

HALIFAX REGIONAL SCHOOL BOARD

Update on Response to the *External Review of the Halifax Regional School Board's Support of Rehtaeh Parsons*

PURPOSE:

To provide the Governing Board with a status report on the Halifax Regional School Board's response to the report *External Review of the Halifax Regional School Board's Support of Rehtaeh Parsons (Pepler/Milton, June 2013)*.

BACKGROUND:

On April 18, 2013, the Government of Nova Scotia appointed Debra Pepler and Penny Milton to conduct an independent review of policies and protocols of the Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB) and associated agencies, as they relate to the tragic death of Rehtaeh Parsons.

On June 14, 2013, authors Penny Milton and Debra Pepler submitted their report, *External Review of the Halifax Regional School Board's Support of Rehtaeh Parsons* to government. At the time of writing this board report, Pepler/Milton's final document is available at the following link:

<http://www.ednet.ns.ca/files/reports/External%20Review%20of%20HRSB%20Final.pdf>

The report of the external review contains 13 recommendations. Of the recommendations, four are targeted for all school boards in Nova Scotia and two are specifically directed to the HRSB. The remaining recommendations are directed to Departments of Education and Early Childhood Development, Health and Wellness, Community Services, Justice and other government departments.

On June 19, 2013, the Governing Board approved the following motion "It was moved and seconded (Linders/Jakeman) that the Governing Board direct staff to complete a report, for the September regular Board meeting, detailing the timeline and implementation plan for the recommendations relevant to HRSB listed in the *External Review of the Halifax Regional School Board's Support of Rehtaeh Parsons Report*."

CONTENT:

The two recommendations that are specific to our board are recommendations 5 and 6.

Recommendation 5: Revise the policy for Creating School Populations to take account of the needs of students who may have parents/guardians living in more than one school area. Clarify the approval process for transfers between schools to remove any inconsistencies between the policy and the practices.

Actions to date: This policy has been under review over the last year. The suggestions in recommendation 5 will be incorporated into the policy review process. Once drafted, the recommended policy changes will come to the Governing Board for approval.

At the Principals' Meeting on August 28th, principals were reminded to carefully consider Out of Area requests, to ensure that appropriate information is shared between sending and receiving schools and to consult with School Administration Supervisors when there are unusual circumstances to consider. Principals were reminded to gather all pertinent information prior to making decisions.

Timeline: Staff will have a draft policy available for the Board's consideration by December 2013.

Recommendation 6: Develop a standard to guide school administrators in determining what informal information to share when a student transfers between high schools.

Actions to date: Questions have been raised about the scope of "informal" information and consequently the legal ramifications of sharing such personal information without consent. We are seeking a legal clarification on this item. In the interim, we have begun preliminary work to improve the registration process. This will center on expanding the information shared by students, families and previous schools when students begin in a new school.

We will continue to be guided by existing provincial policy. The provincial Student Records Policy (2006) provides the framework for information sharing for students registered in the public school system and includes in its purpose the following statement: "*The information collected and maintained in student records is used to assist students through the charting of their educational progress, in addressing educational issues of programming and placement, and in planning academic programs and careers. Compliance with the Education Act, the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIPOP) Act, and the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) must be ensured. This policy is subject to those statutes.*"

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is working on student records and school counselor guidelines. Information will be forthcoming.

Timeline: Ongoing

There are four additional recommendations that are addressed to schools boards in Nova Scotia.

Recommendation 1: Make safety and respect the norm in all organizational policies and practices. Promote these core values at every opportunity – both to prevent bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual aggression, and to promote social-emotional (relationship) competence in children, youth and adults.

Actions to date: Promoting safety and respect as core values in our schools is *and continues to be* essential to ensuring an environment in which learners can thrive. Positive relationships with and among

students, staff, administrators, families and community members are essential.

Schools build safety and respect into their culture in unique ways, reflective of their individual school communities. There are a variety of strategies to build healthy positive relationships in schools. These include formal approaches like Positive Effective Behavioural Supports (PEBS) and Restorative Approaches, as well as informal strategies used in daily classroom teaching. For example, adults addressing situations as they occur in classrooms and hallways, establishing a classroom code of conduct appropriate to the learners and teaching age-appropriate strategies for everyone. Seizing opportunities to see positive examples in stories and books, highlighting what positive behaviour is and helping students in their development of social skills, all promote empathy and healthy interpersonal relationship development. Other examples of supports to address conflict and teach positive social behaviour include accessing support from the Safe Schools Consultant when issues of bullying arise as well as problem-solving individual situations with the support of School Administration Supervisors.

Since the report has been released, new legislation and government initiatives related to bullying and cyberbullying have been introduced.

1. Cyber-safety Act
2. Anonymous online reporting system
3. CyberSCAN Unit

The Superintendents met with the Deputy Minister and voiced concern over the impact this legislation may have, especially as it relates to the speed of implementation, potential unintended impacts and overly broad responsibilities. We requested revisions to the materials that were available and an additional meeting to problem-solve concerns and to identify helpful strategies for school administrators.

In response, materials were updated and Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) staff are providing professional development to every principal and some central office staff on the legislated changes and their roles and responsibilities. These sessions will take place at the end of the month.

At the opening Principals' Meeting in August, principals were given a copy of the Cyber-safety Act and a document provided by the EECD explaining anonymous reporting and the interaction of the CyberScan Unit with schools. To assist principals, discussion occurred regarding how they could focus on a welcoming and safe environment for students, especially in the first weeks of school.

