

# OCDSB backpedals, will allow police in uniforms to attend career days

By JEFF MORRIS

The Ottawa Carleton District School Board will allow police officers in uniform who are parents to speak to the boards children and classes.

The announcement was made last week after the board issued a memo to the Ottawa Police Service saying that officers in uniform would be welcome to attend schools in the board while in uniform to speak to students at events such as community career days.

The OCDSB became the second school board in Ontario to not allow a uniformed police officer to participate in a career day. Last month, a female police officer was told she could not participate in uniform or bring her police car to the school for her child's Grade 1 career day where parents who have jobs that help in the community were coming into the class to speak to the children.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford, Ontario Minister of Education Stephen Lecce, and Ottawa Mayor Mark Sutcliffe expressed their disapproval with the decision made by the board.

The premier posted on social media and called it a "disturbing trend that needs to stop."

"Police officers are the people we call when we need help," the premier also said via social media. "They deserve so much better than this. I'm calling on the (OCDSB) to immediately reverse this policy and show our heroes on the front lines the respect they deserve."

Lecce issued a memo to all public school boards in Ontario stating the expectation that parents would be allowed to wear their uniforms when appearing at schools as guest speakers.

"Those school boards who are not allowing parents in their service uniforms are enabling division instead of bringing all segments of civil society together as we work to counter very real threats to communities across the province," Lecce wrote in the memo.

The OCDSB softened its stance on the issue, stating in a memo that police officers who are parents would be allowed to where their uniforms when giving presentations in schools. According to CTV Ottawa, the memo from Lecce wrote,

"my expectation that these parents, and others who proudly wear uniforms as part of their occupation, are to be welcomed," adding "any parent of a student within a publicly funded school has the right to participate in their child's education and school experience."

The board would not share the memo with the Barrhaven Independent when asked for a copy of it, but they did issue a statement.

"We appreciate the direction provided by the Ministry," the OCDSB statement read. "The OCDSB values the engagement of parents and our partnership with police. Where there are requests for uniformed officers to provide direct learning to students, we review each request to assess the learning opportunity and consider it in the context of alignment with the Board direction to have an emergency response based relationship with police."

The statement also references the meeting that took place between Ottawa Police Association President Matt Cox and the OCDSB Director of Education Mi-

chele Giroux.

"Following up from what we shared previously, last week, the Director met with the President of the Ottawa Police Association to discuss this issue. A meeting with the Ottawa Chief of Police has also been scheduled. These conversations are an opportunity to work together to establish new protocols for police involvement in schools which focus on students, safety, and relationships of trust, respecting the community concerns raised during our police involvement in schools review. The guidance from the Ministry will form part of those discussions."

## End of SRO Program

In 2021, Trustee Lyra Evans, who is now the OCDSB Chair, lobbied her fellow trustees and rallied the community to put an end to the Ottawa Police Service Student Resource Officer (SRO) program at the schools. She garnered support from within the board, and then worked with a group called Asilu Collective, who made a presentation of testimonials they had collected from students.

The report made accusations that the SRO program made students of colour and who are gender-oppressed feel scared and anxious.

Evans, a former provincial NDP candidate, has used her personal social media accounts to call for the defunding of police. The Ontario NDP has a plan in place for defunding the police in Ontario should they win the next provincial election.

Barrhaven-Knoxdale-Merivale Trustee Donna Blackburn voted against eliminating the SRO program.

"If you read the motion where we cancelled the officer resource program, it doesn't speak to a parent coming in for a career day," said Blackburn in an interview with CTV. "So I think it was a bit of a stretch and, in my opinion, a very embarrassing stretch which lost us a lot of public confidence."

Blackburn will be putting forth a motion on June 13 to the OCDSB's Committee of the Whole calling for a return to a positive and proactive relationship between the board and the Ottawa Police Service.

## OPA Gets Involved

The issue with the Stittsville parent/officer escalated earlier this month when Cox was contacted by the officer. The OCDSB's decision not to allow the parent to participate in the Grade 1 career day while in uniform did not sit well with the Ottawa Police Association. Cox, sent a letter to the board, its trustees and local politicians. The letter was also sent to the Barrhaven Independent. The letter asks why members of the Ottawa Police Service were not allowed to be in uniform when talking to Grade 1 students.

"Could someone please explain why? If we are trying to build relationships in the communities and educate students who may wish to pursue a future career in Emergency Services how is this decision the appropriate course of action? Opportunities like this to educate the next generation youth and provide a positive interaction with police should be something you strive to achieve."

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Cox went on to say that the actions of the board were disrespectful to the police.

“The brave men and women who wear the uniform deserve better. Police officers should receive the same support and respect as any other profession that has been invited to speak to your students. “Minister of Education Lecce has come out publicly to support the police stating, ‘I find it entirely unacceptable for a school board to prevent a parent of a child in that school from attending take your parent to work day.’”

On May 4, the OCDSB issued a statement on the board’s stand to the media and also sent a letter to Cox. Both were sent to the Barrhaven Independent. The OCDSB said that to align with Board Policy regarding police involve-

ment in schools, the parent had been asked not to wear her uniform or arrive at the school in a police vehicle.

“I appreciate the many perspectives and concerns that have been raised on this matter,” said the Board’s Director of Education, Michele Giroux. “Our priority is to work collaboratively with the Ottawa Police to develop protocols that support student learning and school safety and are responsive to the community concerns.”

Giroux’s letter to Cox called the OPS an important community partner to the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board.

“We share a common commitment to serving the diverse needs of our community and a recognition of the importance of building relationships of trust. With that in mind, I would

like to arrange a meeting with you to discuss police services to schools and better understand the perspective of your members. This will be an important first step in mapping out a path forward. I will also be reaching out to Chief Stubbs to arrange a meeting with him about the relationship between the OCDSB and OPS and the need for us to build a new partnership protocol.”

Giroux stated that after ODCSB trustees voted to end the SRO program, the board moved toward an emergency response-based relationship with police and away from having uniformed officers in schools providing direct learning to students.

Giroux added that the parent was “warmly invited to attend and to share her work experience with

the class”, but asked to do so without the uniform and the police car. She said it was an effort to find a balance between the direction of the board, student learning, parent engagement, and safety.

“There will be some who say that the easy path forward is to allow the parent to attend in uniform; others will maintain that

uniforms and police cars are not essential to classroom learning about policing,” Giroux wrote. “The Board decision remains in place until ‘further evaluation is complete’. After careful consideration, I do not believe that any decision on this single incident will bring clarity to practice. That will only come as a result of more fulsome

discussions about how the OPS and OCDSB can work together to support student learning, well-being, and safety. These discussions will need to reflect on the concerns that the community raised during our police involvement in schools review, with an intentional commitment on the part of both parties to building new practices.”

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