facebook group. It provides a link to an article about the Agora school in the Netherlands,¹¹ and the

posting member comments, “This looks so interesting!!!”¹² It was actually a repost of an item found on the “World Changing Kids” (WCK) Facebook page, where Lindsey Barr, a local parent and the founder of WCK, wrote the following about Agora:

“This is amazing. This is the future of education. This is what we, as parents of students, need to tell our school boards we want. And we need to support all of our awesome teachers in bringing these ideas into the classroom.”¹³

Agora is part of a trend. It is one of many alternatives to the pressure cooker classrooms Jacque Miller describes in her Citizen article. High Tech High¹⁴, a network of 14 schools in California, applies practices similar to those of Agora, as do the growing number of democratic schools¹⁵ and unschoolers¹⁶. Among the many people leading the charge to a new vision of education are Carol Black¹⁷, the director of the documentary film *Schooling the World*¹⁸; Larry Rosenstock¹⁹, co-founder and spokesperson for High Tech High; Ken Robinson²⁰, producer of the video *Changing Education Paradigms*²¹; Peter Gray²², an authority on self-directed education and author of *Free to Learn*²³; Daniel Greenberg, co-founder of the Sudbury Valley School and author of several books on democratic learning; Ted Dintersmith²⁴, author of *What School Could Be*²⁵; Will Richardson²⁶, school change advocate; and John Gatto^{27, 28} who puts today’s education system into historical perspective.

Through the work of these people and others, we begin to see the formally scheduled school day, which is the practice of dividing the school day into fixed chunks of time to study pre-determined curriculum, as the single greatest impediment to educational innovation. With it eliminated, it becomes easy to eliminate other constructs such as age-segregation, which alone is a huge impediment to children getting the education they need. Ken Robinson²⁹, Larry Rosenstock³⁰, and Bernie Bleske³¹ are people who are speaking out against formal scheduling. Peter Gray³² writes about age-mixing, and Daniel Greenberg describes the success of the Sudbury Valley School by saying, “Age-mixing is our secret weapon.”³³

Michael Fullan is another voice for change, who I mention separately because he is widely revered within the educational establishment for his decades of work on education reform. He is a former dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and is currently promoting the idea of deep learning, which uses technology in education and advocates that school boards give students more autonomy over their learning. It needs to be appreciated that teachers in these learning environments are as needed as ever. They are empowered to be more valuable to students and they stand to experience greater job satisfaction. These teachers let technology handle the substantive transfer of knowledge that can be done with computers and other devices better than humans can do it, thus freeing teachers to concentrate on cultivating healthy relationships within a community of learners, and helping students to acquire the attitudinal knowledge and soft skills attributes, including the 4Cs, (creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication) that students need for a successful life. In 2014 Fullan published *A Rich Seam*³⁴. More recently he produced *Deep Learning: Engage the World Change the World*³⁵. Reference is made in these writings both the Ottawa Catholic School Board and

the Peel District School Board for work they are doing with deep learning, yet the OCDSB draft strategic plan makes no mention of him nor deep learning.

Younger people are also making their voices heard when it comes to the need for change in education. Suli Breaks³⁶ and Prince Ea³⁷ have made their views known through videos that are receiving much attention, and Ottawa resident Jay Gosselin³⁸ left his position working with admissions at the University of Ottawa to start Discover Year³⁹, an organization that encourages students to take a gap year to obtain skills and attitudes he found students entering university straight out of high school were lacking for post secondary studies success. Comparisons are being made between unschooled young people who had control over their learning and those from traditional schools, and they don't favour the latter.

During the 2018 OCDSB trustee elections, I worked to raise awareness of promising alternatives to current practices in education. The goal was more to encourage the trustee candidates to become informed of the bigger education picture than it was to build public awareness, and much of the above view of education was presented to them in the form of five questions of which they were asked to provide answers for voters to consider. Seven of those who got elected, five incumbents and two first timers, made no attempt to answer the questions, and an eighth ignored efforts to obtain responses until the last moment. Lynn Scott, Chris Ellis, Rob Campbell and Wendy Hough are the current trustees who provided responses. The OCDSB 2018 Elections pages⁴⁰ have been restored to the *Uniting for Children and Youth* website for those who wish to obtain a fuller idea of what was going on at the time. I draw two conclusions as to why the eight trustees were so disinclined to answer the questions. One is that they were resisting being held accountable. The second is that they did not have the knowledge needed to answer the questions and they did not want to expose their lack of qualifications. Whatever the reasons, we need to know that the people making decisions about the lives of students, and consequently the future for us all, know more than they revealed at election time.

In 2012, the OCDSB published a forward-looking document titled *Unleashing Potential, Harnessing Possibilities*⁴¹. It contained the views of Ken Robinson and Daniel Pink among others. Pink is the author of *Drive* in which he says:

“Perhaps it’s time to toss the very word ‘management’ onto the linguistic ash heap alongside ‘icebox’ and ‘horseless carriage.’ This era doesn’t call for better management. It calls for a renaissance of self-direction.”⁴²

Superintendent Peter Gamwell was the main originator of the document and the lead for a project to bring its dreams to life. From what I can gather, the board leadership liked the sound of the document, but couldn't handle the implementation of it. During the past term the OCDSB concluded a five year study of its secondary school program and the results were essentially void of the progressive thinking found in *Unleashing Potential, Harnessing Possibilities*. The establishment of a second International Baccalaureate program in the west end of Ottawa was the only tangible result of it that I have been able to determine. It does not reflect imaginative new thinking, and it fuels the problems of

equity. It also suggests that the OCDSB is listening more to people prepared to abandon their community schools to obtain elitist educations for their children rather than fight for quality education for all. As often happens in situations like this, change agents feeling frustrated move on leaving those who maintain status quo less challenged to consider real alternatives. Peter Gamwell has left and is now promoting his book *The Wonder Wall*⁴³, and the OCDSB appears to be burying *Unleashing Potential, Harnessing Possibilities*.

Much could be said about why the board did not make more of *Unleashing Potential, Harnessing Possibilities*. Allen King's cartoon titled "Early Russia . . ."⁴⁴ succinctly conveys one possible factor. Change doesn't just happen. It is a process that produces problems, and when people are prepared to tackle them they can take an idea like the Kitty Hawk and transform it into a Transatlantic supersonic jet.



"Normal science" is the term Thomas Kuhn gave to the process of solving the problems inherent in paradigm, and if school boards will learn from history, they will provide appropriate opportunities for the disciples of the democratic learning model to conduct their normal science on a level playing field. The program I promote through OPERI, the Ottawa Public Education Remake Initiative⁴⁵, is a responsible way for the OCDSB to let small groups of pioneering teachers and students investigate the potential benefits to the democratic learning model, i.e. to conduct its normal science. The strength of the program is that it eliminates formal scheduling thereby unleashing innovative and entrepreneurial people to find new solutions to old problems. Blue Sky School describes itself as "The Experimental Prototype School of Tomorrow", and it refers to its students as pioneers. There is no defensible reason I have encountered that a program based on the practices of Blue Sky could not operate as a school within a community school. The same holds for programs based on the practices of Revel Academy, Agora or High Tech High.

The program I promote through OPERI is far less ambitious than offering students one of these learning environments, and therefore makes a good starting point. It developed accidentally as a coming together of the two education paradigms. A co-worker and I initially proposed it as a Sudbury Valley School program to run within our community high school. The principal responded that the board would not accept it as proposed and it became a compromise between proponents of the democratic learning model and those tasked with fulfilling the requirements of the traditional school system. It now serves as an example of how to let the normal science of the two paradigms progress on equal playing fields, of how the two paradigms can co-exist under one roof with potential benefits to both. Given that it requires no additional funding, that it is made available only if people want it, that it gives students a one-semester deep experience with the skills required for independent, lifelong learning, and that students still acquire the ministry credits they need for graduation, it is a program that deserves serious consideration. And given that students can choose to participate in it in their community schools, which makes it equally visible and accessible to all, it does not have the equity problems inherent with magnet schools. The only reasons I can see for the board not implementing the program is ignorance of its potential and fear of the unknown. We cannot afford to be prevented from investigating real options for students by reasons such as these.

3. Research, genuine consultation and transparency

In its 19-053 Report on the 2019-2023 Draft Strategic Plan, the OCDSB twice mentions that research was part of the planning process. To use the word “research” as it does is raises questions and it is one of the aspects of the draft that leaves the board vulnerable to charges of being disingenuous. Research can pursue how to make a system better without making it different, but it can also pursue how to make it better by making it different. It may, or it may not, question the basic premises upon which the current system is founded, and when we have as many indicators as we do that the current system has outlived its usefulness, research has to look into real alternatives.

