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On November 16, 2007, the Panel requested that I prepare a report responding to the following question: *What, if anything, about the education culture at the TDSB creates inhibitions to reporting issues of school safety and/or excessive resistance to scrutiny?* Please accept this document as my report on the above question.

## ***Introduction***

By way of overview, this report describes my views, supported by my own experiences as well as discussions with others in the system, of the environment and factors at the Toronto District School Board (“TDSB”) which inhibit open discussion and encourage reluctance to report issues of school safety. These views have been developed over time, and through many roles and related lenses. In particular, the perspectives expressed in this report have been garnered from my experience as a teacher, consultant, principal in the York City Board of Education and the TDSB, as an advocate, as a workshop presenter, and as co-chair of the TDSB’s Task Force on Safe and Compassionate Schools, 2003- 2004. The views expressed in this report have also been developed in discussion with TDSB staff working in various capacities in the board. My experiences and discussions with fellow educators have led me to one inescapable

conclusion – that there is a culture of silence at the TDSB that inhibits the reporting of school safety issues and more generally creates reluctance to scrutiny. As a result, a great deal of this report will be focused on identifying this pattern of behaviour which has evolved over time and seems to have become a part of the culture of the TDSB.

### *Reprisal and Disapproval*

The dominant characteristic about the culture of the TDSB is that of excessive concern about reprisal and disapproval. This fear of offending those in authority filters through from the trustee level to teachers in classrooms and support staff. Fear of reprisal and career limitation restricts the behaviour of those interested in promotion or maintaining an achieved desired placement.

The fear of reprisal and disapproval is demonstrated most commonly by a reluctance to question issues, decisions, and processes implemented by those in authority, even when they seem unclear or unwise. Although these decisions are not questioned in the appropriate arenas or questions directed to the staff with immediate responsibility for the activity, they are often dissected privately with peers. This collective activity has significant importance because it is through these discussions that the propriety of silence and the fear of reprisal are communicated.

New staff learn early that questioning or seeming disagreement are not welcomed as characteristics of creative thinking or a desire to contribute, but rather a voice of opposition or independent arrogance. A former school principal emphasized that “the critiques and suggestions of those who must initiate the programs in the schools and make them work for kids, are not welcomed as valid suggestions and taken seriously”.

So widespread is the fear of reprisal or even adverse attention that staff members assume this rejection of opinion to be ever-present, even with staff with whom it has not been demonstrated and in situations where it has not been tested. The concern that “speaking out” may be career limiting is commonly shared not only by peers, but also by mentors assisting those who seek promotion. The mentors’ teaching is not without basis or examples in the history of the board. Stories are told about school staff that have been embarrassingly ridiculed when questioning a decision or reporting what they believe is students’ negative behaviour. Mentors have shared with me examples of gifted educators who have not been promoted because they questioned management’s plans or suggested improvements.

### *Fear of Responsibility*

Many teachers believe, and some cite incidents to support it, that if they act independently to question or report serious incidents they risk isolation from their colleagues who may fear association with someone who is not conforming to system behaviours and may be attracting negative repercussions.

Not to be overlooked, but to be clearly understood, is the emphasis that the Ontario Teachers Federation puts on teachers thorough documentation of all incidents involving students discipline. Behaviour logs and safety plans must be kept current, and incident reports written within twenty-four hours of the incident occurrence. This necessary emphasis on the importance of documentation, its possible use, and the repercussions of inaccuracy or lack of detail if the incident becomes a part of a lawsuit,

only adds to some teachers' fear of reporting. As a result, many teachers are reluctant to witness or admit to witnessing exceptional behaviour incidents.

An equally important issue is that teachers are compelled to give a copy of an accusation against another teacher to the teacher who stands accused of committing a wrongdoing. This process, long established by the Ontario Teachers Federation, discourages trivial and ill-considered accusations, as well as supporting clear consistency in the accusation, and the right of the other teacher to respond. However, the process itself reduces the likelihood that many teachers will report on their peers. In addition to the formality of the process, although definite and ethical, a teacher's fear of being involved with the board, if the accused teacher launches a lawsuit, reduces the likelihood of reporting.

### *Fear of Students*

In addition to the fear of isolation from their peers and the fear of some administrators' disapproval, is the fear, felt by some school staff, of the students. It is a generally accepted belief, even if exaggerated by number, that some teachers' automobile tires have been slashed and they themselves threatened by students whom they have disciplined or reported. In such an environment, knowledge of wrong-doing, in particular collective wrong-doing, is sometimes ignored, then denied, or finally treated like the proverbial hot potato, passed quickly to someone else who, hopefully, will assume total responsibility and see that the issue is solved. If the person to whom the information is passed is not a school administrator then the same pause, indecision and hesitation in reporting could occur with the same basic cause, fear.

### *Fear of Speaking Out Publicly*

Reports are shared of principals who are telephoned and reprimanded by those in authority after the principals openly questioned or disputed practices and decisions at a principals meetings. I have personally experienced this issue while I was attending a principals' meeting in the pre-amalgamated York City Board of Education. At the meeting the principals were reprimanded by the administration for questioning a promotion appointment made outside the established process. The principals were reminded that the administration had "long memories". From this and the frank content of the presentation of the administrator, as well as the discussion that followed, the principals inferred that such questioning was not welcomed by the administration, and could have negative affects on their individual careers, especially for those who might be seeking promotion.

Reports are shared about staff whose actions to initiate changes were considered too aggressive and independent. These staff members were labelled as "not team players", and experienced career limitations. Also discussed are the experiences of staff members who have acted exceptionally, but well within their work situations, and have suffered resultant isolation by their peers. A case referred to me two years ago is an example of both of the above situations. A staff member felt she was being harassed by the administration at her school for her focussed attention to implementing an inclusive program, as well as her consistent and positive contact with the parents and community. Since she distrusted the involvement of her association, it was necessary to solicit the advice of an outside labour union.

It is important to note that principals not only react to this fear of 'speaking out' or questioning the system, but also are seen as inflicting the same limiting expectations and threat of reprisal on others by evaluating their behaviour as troublesome and reporting it to the supervisory staff of the board. In fact, a principal's ability to maintain a seemingly supportive, if acquiescent staff, is often rewarded. This reinforces the cultural belief that silence is valued.

### *Silence at the Board and Administration Levels*

The culture of fear and silence begins at the Board and administration levels. There has been no clear and maintained division between the responsibilities of the elected trustees and the administrative staff at the TDSB. According to a board administrator, "A tug of war between the Board and administration about the areas of power for each group has resulted in the administration, especially at the school level, operating more like managers than change agents". This confusion about areas of responsibility is not only difficult for staff, but might also take time, possibly delaying acquiring information about issues needing the focus of both trustees and administration.

Staff members who should report on issues affecting the system in general, a particular trustee's committee work, or a school district are concerned about gaining the disfavour of the administration or trustees. They are fearful that such disfavour from either group could alter their career paths. Therefore, their reports are often euphemistically stated hiding the seriousness of the situation; or consist of great lists of activity hiding the fact that nothing substantial has been done to address the problem in a timely fashion.

For example, in 2005, I asked for a progress report on the activities of the Workgroup on Safe and Compassionate Schools, struck to study the recommendations and implement a work plan to effect the recommendations made by the Task Force and accepted by the Board. As a result of my request, I was sent an update which reported the percentage of recommendations approved and listed peripheral activities rather than substantial changes.

At the symposium, *Breaking the Logjam: A Blueprint for Progress on School Safety*, (a forum hosted by the Panel and the Ontario Human Rights Commission at OISE on November 21, 2007) Trustee Mari Rutka spoke of the culture of fear which exists at the Board and administration level. She has become aware through her attempts to be thorough and get all the pertinent information on issues, that there are staff members who are fearful about submitting reports which might include information ill – received by either the administration or the trustees. This awareness has sponsored her concern that all information should be shared without fear. She subsequently wrote, “ ..we cannot continue to have people not say what they see and know is happening and be able to offer creative solutions”.

I have been told, when I asked, on behalf of the parents, for some specific information about their child’s suspension, that the staff member was not certain whether certain information could be shared with the parents.

### ***Rumours Perpetuate the Culture of Silence***

Usually rumour and its effects are omitted in serious discussions of causes of behaviour. However, in the environment of the TDSB, rumour is a very important factor

in the perpetuation of the culture of fear. Rumours abound in the TDSB. Whether or not they are always true is only of secondary importance, because their credibility within the TDSB community depends on only one instance of truth experienced by a colleague or associate, and many claim and share their experiences which support the rumours. Rumour maintains, especially in 'problem areas', that there are some teachers and principals who are solicited for information, and who report on their colleagues, the informal meetings of colleagues about TDSB related issues, and information requested.

So shared is the belief that administration and some trustees have 'inside sources' that many staff will attend only compulsory meetings, and rarely contribute opinions to informal discussions about issues. Staff members who are thought to be informing on their colleagues are generally kept at a distance, because of the danger they are supposed to pose in reporting anything as negative and undermining. It is difficult to know whether the belief that there are informers in the system is only a part of the culture of fear or the result of it. But the rumours of informers in the system contribute greatly to a culture of silence, maintained even by those who claim disbelief in the rumours, yet hedge their bets by not speaking openly about school or board issues.

### *Fear of Outsiders*

The objects and the issues of fear discussed above are issues which I have had to confront and understand in working in and with the staff of the TDSB. They all contribute to a culture in which information is not freely shared, where opinions are hesitantly given, if at all, and reporting is done as a last resort or when situations or conditions are extreme. Therefore, staff members are unlikely to volunteer to express their knowledge of or concerns about issues to groups designated to receive such



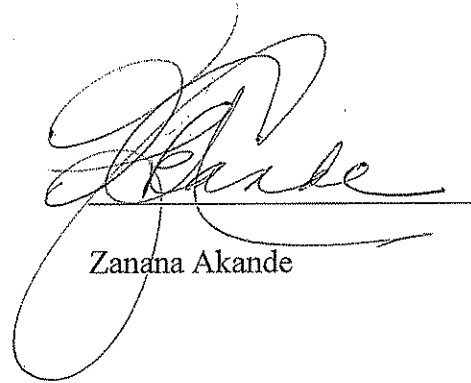
information. There is no better example of this than the reluctance of principals to meet with the Task Force on Safe and Compassionate Schools. During our work, the Task Force repeatedly sent invitations to the TDSB Principals Association to present their concerns and issues to the task force. The Task Force was willing to go to every family of schools to meet with the principals, so vital was their role in the safe schools issue. They did not meet with us until the head of the Safe Schools Department in the TDSB summoned together a small selected group of principals, and remained with the Task Force during our meeting with the principals. Many other principals never knew of the meeting. The Task Force was concerned that the opinions we heard were not indicative of the breadth of issues we had to gather later from personal discussions with some principals.

The reluctance of educators to report is also complicated by a professional concern of teachers. Lodged between their aspired identification as professionals and their economically necessary alliance with trade unions, teachers struggle to maintain their debated status as professionals. Recognizing that professionals are policed by members of their own profession, teachers resent the imposition of outside scrutiny, especially when it is lead by a member of another profession. For many, this is professionally demeaning, and does not encourage open and helpful interaction. This attitude, if demonstrated, is also a hindrance in working with community organizations that criticize current practices and request changes.

### ***Conclusion***

The culture of silence in the TDSB has become so normalized by time that it is maintained by some staff members who would not even identify it. Influenced by fears

of harassment from trustees and administration, colleague isolation, student reprisal, involvement in lawsuits, negative reporting from unidentified sources, and imposed career limits or alterations, staff effect their roles and conduct themselves through their days without attracting attention. They thereby increase the opportunity to achieve promotion or, for the differently ambitious, to exist in peace. Yet such peace gained through selective silence in a system where vigilant observation and timely reporting are needed may leave students vulnerable; ambition realized through selective silence in a system requiring the creative ideas of everyone and open communication to prune and perfect those ideas for early implementation cheats the system of its opportunities and leaves the students wanting, vulnerable and unsafe. It is my belief that in order to achieve school safety, the culture of fear and silence must be aggressively and overtly devalued.



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