Stand With Us and Our Children

at the Toronto District School Board

An open letter from Nasteeha Dirie and the Somali *Women for Change*

“Everyone can be great, because everyone can serve”

Martin Luther king, Jr.

The purpose of writing this article is to share with you the story of five hundred Somali-Canadian parents who have children in Toronto District School Board schools and have been struggling with this institution for a very long time. The majority of these parents are women and they have been given no help at all.

Mothers are the backbone of the Somali family here in Canada. They are the ones who look after their children’s schooling and discipline, on top of everything else. Most of these mothers came from a war-torn country, and as so often happens in times of war, the victims were women and children who faced unspeakable horrors that have yet to be addressed or dealt with. Their two greatest hopes for settling in this country were to find safety and to provide a brighter future for their children through education. Those small glimmers of hope are slowly diminishing.

The fact is the education crisis facing Somali-Canadian students has been known to the TDSB for more than a decade. Their own data shows time and again that these students are disproportionately identified as having Special Education Needs, and many of them attend below-standard schools. Most disturbing is the high dropout rate of Somali high school youth, as well as the violence among our boys that has been on the rise for years.

We are *Women for Change*, an organization made up of frontline workers who primarily service Somali women and their families, and which is run entirely on a volunteer basis. When we realized that eight out of ten women that we assist have issues with the TDSB, we ended up becoming the liaison between these parents and their children’s schools. Though happy to help, we were overwhelmed. On the top of full-time jobs, most of our spare time has been spent trying to make a difference in this realm, despite the fact that problems are continuing to grow.

We often met to discuss and figure out the best way to help these mothers. Most of us as frontline workers have been in their shoes before and lived the same experiences not too long ago. It was apparent to us that we needed to advocate to the institution on their behalf instead tacking individual cases. This is why we are championing this cause.

We were so naïve and didn’t prepare the necessary opposition for the tactics we have faced from the TDSB. We also couldn’t fathom the idea that the TDSB officials are not interested in improving the lives of certain students who come from disadvantage communities – perhaps because of their socioeconomic status or their cultural background. It seems to us that the TDSB forgets they are a vital service and a publicly-funded institution, thus accountable to the taxpayers. They cannot function with the mentality of private corporations, whose main concerns are to generate profits for themselves and their shareholders. In this case it seems to us that the officials of TDSB are happy to look the other way as long as they get to keep their big salaries and get promotions, as well as ensure that well-to-do, upper-middle-class kids and their local public schools are getting the proper resources they need. This is because their parents, like other parents, will certainly not tolerate poor schooling or failing grades and are powerful enough and wealthy enough to defend their children. Students in thirteen “priority neighborhoods,” however, are free to attend below standard schools because their parents are struggling, working two or three jobs to put food on the table and do not have the time to engage with what is going on regarding their children’s schooling. Or perhaps they are new to Canada and face language barriers and thus cannot advocate for their children’s rights. Or perhaps they are simply afraid to demand better education for their children, because they come from dictatorships and are afraid to challenge institutional authorities such as the TDSB, for if this was their homeland, doing so would cost them greatly.

**Trying to make a difference**

For the last several years, the Somali speaking community has been trying to establish a genuine, honest dialogue with the TDSB and find effective solutions for the urgent problems our community continues to face. We have found that our efforts have been in vain, but not for lack of trying on our part. Time and again, our suggestions have been rejected and no serious alternatives have been offered by the Board. Over the years we have approached the Board with numerous requests and proposals that have gone unheeded. Two specific examples standout:

First, we have been asking consistently for the TDSB to fill the vacant position of Somali Community liaison worker. This position was formerly held by Samsam Ismail, who passed away on April 18th, 2011. Before her passing, she had taken time off for illness. At that time, we asked that her position be filled temporarily. Her work was truly a lifeline for Somali speaking parents in Toronto. Anytime a student or parent had an issue, she mediated for them with the Board. Constant consultation with the community was an important part of the job. We have been asking for a replacement for years and we still have had no response.

Second, we have been asking for a replacement for the Somali Student Equity Advisor every since a highly educated young woman was laid off from the position. This too is a request for reinstatement of a position and not creation of one. The role was extremely valuable to both the Somali youth and their parents. This young woman reached out to a wide constituency in our community, dealing with a full range of youth issues that are of deep concern to us. She was also the key initiator of the Somali Youth Conference on December 2nd 2010. Many youth and parents responded enthusiastically to the event saying they had gained valuable information from it.

On March 20th, 2012, we held a meeting with Mr. Jim Spyropolous and his colleagues. Mr. Spyropolous told us that there was simply no money to reinstate people in these two positions. We realized once again our efforts were in vain. It became even more apparent to us that the concerns of the Somali Canadian community simply did not register with TDSB’s officials. Their response deepened our worries about the fate of our children – children we entrust every day to TDSB schools.

**Talking to Top Officials**

Recently, on May 20th, 2013, we, with a group of Somali parents, their children and community frontline workers, met with Mr. Chris Bolton (Chair of the TDSB) and Ms. Donna Quan (TDSB Acting Director). We expressed our deepest concerns, we told them about how the doors were closed, and made sure they understood that in spite of all this, we were there to meet them in good faith and to begin the open dialogue and relationship we’ve been seeking for so long. At this meeting, parents expressed where they are coming from, that they came to Canada fleeing from the horrors of a civil war, pinning whatever hope they had left on the success of their children, though this too is slipping away. When we have a crisis in schools or we need to advocate for our children the most, there is not one person to turn to who speaks the language or intimately understands the struggles of our community. We explained how there used to be a Community Liaison Worker (CLW) and Student Program Equity Advisor, but since these two positions were vacated, our community has suffered greatly for it. We as a community lost our connecting points to the Board and this is why these two positions we’ve been asking for are so vitally important.

We told Mr. Bolton and Ms. Quan that we are respectfully asking for them to reinstate the CLW and Student Program Equity Advisor positions because they are the two people with the ability to set things right. If these positions were to be rejected yet again, we wanted to hear the reasons why directly from them.

It seemed by the end of this meeting that some progress had been made; Mr. Bolton asked us to send job descriptions for the two positions as the community envisions them, and to expect a response regarding the positions within three months. We held up our end of the agreement. Thus, we were shocked that the most important persons in this board, the Chair and the Director (who happens to be a woman), would not only reject this again, but do so without a single word of explanation. What we were offered instead was a watered down version of what the community needs, offered as no more than an illusionary and token gesture.

This institution spends nearly two billion dollars every year of taxpayers’ money toward staffing, and refuses to reinstate two positions for a community that is in crisis – bleeding both figuratively and literally.

We also wrote two open letters to all trustees, and only a handful out of the twenty-two trustees reached out. We also wrote a letter on September 26th, 2013 to the TDSB Human Rights Office Manager in hopes that our voices will finally be heard. We were extremely disappointed in her response to our plea, we simply wanted a third party to objectively evaluate both sides to see the truth.

We parents and frontline workers believe Somali Canadian students are not valued and respected by this institution and when the board staff and trustees are silent, it only strengthens this belief in our hearts. We are asking you to stand with us for justice for *all* students. The principles of equity and inclusion so often cited by the TDSB have not been upheld in regards to our community.

**Stand With Us**

This cannot continue. We desperately need a third party, an honest broker who can reveal the truths that have been obscured by the board for years.

We are writing to you and humbly asking you to stand with us because you are tax payers and our fellow Canadians - the true stakeholders in this institution. All we want is for our voices to be heard. Just because we are a relatively recent community does not mean that our Canadian children have less of a right to the promise and chance of a better future.

Please contact us at womenforchange.ca

Thank you and God bless you all.

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