

Odessa H.B. Email to TDSB Trustees

July 31, 2020

Dear TDSB Trustees,

My name is Odessa Hewitt-Bernhard and I am a recent graduate of the International Baccalaureate program at Parkdale CI. I am writing to you today to show my support for the motion proposed by trustees Patel and Pilkey at the Finance, Budget, and Enrollment committee meeting that would cancel the fees for the IB program for the 2020-21 academic year. I strongly urge you to support this motion if and when it comes to a vote at the Committee of the Whole meeting on August 4th, 2020.

As determined by trustees Patel and Pilkey, the real financial benefit that these fees would provide is much less than originally estimated. They have repelled many students from enrolling in the program. This effect was not lessened by the offer of financial assistance. Adding to this, the COVID-19 epidemic has caused increased financial strain on families. There is almost no financial benefit to keeping these fees, while they create many problems for families trying to access the IB program.

COVID-19 is not only relevant to this issue in terms of the financial barriers that the pandemic has created for Toronto families, but it has also made schooling uncertain. In September, students will be returning to a situation that may change at any moment if a second wave were to appear. Families who pay thousands of dollars for education should be assured that their children will have a schooling experience that is worth that money (this is true no matter how unethical – of course it is my opinion that every student is entitled to a strong education). This is a promise that is impossible to keep with the possibility of switching to online learning (which is difficult and largely ineffective) looming over our heads. For students in the pre-bac program, families will be paying a large sum of money for what is essentially an academic course that could change in quality at any second. Clearly, it is illogical to ask families to do this, especially when the board will receive little gain from it.

Students, teachers, and community members have been petitioning the board to reverse these fees throughout the year. I do not want to waste your time by reiterating points that we have already made. If you would like more information on why we believe that IB fees are unethical and a threat to public education and the wellbeing of students, I urge you to look at the following resources:

Here is a news release put out by the No IB Fees community organization: <https://noibfees.wixsite.com/noibfees/blank-page>

Here is an online petition with well over 1,000 signatures that calls for the IB fees to be stopped: <https://www.change.org/p/toronto-district-school-board-trustees-keep-parkdale-ib-free>

Now, I would like to talk about my own experience with the IB program, and the opportunities it has given me.

I have had the huge honour of being designated as one of the University of Toronto's National Scholars. This means that I have a scholarship covering my full tuition for four years. In my opinion, the International Baccalaureate program equipped me with the skills needed to pass through the rigorous selection process. First and foremost, the program has encouraged me to gain a sense of global community and responsibility. This value, which is enforced in all of my IB classes, as well as through the Community, Activity, and Service requirement of the program, has made me extremely active in my community. I believe that my community involvement was one of the deciding factors that got me this scholarship. Additionally, the IB program emphasises critical thinking (through the Theory of Knowledge requirement, and through work in all my classes), as well as research, close reading, and academic writing skills. These were all extremely valuable when it came to the selection process, which involved a series of essays and interviews. Not only has the program more than prepared me for post-secondary studies, but it gave me the skills that allowed me to get a scholarship that eliminated the financial burden of university.

I do not know the exact numbers, but through speaking with the other nominees, it was clear to me that a large fraction of us were enrolled in the IB program. This further proves my point that the program provides excellent academic opportunities for its students. However, I also noticed that I was one of only a handful of students who were enrolled in a public school. I believe that I was the only nominee who was part of the TDSB. Some private schools had more nominees than the entire school board. This disparity was shocking to me! The free, accessible, IB program at Parkdale CI provided me with an opportunity that students in public schools seemed to be blocked from. Charging a fee for the IB program further blocks students from accessing opportunities like this.

Apart from my own experience, everyone I know in the IB program at Parkdale CI is progressing to post-secondary education. Many have scholarships like me. The IB program has provided us with the tools needed to be successful in university and has given us opportunities that would not otherwise be available. Beyond that, it has given us an elite, world-class education that is practically never possible for working-class students.

Imposing fees for IB violates the TDSB's own Equity Foundation Statement: "The TDSB will ensure that our school system is built on the principles of anti-Oppression, Anti-Racism, Non-discrimination, equitable and Inclusive Education, which... identifies and eliminates barriers; *All students and staff are supported equitably through the identification and removal of discriminatory Bias and or Barriers, whether individual, systemic or intersecting, that limit their ability to equal access, participation and/or outcomes in schools and workplaces and achieve their full potential.*"

Even if the IB fees are purely a result of budget restrictions, they send a clear message to working class students: "You do not deserve the same level of education as those who have more money than you. You do not deserve the same opportunities that come with that education. And, if you want this badly enough, you will have to work your way around rules and restrictions that will never even cross wealthy students' minds."

When I told other students about the proposition to cancel IB fees, there was overwhelming excitement and support. I expect that many students will be sending in written and oral depositions to demonstrate the need for free, accessible education. Please, when you hear these students talk, remember that they are who you are supposed to advocate for and protect. If you vote to keep the IB fees for the 2020-21 year, even though students have voiced their concerns, even though they are inequitable, even though they are illogical in the face of COVID-19, even though there is *hardly any financial benefit*, you have done us a great disservice. You have failed to do your job.

With respect,

Odessa Hewitt-Bernhard