**Ten Recommendations for Change**

**Deputation to the TDSB Program and School Services Committee**

**June 5th, 2013 5:00 pm, Committee Room A**

**Nateesha Dirie**

Good afternoon. My name is Nateesha Dirie. Thank you for granting my request to make a deputation today. I am a member of “Women for Change.” Our organization is committed to seeking equity and justice for Somali speaking children in the Toronto school system. It is our contention that the schools are failing our children- our sons in particular. As parents we have met with school officials at all levels for several years trying to present constructive solutions to address our children’s problems but our advice has always fallen on deaf ears.

By way of introducing myself, I came to Canada as an adolescent in 1993. After I attended secondary school for one year in Scarborough, my family moved to London, Ontario. I completed high school there. Eventually, as an adult, I came back to Toronto. I’ve worked in the Somali Immigrant Aid Association for several years. Having undergone the immigration experience myself and then having coached many others through it, I am well acquainted with the problems immigrant Somali parents face. I have two young children aged 4 and 2. My oldest will be entering all day Junior Kindergarten this fall.

In May, our organization sent every school trustee a letter stating our misgivings about the Somali Task Force and our own list of 10 actions we would like to see implemented by the TDSB. For those trustees who are telling us they’ve never received this letter, I will reiterate those 10 recommendations. Then I want to tell you why you may have to vote down the budget on June 19th.

1. There used to be a full time Somali speaking community liaison worker dedicated to working with parents and children in the Somali speaking community to improve the academic achievement of Somali speaking students. This position was cut. We have asked repeatedly that this position be refilled. Each time we have been told there is no budget for the position.
2. There used to be a full time Student Equity Program Advisor who supported the needs of Somali speaking students across the Toronto diaspora. We want this position reinstated too. We have been repeated told that there is no budget for such a worker.

At this point I must pause to point out there has always been money available for these two supports and others as well. We are aware that the Toronto District School Board has been misdirecting millions of provincial grant dollars intended for children in neighbourhood schools serving low income, high needs communities. A report produced by Social Planning Toronto and recently reported in the Toronto Star tells us that of the $183 million of the Learning Opportunity Grant, only $40 million went to where it was intended. That means $88 million- fully two thirds of the money was misdirected away from poor children. And I don’t want to hear you say this was perfectly legal. It was immoral.

To continue:

1. We want to be given access to the full 2006 and 2011 student census data.
2. We want access to updated student, parent workforce census data which is used to track and measure the achievement of Somali-speaking students. We want the latest Student Achievement Gap data made available. These are **our** children. Why shouldn’t we have access to this research?
3. The Somali Student Conference should continue as an annual event. The planning committee already in place should commence conference preparations immediately.
4. In schools with large Somali-speaking populations there should be mandatory professional development sessions designed to foster cultural sensitivity and understanding among educators. Teachers and staff should undergo workshops on how to provide an anti-oppressive framework for communicating with Somali speaking students and their parents.
5. The hours of community use of schools should be expanded, especially in the 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm time frame to allow the TDSB mentors and coaches to work with Somali youth.
6. In the interests of strengthening student achievement and classroom discipline, as well as employment equity, the TDSB must hire more Somali speaking support staff and substitute teachers.
7. There should be a Somali Front Line Advisory Committee established to help bridge the communication between TDSB officials and local parents. That committee should have representation from front line Somali speaking TDSB workers who deal daily with Somali speaking parents and students. There should also be Somali speaking student and parent reps. There should be at least one trustee and one TDSB staff person dedicated to working with the advisory committee.
8. We want the TDSB Director of Education hold regular monthly open meetings to discuss the progress made on Somali youth issues.

Members of Women for Change have attended several of the public meetings as well as some working meetings held by the TDSB’s Somali Task Force. We are aware we will not see a first report until the fall of 2013. So far we only have our own observations to inform us but as things stand, we are skeptical. TDSB officials have indicated our organization’s participation is not welcome. We’ve observed that TDSB officials prefer talking to us rather than listening to us in public consultation meetings. They also controlled the discussion and meeting format in such a way as to inhibit the parents from expressing themselves freely. These observations, together with our unsuccessful past experience in trying to reach out to the TDSB, make us less than optimistic for an effective outcome for the taskforce. Nevertheless, if there are further opportunities for input, we will be sure to participate.

Finally, I want to ask you-if you are aware of the TDSB’s plans for spending the Learning Opportunity Grants for the coming school year? Does balancing the school year’s budget once again depend on misappropriating the Learning Opportunities Grant? If you don’t know the answer, ask your staff. If the answer is ‘yes,’ you should not approve the budget on June 19th.

Thank you