

# Should schools remain open on municipal election days? HDSB trustees split on issue

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Halton Region municipal staff are urging the Halton District School Board to consider making a change to the 2018-2019 calendar to keep students out of schools on the upcoming municipal election day.

Danielle Manton, manager of committee and election services for the City of Burlington, along with Halton Hills municipal clerk Suzanne Jones and Milton town clerk Troy McHarg, presented a request to the HDSB on March 21, asking the board to schedule one of its professional activity days on Oct. 22.

Some trustees, however, remain unconvinced that this is necessary.

Manton says that while there is a common perspective that children benefit from witnessing the democratic process on municipal election days, in reality, keeping schools open on these days provides no advantage from an educational standpoint, as students are not permitted in the voting areas.

"The students at the school cannot witness the voting process happening

or the setup of that process occurring. Therefore, there is no opportunity to teach them anything about that process," she said.

Manton added that if educators are interested in further teaching students about elections, they have other options outside of the curriculum, such as the student vote program.

"Given the ongoing concern from school boards, parents and teachers for student safety, we recommend you reconsider the decision of your calendar committee and what they've proposed and you listen to this stakeholder your school board chose not to consult with," Manton concluded.

Halton Hills municipal clerk Suzanne Jones says one of the primary concerns for parents, students and election staff is that on election days, adults visiting or working in the schools often have to share washrooms with students.

"We do hear from not only eligible voters but also our election workers who work a long day, and they need accommodations in the school," Jones said.

"We make sure they have bathroom breaks and so forth and they feel un-

comfortable as well going into a washroom with a child. That perception is there."

But HDSB trustees indicated they have been getting mixed responses from parents on the issue.

"I, too, have received phone calls from constituents who are concerned about student safety on election days," trustee Amy Collard told the municipal staff. "I am hopeful that you will be able to find alignment between your wishes and that of the Catholic board and that we will be able to do the same here."

Trustee Leah Reynolds says unlike Collard, she has only heard positive feedback from the community regarding the issue.

"I heard the reverse. People were supportive, teachers and parents, of engaging their kids in the school day with the voting going on," she said.

In the past, the HDSB has paid to hire security guards at all sites to ensure student safety on election day, director Stuart Miller noted.

The HDSB will further discuss the topic on April 4, following conversation with the Halton Catholic board.

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