Tory MPPs challenge public school board over child care [1]

Author: D'Amato, Luisa
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EXCERPTS:

Elizabeth Witmer, Kitchener-Waterloo MPP, took a most unusual step Friday.

She sent an open letter to the Waterloo Region District School Board, asking trustees to listen to parents and to reconsider their plan on the explosive topic of who provides before-and after-school child care in local schools.

Witmer publicly challenged the judgment of trustees, almost all of whom watched approvingly while board administrators planned to cut out the Y and other local child-care providers who have been offering the service. In future, the plan is for a total board monopoly on running these programs for four- to seven-year-olds.

"As representatives of this community," Witmer wrote (the letter was also signed by fellow Conservative MPPs Michael Harris and Rob Leone) "we share the concerns of our constituents about your plan to completely phase out these third-party partnerships for before and after school care in schools, since this is not what parents want."

The board has its reasons, including its wish to offer child care to as many families as possible. It needs the large, money-making groups of kids in certain schools in order to be able to offer care in other schools where demand is lower.

Maybe this is an admirable goal, maybe it's an authoritarian disaster. The point is that there has not been a public debate, nor even a vote by trustees, on the strategy.

It's Politics 101 that elected officials are supposed to respect their constituents, to listen to them first and then make decisions.

But this plan was already decided by the time most parents found out about it. More than 1,000 moms and dads have petitioned trustees. Some furiously shouted down board officials at a meeting. Witmer herself got hundreds of calls and letters, asking for help.

Now, the tension is nearly unbearable. Witmer's rebuke places even more pressure on the beleaguered board. And the board is exerting tight control over parent consultation sessions that begin Tuesday.

The sessions expect you to register in advance and are limited to 80 people per meeting. (Tuesday's is already "sold out," but there are plenty more.) They will be round-table discussions handled by an outside facilitator. Discussion topics are predecided. News media will be kept out.

This is a long way from the traditional public meetings where all citizens were welcome to just show up and say what they wanted. Witmer, who was an Iron Lady school board chair herself here in the 1980s, presided over a few fierce controversies, including the closing of Victoria Public School in Kitchener. But she said she never would have handled public meetings in this restrictive way.

I covered education for many years at this paper. Sitting at school board meetings, I was routinely infuriated by what I saw as the board's culture of hostility to dissent, and its intransigence.

But on this issue, there are signs the school board is listening. A report to come before trustees next week proposes lower daily fees for board-run programs, and child-care service is proposed for March break and other holidays. Both issues were key parent concerns. And when I asked board chair Catherine Fife if the board trustees just might change their minds as a result of the consultation meetings, she said: "I feel trustees are open to the discussion .... There may be a broader discussion about the best course." The door is opening, just a chink.

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