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Written Submission to KPRDSB ARC Process

May 5, 2011

The purpose of my submission is to persuade committee members you do not have adequate information to effectively answer the question put to you regarding how the Board should respond to the precipitous decline of enrolment in Peterborough Secondary Schools.

The main problem is that you have received inadequate and confusing data regarding the reason for the declining enrolment. While Board staff have presented the decline as simply a demographic issue, other sources of information strongly indicate otherwise. At the last ARC meeting information was presented indicating that the KPRDSB has a much higher rate of enrolment decline than the PVNC School Board. While the data presented to your committee remains confusing and hard to compare enrolment rates for the two boards (i.e., rates are presented in absolute terms over a 10 year period for KPR and as percentages over a 7 year period for PVNC), the difference is startling. The data indicates a 5% drop in primary enrolment for PVNC while KPR primary enrolment declined by 29%. Similarly, the data indicates a 2% drop in secondary enrolment for PVNC while KPR primary enrolment declined by 24%. This means that elementary enrolment at KPR is declining at more than 5 times the rate it is at PVNC, and secondary enrolment at KPR is declining at 12 times the rate it is at PVNC.

Further, it has been reported that while KPR is looking at closing one, or even two high schools, PVNC has recently added secondary classroom spaces through a renovation at one of their Peterborough High Schools. The newspaper report indicated the square footage of the addition was only slightly smaller than the square footage of Kenner.

There is considerable data indicating that while there might be a general decline in the number of school aged children in the Peterborough area, the very serious enrolment problem you are being asked to address also results from a pronounced loss of students to another board. However, you have not been provided with the information necessary to adequately evaluate or respond to this issue. Providing public education in Ontario has become a competitive environment and the ARC process you are participating in has not taken this into account. This fact leaves you likely to make inappropriate recommendations that both do not address the factors underlying the declining enrolment in the Board and could exacerbate the problem through encouraging a more pronounced shift of students from KPR to another board.

For example, in the scenarios presented to you as possible ways to address the enrolment problem there is a consistent assumption that all the students enrolled in any high school

that is closed would move to another of the schools being considered for closure. Given the data indicating competition and movement of students between boards, such an assumption seems ill-advised at best and possibly disastrous. As pointed out in an oral submission at the last meeting, if the recommendation is made to close PCVS, there is good reason to believe many of the students currently enrolled there, and those in key feeder schools, will choose to attend St. Peter's High School. There is an overlap in programming in the two schools and most of the students in question could walk. Do you as a committee know what the impact would be on future enrolment if you closed PCVS? The data before you strongly suggests you need to think about which KPR high school could be closed with the fewest number of students transferring to PVNC.

It seems ridiculous that in an environment where boards are competing for students KPR appears to have neither recognized there is a drain from their board to another, nor looked into how to stem the drain and attract students. The Board's lack of attention to this issue leaves you as a committee with insufficient information and likely to put a band-aid on the underlying issue: as a Board we are failing to attract students. One consequence of this is you have not been given information regarding how effective each school you are dealing with is at attracting students. This year PCVS has 129 students who have chosen to attend from other school catchments. This number is on top of those students participating in specialized programs such as the Integrated Arts and ESL programs. These 129 students have voted with their feet and are managing their own transportation in order to attend a high school they have chosen over the alternatives. Given that you have not been provided with any measures of how effective each of the schools in the ARC process are at meeting the educational needs of students, this is a critical piece of data for you to consider; many students and families shopping for a good school choose PCVS. What are the data for other schools?

It is vital that you as a committee look realistically at which schools actually provide the kind of educational experience students and families value, which schools will help KPR compete effectively with PVNC, and which will contribute to the community of Peterborough in a real way. Some individuals presenting to your committee have suggested you should not consider the impact closing a school might have on the broader community. However, this is wrong-headed and self-defeating. Schools are essentially value-based entities. KPR has sought to embody this through its Character Education initiative. However, too often such initiatives are undermined because they are not practiced at the staff and institutional level. Considering the closure of the one remaining school in the downtown core, the area with the highest concentration of low-income, high-risk students in our city is not consistent with the values espoused by the Board through Character Education. Unless KPR pays more attention to the real needs of students and the community, and unless KPR accepts it is more important to recognize academic excellence

and student success than to compare parking lots and playing fields, the Board will continue losing students to other boards and fall below expectations in terms of providing a good, values-based education.

In terms of possible solutions for the current enrolment crisis, it is clear that neither PCVS nor Kenner can close and the Board still meet its commitment to the community of Peterborough. Of the two remaining schools, TASS has the smallest projected student population and the largest physical plant. It is the one that should close. However, to maximize current and future access to the land and building, the Board should consider moving the Board offices to the TASS building and using parts of the building for specialized educational purposes such as adult education, and possibly outdoor education.

The Board should also look into specific measures to better understand why students and families are choosing other boards over KPR. A first step would be to gather more complete data regarding movement between the Boards between elementary and secondary school. Gathering information from students leaving Grade 8 (and their parents) about their choice of schools would provide important information, as would interviewing families choosing to enrol young children in PVNC rather than KPR schools.

Finally, a clear problem resulting in some bleed to the PVNC Board is that students registered in French Immersion at the elementary level are unable to pursue advanced French studies in their local high schools. While it might not be possible to have immersion programs in both PCVS and Adam Scott, it should be possible to recognize immersion student's advanced French proficiency and provide them with opportunities to maintain and develop it. For example, promoting the Board program which allows students to challenge for advanced grades might permit them to begin at the Grade 11 level. Similarly, providing an opportunity for Advanced Placement French programming would help students feel they had not wasted their investment of 9 years intensive study of French, and attract them to KPR high schools.

Similar options should be explored with parents and students in the areas such as sports programming and services for special needs students, which also attract students to PVNC schools. The overall point is that you can't solve the enrolment issue without finding out what is driving student choices, and taking steps to meet their needs.

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