

Bus stop removed after school board learns of its existence

Board turns down parents' request

CYNTHIA GAMBLE
Staff Writer

The Appeals Committee of Halton District School Board (HDSB) has denied a request by Acton parents to continue a bus stop for their French Immersion children.

The parents were informed this week that as of January 8, the bus stop on Churchill Rd. at Tanners Dr. that has served that community's French Immersion students for the past two years would be removed. The dozen or so children who take the bus will now be required to walk to McKenzie-Smith Bennett School (MSB) to board a bus for Acton's designated French Immersion school, Robert Little.

Last week, Kim Bishop, representing the parents, appealed a HDSB staff decision to remove the bus stop. HDSB staff had ordered the stop's removal after learning of its existence earlier this month from Bishop who had requested that it be moved from the busy school crossing intersection—the subject of ongoing safety concerns. The parents were told that the bus should have been picking the children up in front of M-SB.

HDSB Superintendent of Business Services Steven Parfeniuk said the committee of three trustees— Vice-Chair Janie Hames, Peggy Russell and Jennifer Hlusko— made the decision based on the application of the transportation policy in fairness to all Halton students. Board policy states that all French Immersion students who reside within the 1.6 km walking distance of a home school are not eligible for busing. In this case, the students must walk to their "home" or neighbourhood school—M-SB— and catch the bus to Robert Little from there.

Parfeniuk admits an error had been made in having a stop on

Churchill Rd., and that upon learning of its existence, it was removed immediately to meet board policy.

"Allowing the error to continue would have potentially undermined that policy," he said, adding that similar situations exist elsewhere in the region.

The board's transportation policy clearly states no transportation

shortcut and walking along the east sidewalk (there is no west sidewalk) on Churchill Rd. to Norman Ave. or to Peel St. is still within the 1.6 km walking distance.

"The fact the bus stop was there in the first place is inconsistent with board policy because with the Optional Attendance program like French Immersion the policy says the bus will pick

logic and forethought, not to mention concern for the children, was not applied in the board's decision and I would simply like to know why," said Tony Medeiros. "I believe if a decision that they made affects my safety or that of my family and friends, I'm entitled to know why."

Medeiros would like other Halton-area residents to become aware of the issue of the French Immersion students.

"Awareness brings about change and we need change. I would like other residents to support our initiative, if for no other reason than if it can happen to us, it can happen to others," he said.

Bishop also vowed to continue her case.

"This decision has been made by three Burlington trustees who do not represent the north and this is far from over. A French education is a right and the HDSB Operational Policy discriminates against us," she said.

Bishop pointed to the HDSB's transportation policy that clearly outlines that French Immersion students are excluded in the busing policy.

"It's correct to say busing is not provided door-to-door but any child who wants to go French Immersion can go to their home school, which is where they would be going anyways (if they didn't attend French Immersion) and the bus will pick them up there," said Tuck Kutarna.

While Parfeniuk says there is no appeal process after the Appeals Committee hearing, Bishop does have the right to appear as a delegation in front of the full board of trustees to plead her case at a future meeting.

Ockenden said he would help Bishop go through the procedures necessary when it gets to the board.

(Cynthia Gamble can be reached at cgamble@independentfreepress.com)

'Allowing the error to continue would have potentially undermined that policy.'

—HDSB superintendent Steven Parfeniuk



will be arranged for those students who, by choice, attend a school outside their normal school area, unless there is room on an existing bus route. No additional bus stops or route adjustments will be made to accommodate these Optional Attendance students (as the French Immersion students are considered), and bus-riding privileges could be withdrawn at any time. This was made clear to parents upon enrolment of their children in French Immersion, Parfeniuk said.

Both Halton Hills trustees, Gerry Ockenden, representing Acton, and new board chair Gillian Tuck Kutarna, representing Georgetown, agreed the Appeals Committee applied the board policy.

Exceptions to the policy can be issued on a case-by-case basis but only if there's deemed to be a safety hazard for the children. The Acton parents argued walking across an ice or snow-covered M-SB soccer field could be considered a hazard, especially for the smaller children.

But both Ockenden and Tuck Kutarna say the soccer field is a

the kids up at the home school (M-SB)," said Tuck Kutarna. "And that's not an unsafe place to pick up the kids. It may not be as convenient for them as in the previous location ... but that's the same as any other child in French Immersion."

Ockenden added it's unfortunate the Norman Ave. all-way stop was removed when the all-way stop was installed at Tanners Dr., but he was not involved in that decision-making (made by Halton Hills council due to parents' complaints), and the crossing guard was not installed at Norman instead of at Tanners.

"In fairness to the people who made that decision... I'm guessing that they did the best thing they could do at the time to address the issues they had to at that time," said Ockenden.

Parfeniuk said no site visit was made to Acton. He added for those who live within the 1.6 km walking distance, it is the parents' responsibility to ensure the safety of their children getting to school.

Parents learning of the decision were not happy.

"In my opinion, it seems that



Fun reading

Diane Dupuy, founder and artistic director for Famous People Players, was at The Freckled Lion recently, promoting her new book, *The Teacher & the Soul*. Here, she shows three-year-old Sara Padt of Georgetown, another book of hers, *The Little Girl Who Did What?!!?*

Photo by Patti Post

Office closed Dec. 26

The Independent & Free Press office will be closed today (Tuesday, Dec. 26) for the Boxing Day holiday.

The office will reopen tomorrow (Wednesday, Dec. 27) at 8:30 a.m.

Regular publication dates will resume with the Friday, Dec. 29 edition.



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