

New Director of Education wants to restore 'optimism' at YRDSB



Public education was essential in shaping Bill Cober.

Growing up, it was an opportunity that was 'critically important' to the former King Township councillor, and remains so in his family and in his life.

This is a factor he is keeping close to his heart as the new Director of Education for the York Region District School Board (YRDSB).

Cober is now preparing for his first back-to-school season at the helm after his June 6 appointment took effect on August 1. He comes into the role at a time of transition and tension for the YRDSB.

In recent years, the Board has been working to address myriad concerns from racialized communities over both representation and instances of anti-Black and anti-Asian racism, as well as anti-Semitism.

Addressing these issues comes 'right back to our students, student achievements and student outcomes,' he says.

'As we work through meeting the needs of every student across our system, we need to make sure we're providing differentiated instruction, differentiated assessment, culturally-responsible pedagogy where every student feels connected in their school, in their classroom, feels like they belong and they have a sense of belonging. When you feel like you belong, you contribute, you grow, you learn and the success just continues to build.'

'Some of the concerns that have been raised through the anti-Asian discrimination we have seen coming out, which is very challenging, and some of the matters that are being presented, whether it is coming out of our anti-Black discrimination issues, anti-Semitism issues, any kinds of hate that we have been seeing [related to] the LGBT communities - we have to make sure that we're differentiating, meeting the needs of all our students, and that they see themselves reflected in the classroom.'

All this work, he says, has to be 'completely integrated at all times' into student achievements, student outcomes, and into instruction and assessment.

It is important that [these issues] are named and brought forward so we can do better and be better," he says. "We're a learning organization, so we have to be open, have an open stance to feedback; an open stance to how we can be better and what we need to do to be better. I am very optimistic and very, very excited about how we're looking at this going forward and achieving the best outcomes for our students."

Cober's approach to his new role as Director of Education is very much informed by the experiences he brings from his two-pronged career. He was appointed to the role after 30 years within the YRDSB, most recently as Superintendent of Human Resources, and after five terms as a municipal councillor.

In his political life, he saw firsthand the importance of community engagement and consensus-building and that is an approach he hopes to take with his new position.

"I think a lot of trust in public institutions coming out of the pandemic has been eroded," he says. "The YRDSB is certainly a part of that because there were mandates, there was cohorting, there were school changes that none of us anticipated or saw coming and, as a result of the constant change, the erosion of public trust certainly became prevalent with public intuitions and we need to be honest with ourselves that the YRDSB was a part of that. We have to spend time building the trust with our community partners, our families, with our students, to elevate that trust so we develop those relationships."

"It is so important and anyone who knows me [knows I say] trust is our most viable currency. There is nothing more important than trust, so we must do all we can to make sure that we're working hard to build confidence."

As Cober continues to get his feet wet as Director of Education, he knows he is doing so in conjunction with the Board, the most recent term of which took their seats at the table late last fall. Forging ahead as a team, student achievement and student outcomes are paramount for both Director and Board.

"From boardroom to classroom, we have to have a student-centred focus and understanding that we have diverse needs of students across the system," he says. "Making sure that we are so focused on differentiating supports and resources so we can differentiate the services we provide to those students and our families has to be our core focus."

"We are very fortunate in the sense that with our Board of Trustees, we're going forward on refreshing our multi-year Strategic Plan and the opportunity to refresh our Plan right now coming forward with a new group of trustees just starting the 2022-2026 term, a new Director, many new senior team members in alignment with some of the new Ministry initiatives coming out of the Better Schools, Better Outcomes act that recently passed. It's a great opportunity for us to frame our strategic goals and planning, align with what's going on in the classrooms and in our schools around student achievement and student outcomes because that is our bottom line."

In addition to achieving these goals, a challenge ahead for Board and Director will be addressing what he describes as ongoing "labour tension" with the YRDSB's bargaining partners.

"We in the YRDSB have a really good working, trusting relationship with our union partners but we need to build on that," he says. "We need to build on that more as we go through this because we recognize the tension that may come from the Provincial bargaining table may have outcomes that impact things going on here. We just want to be able to have the open dialogue and we want to be able to communicate clearly with our communities about some of the things we're dealing with through that."

"There will be turbulence we have to get through this year and we have to get through that understanding we will collectively come out the other side."

But, first, the start of the school year and as he addresses students, parents and the community, communication is key.

He would like to underscore how "important" students are to the YRDSB and how much they care.

?We're excited to see them coming back after a more regular summer, so excited to embrace them, see how they're looking forward to their new experiences, new courses, new grades, and we're going to do all we can to differentiate to meet their specific needs to help them become the best they can be and?take them to the pathways where they want to be.

?We want to build that trust with our families and we want to make sure our families feel supported and feel we are partners and we build a trust. They know their children best, so we want to make sure that we have that partnership built where there's lots of feedback, 360 feedback?. We want to make sure we really reinforce we're partners with families and that is so important to building trust in public education and making sure that the public and our families feel it.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter