

LETTER TO THE PARRY SOUND NORTH STAR EDITOR:

NEAR NORTH BOARD “MEGA SCHOOL” WON’T FIT STUDENTS

Dear Editor,

Our community has completely lost trust in the Near North District School Board. The new school has dragged out over a decade and this week we find out the “mega” school we are getting is too small. We deserve a new Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) process.

We are being forced to accept a K-12 school that was at best a compromise ten years ago and has since failed to materialize. Now Covid has emerged, a provincial moratorium on school closures exists, and our community faces opportunities like a new pool complex. Yet already doors are being taken off classrooms. Demolition has started, with no meaningful public consultation.

On October 24, 2012, you reported that parents like us travelled to North Bay to demand that trustees put their sudden decision to move Grade 7/8 students into the high school within months, with no public consultation.

On September 12, 2018, you reported that McDougall school would remain open with the Board telling us the Ministry was deciding about their recommendation - yet the Ministry told us they hadn't heard any recommendation from the Board.

On October 15, 2020, you reminded us how, although the Board projected the new school would open September 2019 with 1,110 students, the Board changed the plan to a school opening in September 2022 with a school population of 866 pupils.

This week we were told we would get a school for 815 students, opening in 2023. Really?

We have no idea how 815 students for the new school was calculated, and how many will actually be accommodated inside the building and how many will be put in portable/pods. The Board's own Capital Plan projects 958 students for our K-12 in 2023 and enrolment over 815 past 2028. The Board is deliberately building a school that is 17.5% (143 students) overcapacity the day it opens. We can only assume that 17.5% of students will be put in portable/pods and potentially more if the population grows.

Does the Board's projection of long-term declining enrollment account for our Census population growth rate of 3.5% or Covid displacing families to rural areas like ours or actual municipal growth rates? Does it factor in the flux of in-person and online learning? What about the spaces that are so needed in the building that we didn't see in the design: for specialists to help students? The forested and natural spaces so important for rural elementary students recommended in 2014?

The original budget was \$27.6M in 2015 and dropped to \$26.3M in 2020. Yet, in order to build the 2015 school today, we would need \$31M and that doesn't include the actual rise in building costs for a "state-of-the-art" school. If closing Nobel and McDougall

schools saves money - where is that money going? Why go ahead with this project?
What about building a new 7-12 school instead that has enough space for all students?
What about building it with the new pool complex like Bracebridge has done?

Sadly, this lack of transparency is entirely consistent with the Ombudsman's investigation in 2019 ("Lessons Not Learned") of the Near North District School Board. The Ombudsman should be prepared to open another investigation in response to our concerns. Lawyers are currently reviewing the ability for area municipalities to change school Boards under the Municipal Act.

A decade has passed, the 2014 ARC is outdated and new opportunities have emerged. It is unlikely that a new ARC would produce the same result as the one in 2014 and it should be our right to consult on the school plans - not just see architectural drawings a few weeks before demolition begins.

On March 11, 2020, as a pandemic was unfolding, you reported that Board Chair Aspin said the project was slated to go to tender for architectural services. But, Aspin asserted, this time around the town would see a completed project. "The guarantee is the approval from the government of Ontario, Ministry of Education," he said, adding when pressed for more, "You'll just have to take my word."

Well, Mr. Aspin, we don't. We've waited ten years. We can wait a little longer. Stop the demolition and start answering our questions.

Sincerely,
Greg Mason, Nobel School parent
Leigh Spinney Armstrong, Nobel School parent
Howard Wesley, PSHS Parent, Chair of McDougall PTC
Accommodation Review Committee representatives, 2013-14

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