

**Ministry of Education**

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November 22, 2016

York Region District School Board  
60 Wellington Street West,  
Aurora ON L4G 3H2

Dear Trustees of the York Region District School Board,

I am writing further to my meeting on November 10, with Anna DeBartolo, board chair, and Philip Parappally, director of education. I wish first to express my thanks for the opportunity to meet. My purpose for the meeting was to support the board as you work through difficult issues, and your openness to having the conversation is important to me.

Let me also acknowledge the many successes of the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) in delivering strong student achievement results and being a creative, innovative leader in public education. Through commitment and many years of hard work, the board earned a strong reputation and the public's confidence in its ability to meet the needs of a growing and diverse population. This public confidence is integral to the success of Ontario's publicly funded education system, and we have a collective responsibility to continually earn, preserve and grow that trust.

I met with the chair and director of education on November 10, because of escalating community concerns about transparency and accountability, particularly with respect to board spending on trustees' international travel, and with respect to the board's responses to the community about its investigation into Islamophobic Facebook posts. I have also received a growing number of letters and calls for action from individuals and groups who feel there is systemic racism that is not being adequately addressed within the board.

The government and the people of Ontario expect school boards to be transparent and accountable, and to build inclusive learning environments where equity is ensured. While there was some acknowledgement at our meeting that work needs to be done to regain the community's trust. I continue to have concerns and, therefore, am making a specific request for information about the current issues and plans for how the board will move forward to address and resolve them. Our meeting and this letter are a first step in my engagement with you to ensure that public confidence in the board is restored.



Regarding the investigation into allegations of Islamophobia, I understand your concern to respect the confidentiality of the particular investigation. At the same time, the board must reassure the community that there is a clear and thorough process that will be equitably applied to support and protect the safety of students and staff. As we know, when staff, students and parents feel unsafe, the conditions for learning are compromised.

I am requesting that you articulate what your process is for such investigations and how you ensure that processes are followed. The board can help to reassure all members of its community by clearly communicating all aspects of the policy, including how these determinations are made, the standards to which employees will be held accountable and the types of disciplinary measures and restorative practices available to redress unacceptable behaviour. The community has voiced particular concerns over the transparency of this process and seeks clarity of what are the acceptable standards of behaviour in these circumstances. What will you do to appropriately respond to this community and to the public?

It is clear from the letters I have received and the repeated calls for action, that some members of the community have a sense of systemic racism within the board. These feelings cannot be downplayed or ignored. The board has a responsibility to acknowledge and address them with demonstrated commitment and action. The relationship with the community is yours to maintain. What will you do to respond to the community? What is your plan to involve parents and community members to address these issues? How do you plan to work with and strengthen the work of the equity committee? How will you show that you are living your equity policy?

Turning to the specific concerns about international travel for board members, I understand that the board supports international travel under its jurisdictional learning policy to benchmark the board's work against other high-performing educational jurisdictions. What I would like to understand is the process by which the board arrived at the decision to approve recent international travel for trustees. More particularly, please provide the considerations that went into the approval of trustee travel, including the considerations that justified repeated visits to a foreign jurisdiction on the part of one or more trustees. In what practical ways can the board demonstrate the value of this travel to the community to assure the community that the board's resources are being spent for the maximum benefit of student learning and well-being?

Ontario is a global leader in public education and I recognize that this accomplishment is in large measure due to the quality and high standards expected of Ontario's school boards. Every board will have its challenges, but it is within your power to demonstrate leadership, transparency and accountability to address the issues head on and build stronger and better learning environments for all members of your community.

As minister, I believe that while a commitment to equity and inclusion may exist in policy frameworks and mission statements, just as we teach our children and students, it is our actions that speak louder than our words. Ontario's most impressionable young people are watching the adults involved in their education and are looking for assurances that their schools and places of learning are beacons of hope and environments of tolerance and respect. Let us never give them reason to think otherwise.

I am committed to supporting the YRDSB as you work to resolve the issues and reclaim the board's standing as a model school board in Ontario. I look forward to receiving the board's response and plan for addressing these serious concerns.

It is my expectation that the board will provide a thorough and detailed response to this letter with an accompanying action plan no later than January 13, 2017.

Sincerely,



Mitzie Hunter, MBA  
Minister

c: Philip Parappally, Director of Education, YRDSB  
Bruce Rodrigues, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Education