

Education Minister "deeply troubled" by YRDSB report

By Brock Weir

Ontario Education Minister Mitzie Hunter says she was left "deeply troubled" by observances and recommendations in a report looking into alleged systemic racism and other issues within the York Region District School Board.

On Tuesday, the Minister said issues within the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) were "severe" and issued a series of immediate actions and timelines for the YRDSB including immediately suspending international travel by the Director of Education and Board members.

Within 24 hours of Tuesday's letter to the YRDSB, staff must be encouraged to "make use of the Board's Employee Assistance Program as required" and immediately notify the program provider of uptake. A plan will be required by May 9 outlining long-term student and staff support and recovery strategies put in place.

The Board has until April 29 to submit a plan for governance and equity training for all Board members, the Director of Education and senior administration, along with a plan for rebuilding trust within and re-engaging the communities the YRDSB serves.

May 9 the deadline for a number of key directions, including the establishment of policies and processes for receiving and investigating complaints of racism and "any other prohibited ground of discrimination" at the Board and within all schools by staff, students and parents. The YRDSB must also establish the position of a senior administrator responsible for equity, and submit a progress report on retaining an independent consultant to support the establishment of an integrity commissioner.

A full appraisal of J. Philip Parappally, the beleaguered Director of Education, by an external human resources professional must also be completed by May 31.

"Our government is committed to improving student achievement, ensuring equity, promoting well-being and enhancing public confidence in our publicly funded schools," said the Minister in a statement. "This is critical to the success of students in Ontario. After carefully reviewing the observations and recommendations in the report, I am deeply concerned. In particular, the report describes feelings of alienation, marginalization and discrimination expressed by many of the board's students, parents, staff and members of the community. The board's leadership "including the trustees and the Director "must take the actions necessary to address these concerns.

"Let me be clear: racism in our schools and school boards is not acceptable. Ontario's students and parents must have assurances that their schools are safe and welcoming places to learn, and that they are environments of inclusivity and respect."

As for the YRDSB, they were swift to respond to the report, stating there was "no time to waste" in responding to the action plan, but raised some concerns of their own.

"Message received, loud and clear," said YRDSB Board Chair Lorelea Carruthers, speaking on behalf of all YRDSB Trustees, in a statement on Tuesday morning. "We are grateful the Ministry's report has been released, and would like to thank the Ministry of Education staff for their dedication and professionalism.

"We have only just received the report ourselves, but as a Board, we have immediately begun discussions on how to implement some of the report's key recommendations. We have seen within the report some significant errors of fact that we have raised directly with the Minister. In addition, we are seeking clarification on a number of points.

"That said, we want parents and students to be assured this report will not be ignored in any way, shape or form. Our primary mission has been, and continues to be, the education and well-being of our students."

In their response, the YRDSB touted several changes that have taken place already, or are to soon get off the launch plan, including the establishment of committees to "immediately deal with racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and islamophobia," meetings with "respected equality experts" to develop and implement a full equality plan, agreed to a "tough arm's-length Trustee assessment process" and a comprehensive equity training strategy.

They also reiterated the international travel suspension and hiring of the integrity commissioner.

"Throughout this review, we have done our utmost to accommodate and assist Ministry staff, while working towards our common goal of addressing the issues surrounding the culture of YRDSB," said Ms. Carruthers. "We saw this report as an opportunity to develop a more welcoming and inclusive environment for our students, while maintaining the high academic standards our students are well known for.

"While the review was still being conducted, YRDSB took several steps to show a greater dedication to diversity and respect for the diverse community the Board serves. A monthly public forum for community feedback was reinstated; community working groups have been established to report to Trustees on addressing classism, anti-black racism, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism; and Board

meetings now begin with an acknowledgement of traditional Indigenous lands.

?There is no more time to waste. ?Our kids need an education that is the best we can give ? and an environment free of bias. We pledge today, unequivocally, to give them that.?