

Delegate Presentation Proposal

Ellen Walton

Good evening. My name is Ellen Walton. I am a TCDSB parent of a gifted learner and an Ontario Certified Teacher with over 20 years of teaching experience. I have spent my entire career supporting special education students and over 10 years working specifically with gifted learners.

As a parent, I have been able to witness firsthand the benefits of a gifted special education program. Before this experience, my son was engaged at school but was not receiving the academic and social enrichment that he needed to grow. Unfortunately, the pandemic has resulted in my son again experiencing what it feels like to be restricted in a program that was not designed for his needs. Some may argue that students like my son should not be a priority because their intellectual ability reduces the chances that they will be adversely impacted by a less-than-optimal learning model. For those with this exceptionality, the reality could not be farther from this perception. Gifted learners often experience other learning needs caused by things like learning disabilities and autism. The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario states that “intellectually gifted individuals with specific learning disabilities are the most misjudged, misunderstood, and neglected segment of the student population and the community”. The LDAO argues that these twice exceptional students could have increased experiences with depression, anxiety, withdrawal, aggression, or disruptive behaviour. For most students, a return to in-person learning has improved the overall schooling experience. This is not the case for gifted withdrawal students who are still being forced to learn virtually. Meeting in person also allows educators to identify the need for various supports that simply cannot be identified virtually. Even as a very experienced professional, there is no way I or any other educator can adequately assess students’ needs through comments in a chat box one day a week. My small cohorts of gifted students have required more mental health supports than all of my regular program students combined.

I recently had the privilege of getting to know a student named Lisa whose beautiful and brilliant mind at times made it difficult for her to cope. As a gifted learner in a program geared to her needs, Lisa was able to access the academic enrichment and mental health interventions that she needed. Due to circumstances beyond her control, Lisa ended up in a regular program path for high school. Her

new path could not provide adequate support. It has been two years and two months since Lisa died by suicide. I have lost track of the times I wondered what the outcome would have been had she been in a program where her teachers could not only support her needs, but also literally *see* her on a daily basis and be an added physical presence. Specialized programs like the Gifted Withdrawal Program are not just about academics. They can literally be a lifesaver for a student in need.

As a parent and an educator, I am asking you to reinstate the in-person gifted withdrawal program by the proposed date of April 18th, 2022 in alignment with the TCDSB mandate that has removed the need for student cohorting and physical separation as protective measures against Covid-19. There is no reasonable explanation as to why a small percentage of students should be forced to learn virtually when this measure is no longer in line with provincial guidelines. I welcome any opportunities to answer questions and hope for your support in ensuring that all TCDSB students are afforded the opportunity for in-person instruction