

Trustee tells supporters she opposes specialized schools

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Boutique-style specialty schools should not be offered to elementary students because they undermine regular community schools, according to York Region public school Trustee Lorelea Carruthers.

Ms Carruthers was responding Tuesday to questions raised by supporters of the region's only specialized elementary school, which faces the axe if the board's draft equity policy is approved this spring.

Trustees are considering a policy that would prevent elementary schools from offering optional programs other than French immersion.

Supporters of the arts program at Baythorn Public School in Thornhill appeared before the board again this week in an attempt to plead their case and learn why the board wants to ban all such specialized schools.

Students should have the same kinds of choices offered to their peers in the York Catholic, Peel and Toronto boards, where

boutique schools are proliferating, they argued.

If trustees give draft policy 316 the green light April 3, Arts@Baythorn will be gradually phased out, starting in September.

But Ms Carruthers said the policy is not about Baythorn, it's about all York schools.

"This discussion needs to be at a higher level, about what we want all of our community schools to look like," the trustee for East Gwillimbury and Witchurch-Stouffville said.

"What is in the best interest of all of our kids. And there's mounting research ... that the old-fashioned way of streaming kids is not in the best interest of kids in the 21st century."

Also during Tuesday's meeting, Jordan Allison described how Baythorn's arts program rescued his floundering academic career.

"I was an awkward kid who was always in the principal's office, maybe three, four times a week. I was that kid who had to have his desk next to the teacher's desk."

He wasn't good at sports, had a speech

impediment and few friends.

After he switched to Arts@Baythorn, he felt included and, by Grade 7, was earning straight As, graduated top of his class at University of Toronto and is working toward his masters in architectural design at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"You are a wonderful achiever," Ms Carruthers told him. "But I'm worried about the other kids at school who are left behind. They need you as a role model. That's what the research is saying."

Some of the research to which she referred was released in a report last month by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

She sent an e-mail to the board's director and trustees Saturday quoting from that report, saying "early student selection has a negative impact on students assigned to lower tracks and exacerbates inequities, without raising average performance. Early student selection should be deferred to upper secondary education while reinforcing comprehensive schooling".

"I hope we can not only listen to the voices of individual parents, but also listen to the research and evidence presented by experts in education when making system level decisions," Ms Carruthers said in her e-mail.

But that research and York's plans to cut specialized schools are being questioned by posters on a national education blog.

The OECD actually reached the opposite conclusion, blog author and education consultant Paul Bennett said.

The report said a careful design of school choice schemes can allow education districts to "combine parental freedom, enhanced opportunities for disadvantaged children and equity", he explained.

Tuesday's standing committee also heard preliminary results from a survey covering another highly sought-after specialty program — French immersion.

It is the one optional program the board will continue to provide under draft policy 316 because it is mandated by the government.



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