

Letter to the Chair of the Finance Committee for April 17, 2023

Attention: Chair of the Finance Committee through to the Trustees, Director, and Chief Financial Officer

Thank you for extending an invitation to union representatives for input in establishing budget priorities for the upcoming school year.

The members of the Association of Professional Student Services Personnel (APSSP) are highly educated professionals and paraprofessionals who provide uniquely specialized services to the most vulnerable students and families enrolled in our schools. Within the Durham Catholic District School Board (DCDSB), the disciplines represented by APSSP's 58 members include:

- Board Certified Behaviour Analysts (BCBAs)
- Chaplains
- Child and Youth Counsellors (CYCs)
- Communicative Disorders Assistant (CDA)
- Orientation & Mobility Specialist (OMS)
- Psychological Services staff (psychometrists, psychological associates, and psychologists)
- Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs), and
- Social Work/Attendance Counsellors(SWs)

Each intervention, regardless of discipline, offers individualized and/or classroom-wide supports. Our services are provided across all schools in our system, including our virtual school and students who are operating through supervised alternative learning (SAL).

At the heart of our education system is the children and by extension their families. Every discipline in our union, especially as person-centred service providers, embodies the board's vision where every person is:

- Safe and welcomed
- Accepted and valued
- Heard and engaged
- Supported and prepared

We know the board faces many challenges with trying to balance its budget. It was noted at the board's last financial meeting how the Collective agreements "are huge impacts on the budget". Our position is that it is not the Collective agreements, but that as ethical, caring service providers, we are trying to offer the best opportunity and growth for our students. We are invested in providing care and bridging gaps for our children and youth. And, our goal is to prevent students from falling through the cracks when services are not offered, for we know that in many instances, if our services are accessed through the school board, the families will not access the needed services in the community. We work with some of the community's most vulnerable children and

families, and care greatly about helping them be as healthy and capable as possible through providing opportunities that we know they would simply not have otherwise.

The organization, People for Education, entitled their 2021-22 Annual Ontario Schools Survey “A Perfect Storm of Stress”. In this report they warn “the issues facing students and educators remain relatively unchanged since last year, and the magnitude, prevalence, and urgency of these issues have only grown.”

Now in 2023, as we struggle to achieve some kind of normalcy after the pandemic, the challenges facing educators are three-fold. First, the pre-covid struggle to provide each student, no matter what his or her circumstances, with a quality education which would prepare them for their future endeavours, whatever those may be, continues. Secondly, the recognition and amelioration of the current realities that 18-22% of students in Ontario meet the criteria for mental health illness or concern, and that 17.3% of the Ontario student population relies on special education services or programs. Thirdly, is the reality that the previous two challenges have basically threatened any gains that have been made in student literacy and mental health.

In support of this, last year we shared with the board that over the last number of years, in every school throughout the DCDSB, we have seen an increasing number of students who require the services of one or more APSSP staff. This includes students experiencing learning difficulties, or academic failure; students with speech, language and communication challenges; students with behavioural, social, emotional, and self-regulation difficulties; students with mental health concerns; students with developmental and intellectual disorders; and students with multiple needs in several of these categories. In contrast to years past, we are seeing an exponential increase in children who present with very complex issues requiring our care, and more than ever, we are seeing families who are struggling also.

So now, we are at the time of year where the board is trying to determine what is important. Without question, all of the disciplines in our union are working to support children of all ages, both directly and indirectly and we are going above and beyond our job descriptions and hours in the day to do so. Below, I share a minimized version of our roles:

- Our BCBA's are supporting the Autism team and the Behaviour Resource team runs afterschool groups. BCBA's offer assessments and support the Early Intervention classrooms and provide VTRA (Violent Threat Risk Assessment) support as needed.
- Our Chaplains, who cannot be employed without receiving approval of the Local Ordinary, extend beyond supporting the board's strategic goal of faith formation. They feed, clothe, coordinate all charitable functions, etc. They are advocates, advisors, and most certainly do not operate within the confines of a 9am-5pm job.
- Our CYC's' focus mostly centers around school-based issues. They offer evidence-based, ministry mandated (i.e.-School Mental Health Ontario), and social-emotional learning programs and interventions (as outlined by Yale, Harvard, and Berkely Universities) individually, in small groups and classroom wide, to better students' emotional intelligence, thinking and coping. They also work in

collaboration with other Student Services personnel collaborating about how to best support individual students and classrooms, which involves attending shared meetings and problem-solving.

- Our CDA not only trains and educates staff who support students that use technology as communication devices, but also, implements the students' therapy goals for our highest needs students who are non-verbal, and have severe speech disorders.
- Our single OMS worker, who we share with the public board, provides experiential learning to our visually impaired students by helping them to explore and navigate various environments, by training them to access their other senses and tools to make sense of their world.
- Our psych staff should not be reduced to mere Assessment professionals. They provide mental health and learning consultation and assessment services for children and youth with suspected or confirmed learning, behavioural and emotional challenges (e.g., learning/intellectual disabilities, Autism, Anxiety, Depression, ADHD, etc.). They also collaborate and provide professional development/resources to educators in the board and family members, conduct suicide risk assessments, respond to community crises when requested, and help parents access critical health related funding initiatives that can greatly change the trajectory of a child's life.
- Our board's SLPs' have expertise in evaluating various aspects of language and phonological awareness skills as well as providing early identification and intervention; this plays a crucial role in supporting students and educators. Research indicates that early intervention which includes systematic, explicit, and intensive instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension is essential to supporting students who are at-risk.
- Lastly, our SWs/Attendance Counsellors support children and families with systemic issues. They offer mental health supports and interventions, they work with families to navigate through micro and macro levelled barriers (both internal and external to our school system) and frequently collaborate with other student services personnel though shared team meetings and ongoing consultation. These professionals are also critical crisis responders and frequently conducting risk assessments with some of our board's most challenging students.

By offering this short synopsis of the role of each discipline within our union, I hope you can see that no one profession is more valuable than the next. We are essential services and there is no family that we have supported who would argue otherwise. In fact, the only complaint is that there is not enough APSSP representatives to support the needs.

So, when we put into context that our student enrolment in the board was 22 472 students on Sept 30/22, spanning across 39 elementary schools, 7 high schools, and 6 alternative and continuing education sites, yet we are only 58 members (across 8 disciplines) trying to service our community, it is clear there is not enough of us. The reality of today's classroom is one of differentiated learning, of students who face a myriad of challenges and needs, each of which need to be addressed and administered in a particular

individualized way. Both teachers and students require our support and presence, now more than ever. Going forward in the budget process, we encourage the Board to prioritize and increase the supports provided by Association of Professional Student Services Personnel.