- *What plans will you put in place to support students to report directly to adults in your school when they are feeling bullied or experiencing cyberbullying?*
- *If every teacher emphasized every day during the first week of school that they were available as a support to each of their students whenever they felt bullied at school, would that reduce anonymous reporting of bullying? How could you make this happen?*
- *What type of support will principals need?*

Responses from principals will influence future discussions and professional development organized through the School Administration Department.

Timeline: Work in this area is ongoing in all schools. We will continue our work with principals at the Family of Schools Meetings in October.

Recommendation 4: Ensure that many different students play meaningful roles in the development of policies, procedures, protocols, and initiatives that affect them – including the revision of regional and school codes of conduct.

Actions to date: EECD has indicated that the provincial Code of Conduct will be reviewed during the 2013-14 school year. Upon completion, we will schedule the revision to our *Regional Code of Conduct policy*. When the Governing Board approves that change, our schools will work to align school code of conduct policies.

Staff has begun work to develop a framework for public consultation. Once completed, it will come to the Governing Board for approval. In addition, the Governing Board is reviewing *Policy A.012 Policy Development and Review*. As part of this policy, the Governing Board will be able to ensure that there is a statement regarding student participation and consultation on policies.

Timeline: Staff will have a draft public consultation process available for the Board's consideration by December 2013. It is anticipated that the Governing Board will complete its review of the *Policy Development and Review* policy by November 2013. Revisions to regional and school codes of conduct will begin after receipt of the revised provincial Code of Conduct.

Recommendation 7: Ask students, staff and parents about the quality of their relationship within the school community, using school surveys or other tools. Report the findings in the school board's accountability reports to the community.

Actions to date: The Halifax Regional School Board has been collecting student, parent and teacher feedback with its *Getting To Great* survey since 2008-09. The survey has a variety of questions that collect attitudinal data about participant's opinions on several topics including the quality of relationships in individual schools.

Over the past three years, a consistent percentage of students report never being bullied at school. Students' feeling that teachers genuinely care about them has increased in junior and senior high schools over this timeframe. Feeling that there is at least one adult at the school with whom they can talk has increased for elementary and senior high students.

At both the junior and senior high levels, a greater percentage of students are now reporting that they treat every school staff member with respect, compared to three years ago.

Although still a very high result, a lower percentage of parents have reported believing that school is a safe place over the past three years (94% to 92%).

In 2012-13, we added statements about being treated unfairly because of culture or race and experiencing discrimination at school (students, parents, and teachers). We look forward to repeating these questions this coming school year.

Survey results are compiled by school and delivered to principals. Board results are also compiled. Staff reviews the *Getting To Great* survey results annually and makes decisions regarding revising, deleting or adding questions. Schools review results and use findings within the context of their continuous school improvement efforts. Many schools include survey results in their annual School Report to the Community. This year's reports are in final stages of completion. Staff will ensure that all schools comment on this factor when reporting to the community in the future.

Timeline: We will continue to survey students, parents and teachers and use the results in our continuous school improvement process.

Recommendation 8: Engage parents who have many different perspectives and experiences to help in the essential work of creating welcoming schools and non-adversarial policies and practices for resolving problems.

Actions to date: This recommendation requires two steps. The first step is to ensure that all parents feel welcome within the school environment and the second is to ensure that all voices are heard when developing policies and practices within the school community.

Information from the *Getting To Great* surveys informs schools on the work they need to do to ensure that all parents feel welcome in their school. Since 2008-09, 92-93% of parents/guardians surveyed reported that they feel welcome in their child's school. Over the past five years, the percentage of parents/guardians who reported that their school invites parent/guardian and community involvement has decreased from 92.5% (2008-09) to 90.4% (2012-13).

We have also started to ask grade 7-12 students and teachers whether people from different communities and cultures are involved in the school. 76% of students and 80% of teachers agreed in 2012-13.

The HRSB Strategic Plan identifies cultural proficiency training for all administrators and teachers as a priority. During the 2013-14 school year, a needs assessment will be administered and used to determine what this professional development will look like and how it will be implemented.

This professional development will benefit parents and students as schools and classrooms look through the lens of diversity and respond in the policies and practices of the school community.

As noted above, staff has begun to develop a framework for public consultation.

Timeline: We will continue to survey students, parents and teachers and use the results in our continuous school improvement process. Our work in developing a public consultation process is scheduled to be finished by December 2013. Our work here continues.

In order to support HRSB with the ongoing concerns around mental health initiatives, the IWK Health Centre has appointed a Program Developer/Service Facilitator for School Mental Health Services to work with HRSB. This position will support children and youth with complex care needs and the mental health staff that care for these children. In collaboration with HRSB Student Support Services and the IWK Health Centre staff working in the school system, the Program Developer/Service Facilitator will focus on the development of policies, standardization of procedures, school staff training and accessing the resources required to assist the child and his/her family to function as fully as possible in the school setting. This reallocation of resources from the IWK will enhance our ability to support students with mental health initiatives.

COST: TBD

FUNDING: Within existing budgets

TIMELINE: As specified above

APPENDICES:

RECOMMENDATIONS: That the Governing Board accept this report for information.

COMMUNICATIONS:

AUDIENCE	RESPONSIBLE	TIMELINE
Governing Board	Superintendent	September 25, 2013

From: For further information please contact Judy White, Superintendent, jwhite@hrsb.ca or by phone 464-2000 ext. 2312.