

**External Review of the Halifax Regional School Board's  
Support of Rehtaeh Parsons**

**INTERIM REPORT**

**Debra Pepler and Penny Milton  
May 10, 2013**

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Minister Marilyn More  
Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women

Dear Minister:

We are pleased to submit the Interim Report of the Panel of the *External Review of the Halifax Regional School Board's Support of Rehtaeh Parsons*.

We began our work immediately on our appointment of April 18, 2013. A relatively short period of eight weeks is assigned for the review. This Interim Report describes the methods we have selected to collect relevant information from which to understand what supports were available to Rehtaeh Parsons, where gaps in service provision may lie and to make recommendations for the consideration of Nova Scotia and the Halifax Regional School Board.

We committed to identify early any issues and recommendations for action that may merit immediate response. This report does not contain any such recommendations.

Officials of the Government and the Halifax Regional School Board have received us with openness and readiness to facilitate our work. We are grateful for their assistance in compiling documents, advising us on key contacts and arranging interviews and meetings.

Sincerely,

Debra Pepler

Penny Milton

## Introduction

The *External Review of the Halifax Regional School Board's Support of Rehtaeh Parsons* is being conducted as a result of her tragic death following her suicide attempt. The contributing issues include an alleged sexual assault, the distribution of digital images of the assault and subsequent bullying. These are not the subjects of this review. Rather our task is to find out: what the Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB) knew or could have known about the issues faced by Rehtaeh Parsons; what response it made or could have made to provide support; what barriers existed that limited the provision of adequate supports and services; whether relevant policies, procedures, training and guidelines were followed and are adequate; and what protocols provide for coordinated care and support among health, justice and education. The ten specific questions set out for the Review Panel's mandate are included in Attachment 1. Answers to these ten questions will be the substance of the Panel's Final Report to be delivered on June 14, 2013.

## Context and perspective

Sexual assault, harassment and bullying occur in all societies. Over the last twenty or more years, public policy and public services in Canada and internationally have sought to decrease incidence and provide support to people harmed through the cruel behavior of others. The development of powerful information and communication technologies and their rapid and deep appropriation by the young has added a new medium for such unacceptable and harmful behaviours. This context has been well described in the report by the Nova Scotia Task Force on Bullying and Cyberbullying, *Respectful and Responsible Relationships: There's No App for That*<sup>1</sup>, presented to the Government in March 2012.

Schools represent society's largest single investment in the development of children and youth. