

Give Us Back Our Neighbourhood School

A Presentation to the School Programs Committee of the Toronto District School Board From the Parents and Community of 900, 910, 930 Queen's Plate Drive, November 11, 2009

On May 26, 1999, the standing committee of the Toronto District School Board in Report No. 4 recommended that the children of 900, 910 and 930 Queen's Plate Drive be removed from our neighbourhood school, Humberwood Downs Junior-Middle Academy, and placed at Elmbank Middle School, which added a junior school program to facilitate the move. This move has badly hurt our children and our community. We ask you today to give us back our neighbourhood school. We believed at the time that the move was calculated to separate a poor, immigrant and largely black community from its wealthier neighbours, and that is still our opinion. There seemed far less harmful options available when the decision was made. We protested then the best we could, but most of us were new to Canada, we hardly spoke English at all, and we had few resources to fight what we knew would be a destructive experience for all of us. Over the last 10 years we have continued to protest, but we have had no luck in persuading Board officials to take what is happening to our children seriously. We hope you will listen to us now and do what is right for our children.

For many parents in our three buildings, these last 10 years have been a nightmare. Some, in desperation, have sent their children to private schools, even though they could not afford it, and some have home-schooled their children. We are not exaggerating how strongly our community feels about this issue. Let us explain.

At the core of the problem is that we are cut off from Elmbank. Our buildings are a brisk $\frac{3}{4}$ hour walk away, with access along very busy and very dangerous roads, requiring bus services, with all their limitations. (See the attached maps). We are about 15 minutes closer to Humberwood, which we can walk to around the edge of (or through) a beautiful park. We will still need buses for Humberwood, especially in winter, like the Catholic students in our buildings who continue to go to the TCDSB section of Humberwood. But the difference in access between Elmbank and Humberwood is night and day, and it makes a great difference to what actually happens to our children in school. This is why we are taking this petition to the School Programs committee. Our children's education is on the line.

Part of the problem of being cut off from Elmbank is that it is a more violent school than Humberwood (fighting is a common occurrence), closer to criminal and gang activity, with major school discipline problems, with very serious academic issues (many of our children are two to three years behind in literacy and math when they leave Elmbank), with far fewer classroom and recreation resources available to its staff, as well

as a building beginning to crumble (including its toilet facilities). All of this means that as parents we have to be very deeply involved with our children while they are at school and our children have to have access to additional programs to assist them in improving their schoolwork. We have to be there to look after our kids. Of course, we want to be involved with Elmbank and make it a stronger school, just as we know our friends in the Jamestown community want the same thing. We also respect Elmbank's staff and think they are caring people. But we can't be sufficiently involved with our children in that school and our children can't attend after school activities because the school is too far away and the bus services don't fill the gap. The school is simply not part of our neighbourhood.

Here is what happens to us and to our children under the present circumstances:

Any child who attends an after-school tutoring program has to find an alternative means to get home. For many of our children, then, the tutoring doesn't take place at school. Since most of our children need these programs – programs that may be key to their survival in school – poor parents in our community are reaching deep into their pockets for home tutoring. It's money they can't afford in any way. In their daily lives, they are often forced to choose between the most basic necessities of life, and now they are obliged – in a public school system – to include funding their children's academic future in those choices. Furthermore, while these parents can manage some tutoring for their children, a really serious tutoring program is entirely beyond their means.

Any child who attends a recreation or cultural program after school also has to find an alternative means to get home. So most of our children don't attend these programs. We try to set up after-school programs on our own, but we have very limited resources and very little room to carry these programs out. We have just been told, for example, that our small soccer program in the community centre gym has to be cancelled.

When somewhat older children do take the long walk home – because they decided to stay for a program after school or they missed the bus (not at all uncommon) – they are in real danger, not only from traffic or from dangerous strangers, but also from bullying. Many times our children are roughed up or beaten up when they attempt to walk home. The bullying, however, is not limited to the walk home. It is a big reality on the school grounds. School staff can only cover so much ground. Our parents want to be close enough to their children's school so they can intervene in bullying and protect their children.

Our parents are also very worried about their children at lunchtime, because the children are not able to come home during this period. Students are supposed to stay inside the school during lunch, but they often wander off the property with school staff none the wiser. There are many dangerous places around Elmbank they can wander into – places they can also make contact with gangs and with criminal activities. Again, we can't be around to protect them.

