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An Open Letter to Parents of UCDSB Elementary Students:

I would like to first introduce myself. My name is Erin Blair and I am the President of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario – Upper Canada Local (ETFO-UCL). ETFO-UCL represents the approximately 1150 elementary teachers who work for the UCDSB.

I am writing to you to discuss a very important topic that is of the utmost importance to the overwhelming majority of members but one which they, in their role as your child's teacher, cannot speak directly to you about. As a federation president, I do not have the same constraints hence this letter.

The last number of months have been very challenging for everyone on many levels. If nothing else the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the value, we all place upon public education and the extreme importance of our publicly funded public schools.

My members are as equally excited about returning to school as your children are. They are also as equally concerned with the current reality re: reopening of schools next week during a pandemic.

While there is an apprehension that, with the proper measures in place, individuals can feel and be better protected against acquiring the COVID-19 virus, concerns remain. I won't belabour the point here but there has not been the necessary funding from the provincial government for school boards to make this return as safe as it could be i.e., reduction in class sizes to match the number of students to the size of the classrooms (2m distancing). One would think that by parents keeping their students home smaller class sizes would be the result. Ironically, without properly funding a dual stream (school/virtual requiring increased financial resources) the number of students/class will increase.

To this end the UCDSB has surveyed you asking which method of instruction you would like to see your child in.

There is no doubt in the world that the optimal place for students is to be physically in the classroom. Teaching virtually for children who are especially vulnerable because of the pandemic is, while not ideal, the best of a bad situation.

The UCDSB has proposed one model we find hugely problematic – that of live-streaming your child's classroom. I suspect financial constraints had much to do with them offering this, but I

want to now implore you to reject outright this option as it is seriously flawed; let me explain why for both pedagogical and professional reasons.

Targeting lessons for in-person instruction is simply not the same as what one would have for dedicated on-line learning. Teachers are not lecturers standing in front of the classroom and there is a whole different dynamic involved that, in trying to reach both groups, would cause both to suffer.

The teacher's focus would not be on students at home as they work with students in the classroom i.e., divided focus especially with the multitude of issues teachers face on a daily basis in classrooms. It might be that the students at home would be passive observers as teachers work to maintain the interest of the students in front of them.

There is a potential for inappropriate use of the video streaming. As you know from the Internet age, once you send something out over the Internet you have lost control of it.

Privacy concerns are paramount and are really too numerous to list but I can try to list a couple. First of all, can you imagine your home being broadcast for 5 hours of the day? The younger the age group the less filtering that goes on; sometimes students do make comments that are best not broadcasted. Similarly, self-regulation can be a challenge for some students in terms of their actions. Again, do these really need to be broadcasted? (even if only the audio is picked up)

Video images, as we have seen on news broadcasts do not always provide the context of what happens. Interactions can occur that would be broadcasted and not taken in context. This could be unfair to anyone in the classroom.

On a practical level school bandwidth could be insufficient to have live streaming from every classroom. What would be the consequence for individual students at school wanting to access the Internet with bandwidth taken up by livestreaming? Classes are encouraged to go outside – how would that then work?

Professionally the workload on teachers trying to maintain two streams would be overwhelming resulting in less than optimal lessons, increased anxiety and potential burn-out of teachers despite their best efforts. Teachers not functioning, at their best is not what they nor you would want.

So, what can be done? You might try contacting your Trustee, but they did meet and were essentially silent on the issue.

My suggestion is to outright reject the option of livestreaming your child's/children's classroom either vis-à-vis any survey or writing an email to administration of your child's school.

The second possibility is to also indicate that you want to protect your child's privacy and do not give permission for your child to be broadcast out either by video or audio.

I am very proud of the teachers I represent, and I know they look forward to providing your children the best education possible. Please join in this effort to allow them to do just that.

Regards,

Erin

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