Why the draft strategic plan would use the word “research” as if it alone is sufficient to instil confidence that the board is doing its job is questionable and people need to hold the OCDSB accountable. The public deserves to see clear evidence that the board has been thorough with the research it has done in crafting its strategic plan. It must avoid the public asking the following questions. Is the board actually so narrow in it’s thinking that it believes the word “research” alone is sufficient? Does it have such a dim view of the people it is supposed to be serving to think the word alone will impress them? Is the board attempting to avoid revealing its biases? Is it attempting to keep the public uninformed about things it doesn’t want them to know?

With respect to the last of these questions, Thomas Kuhn observed that paradigms compete, and that the dominant ones will do what they can to keep their challengers out of sight. John Gatto recognized this in his book *Dumbing Us Down* where he wrote:

"It is the great triumph of compulsory government monopoly mass-schooling that among even the best of my fellow teachers, and among even the best of my students' parents, only a small number can imagine a different way to do things."⁴⁶

Whether or not the board is doing this intentionally, it is happening. It is not encouraging people to imagine real alternatives. It may try to defend this accusation by pointing to its alternative and alternate schools, but there are backstories to these schools that are not flattering of OCDSB leadership. The board might also point to impressive innovations like what is happening at Meadowlands Public School with loose parts play⁴⁷, or to the John McCrae Secondary School project described as unlearning learning⁴⁸. Programs such as these are often the work of passionate teachers who are willing to take risks and are driven by an entrepreneurial spirit. They exist despite school board leadership and they are easily shut down when school administrators decide they no longer want to work at solving the problems they create. I recommend that the board provide for the public an inventory of all such innovations by its teachers along with the commitment to support these bottom-up changes. Executives of the local Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) have told me that they want to see the board empowering teachers to change the system from the bottom up, and this is consistent with what Justin Reich and Peter Senge⁴⁹ have to say in their video presenting concepts covered in Unit 1 of the Launching Innovation in Schools⁵⁰ course run by the MIT Teaching Systems Lab⁵¹.

By failing to inform the public of the range of possibilities for public education, the board makes a mockery of its consultation process. The value of people's feedback depends on how much they know, and if they are limited to just their experience with traditional education then they are not likely to express a desire for a fundamental change to something more workable. Marshall McLuhan is one of the people to say that we don't know who discovered water, but we know it wasn't the fish. If people have only swum in the polluted waters of public education, they may have no idea that fresher waters exist. I believe the board has a responsibility to ensure that parents are well informed of the latest thinking on how to bring public education in line with the needs of students and our fast changing society. To not assume this responsibility makes the consultation processes used by the board in drafting the strategic plan look like a tool for manipulating public opinion rather than a genuine effort to help people articulate their feelings. Not unrelated to this is a comment about assessment by a parent whose child was a participant in a democratic learning environment. She said, "I don't need to see grades when I can see my child learning." When Lindsey Barr posts about the Agora school saying, "This is what we, as parents of students, need to tell our school boards we want," she is providing value feedback that formal consultation processes can only wish to match. When a grass roots group of community leaders like the one that met with OCDSB officials on March 4th, presents a list of "asks" that it would like to see incorporated into the board's strategic plan, the board is being given information that people motivated to genuinely consult would welcome.

To the best of my knowledge, I am unaware that the board has seriously considered the "asks" of the community group, nor considered what might be learned from Agora. The best-case scenario for this is that the board has a PR problem that is working against its

stated desire to establish strong community involvement. It is another way that the board leaves itself open to the criticisms of lacking transparency and being disingenuous.

Overall, the consultation process has not been the “comprehensive community consultations” the board claims it has been. Its choice of wording again seems designed to lead the public to think it is doing a wonderful job, when in fact the consultations have been far from comprehensive, far from truly striving to determine what is needed. It appears to have omitted seeking out the views of people who have left the system in favour of homeschooling or private schools. If there was a concerted effort to directly get the views of dissatisfied, marginalized people with no choice but to use the system, the draft provides no reassurance that this happened. Also there is no mention of consideration that the board took into account that the people who expressed their views through its thought exchange process are any more representative of the board’s community than the small number who vote in school board elections.