As a side note: with all of our problems of school access, our children don't even have access to some special programs set up for "high priority" areas like Jamestown (where Elmbank is situated) because their postal code reflects a richer neighbourhood.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, being cut off from their school, means that our parents cannot engage with the school – and especially its teachers – on a regular basis. Being in daily contact with the school is especially important for our younger children. It is these regular contacts with the school that make all the difference in building good relations and good communication between teachers and parents. It is in these contacts that we can learn how best to support our children and their teachers.

We are very much aware of how badly children like ours are doing in the Toronto school system. We know they are reading and writing badly, that they are behind in math, that they have not experienced serious intellectual and creative work in school, that many have been profiled as not being smart enough or stable enough to succeed in the regular program and have been dumped into bottom streams – formal bottom streams like IEPs, certain Special Education programs, the Applied, Essentials, College, Mixed and Workplace high school streams as well as a wide mix of informal bottom streams – all of which offer little hope for our children's future. We want to work closely with our neighbourhood school to turn this situation around for our children, and we hope to do this at Humberwood Downs. We know our children are every bit as intelligent and capable as children from any other community.

We also want to help build a great program for *all* of the children in Humberwood in collaboration with parents, community activists and teachers from a wide range of social class, racial and cultural backgrounds. We believe strongly that genuine diversity in our schools is a good thing, and we are told the research bears us out. It makes school life better for everyone. Far too many Toronto schools are part of the ghettoization of this city into increasingly rich and poor neighbourhoods. Our current situation with Humberwood Downs is one very evident example of this social class and racial division – part of what some people are starting to call an "apartheid" school system.

We believe our situation can be remedied immediately by allowing the children at 900, 910, 930 Queen's Plate Drive to begin attending Humberwood Downs. It will be a tight fit, but it appears it can be arranged right away. Humberwood Downs currently has a capacity of 1,075, a total of 931 FTE, resulting in utilization of 87%, with an FTE capacity of 144. There are, we estimate, less than 144 students from Queen's Plate Drive who want to go to Humberwood. (On Tuesday, October 20, 2009, for example, there were 90 students from our buildings on the school buses going to Elmbank and on October 21, 2009, there were 80 students. We are not sure how many children find other means of getting to Elmbank, but we are pretty certain they don't bring the complete number up to 144.) In 2013, the utilization rate of Humberwood Downs is estimated to be 83%,¹ which gives us a bit more room in a couple of years time.

¹ See table, Detail Model 2, p. 9 of 12, in "Humberwood Downs JMA Accommodation Review, Toronto District School Board, September 29, 2009."

It may be that our move to Humberwood is not as straightforward as we hope it can be. But no matter how complex the shifting of school boundaries may be to solve this problem of ours, we insist that it be done. Our children and our families have suffered enough these last ten years from the separation from our neighbourhood school, and it has to stop.

We know there are other groups in our immediate neighbourhood who arrived after we did and who knew that their children would have to go to Elmbank or Greenholme (a school close to Elmbank in the Jamestown community) when they settled here.² They weren't thrown out of their neighbourhood school as we were. Still, their local school situation is as intolerable as ours, though we would guess they have more resources than we have to cope with it. We hope the Board will consider their plight as well and come up with a solution that also puts them into Humberwood Downs.

Moving these additional children may involve some restructuring of school boundaries – say moving children from the northeast end of the Humberwood attendance area to a restructured Melody Village school, a distance much shorter than the distance of their homes to Elmbank. Something like that seems to us the just thing to do. Hopefully, the Board can come up with less disturbing solutions to this problem.

What would be best of all, of course, would be a new school for the growing population in our immediate neighbourhood. We would be happy to join with you in pressing the provincial government to make an exception to their present freeze on school building in Toronto. But first, we want our children back in our neighbourhood school where they belong and where we can help build a real future for them.

Hibo Hagi-Nur and Abdullah Wardhare
Co-Chairs, 900, 910, 930 Queen's Plate Drive Parents and Community

² There are now officially 253 students residing in Elmbank's attendance area (that was formerly the Humberwood Downs' attendance area, For the See table, p. 10 of 12, in "Humberwood Downs JMA Accomodation Review, Toronto District School Board, September 29, 2009."