It has been said that the culture of the board is wrong, and the weaknesses in its development of the new strategic plan give some indication that those saying it are right. I’ve been sharing the above views for years, and acknowledging that paradigm shifts take time, I am prepared to keep sharing, but I am encouraged with signs that the critical mass, the tipping point at which things suddenly begin to flip, is being reached. We need a proactive board focused on methodically determining how to orchestrate a least disruptive and most constructive route to a new age for public education. We need the board to develop a culture of genuine partnership with the people it serves and to be dedicated to providing honest, transparent leadership.

¹ Miller, “Swearing, Punching, Spitting.”

² Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

³ Hall and Dennis, *Living and Learning*.

⁴ Hart and Kempf, “Public Attitudes Towards Education in Ontario 2018.”

⁵ School, “Blue Sky School.”

⁶ “Revel Academy.”

⁷ Gatto, *The Reasons for Schooling*.

⁸ “Children Learn What They Live -- Complete Version.”

⁹ Tapscott and Caston, *Paradigm Shift*.

¹⁰ Tapscott and Caston, pp. 35-36.

¹¹ Webb, “Meet the School with No Classes, No Classrooms and No Curriculum.”

¹² “OCASC.”

¹³ Barr, “World-Changing Kids - Posts.”

¹⁴ “High Tech High.”

¹⁵ “Democratic Schools.”

¹⁶ Olson, “Unschooling | Radical Unschooling | Unschoolers — Live and Learn.”

¹⁷ Local Futures, *Carol Black*.

¹⁸ “SCHOOLING THE WORLD.”

¹⁹ “Larry Rosenstock - High Tech High on Vimeo.”

²⁰ “Ken Robinson Creativity - - Video Search Results.”

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- ²¹ Robinson, *Changing Education Paradigms*.
- ²² Peter Gray is author of the article in the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education titled “Self-Directed Education—Unschooling and Democratic Schooling.” He also maintains a blog for Psychology Today titled “Freedom to Learn”. He is also a co-founder of the Alliance for Self-Directed Education. A video titled “Mother Nature’s Pedagogy: Insights from Evolutionary Psychology” provides a summary of his views.
- ²³ Gray, *Free to Learn*.
- ²⁴ {Citation}
- ²⁵ Dintersmith, *What School Could Be: Insights and Inspiration from Teachers across America* by Ted Dintersmith, Hardcover | Barnes & Noble®.
- ²⁶ Richardson, “Will Richardson TEDx Vancouver.”
- ²⁷ “John Taylor Gatto.”
- ²⁸ TheConnected44, *John Taylor Gatto - The Reasons For Schooling*.
- ²⁹ Abeles p. 45.
- ³⁰ Abeles, p.56.
- ³¹ Bleske, “The Absurd Structure of High School – Featured Stories.”
- ³² Gray, “The Special Value of Children’s Age-Mixed Play.”
- ³³ Greenberg, *Free at Last*, P.75.
- ³⁴ Fullan and Langworthy, *A Rich Seam*.
- ³⁵ Fullan, Quinn, and McEachen, *Deep Learning*.
- ³⁶ Suli Breaks, *I Will Not Let An Exam Result Decide My Fate*||Spoken Word.
- ³⁷ Prince Ea, *I SUED THE SCHOOL SYSTEM !!!*
- ³⁸ Gosselin, “Why a Discover Year Is Important.”
- ³⁹ “Discover Year - A Purposeful Gap Year: Reinventing Education and Career Transition.”
- ⁴⁰ “OCDSB 2018 Elections – Uniting For Children and Youth.”
- ⁴¹ “Unleashing Potential, Harnessing Possibilities”, <http://www.ucyottawa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Unleashing-Potential-OCDSB-Action-Research-Study-3.pdf>
- ⁴² Pink, *Drive*, p.92.
- ⁴³ Gamwell and Daly, *The Wonder Wall*.
- ⁴⁴ Reprinted with permission.
- ⁴⁵ OPERI, <http://operi.ca/>.
- ⁴⁶ Gatto, *Dumbing Us Down*, p.12.
- ⁴⁷ Jacqueline Whelan, *LOOSE PARTS at Meadowlands Public School*.
- ⁴⁸ Katawazi, May 14, and 2018, “How an Ottawa Teacher Is Helping Students Unlearn Learning | CBC News.”
- ⁴⁹ “Peter Senge.”
- ⁵⁰ MIT Teaching Systems Lab, *Unit 1 In Conversation*.
- ⁵¹ “MIT Teaching Systems Lab.”

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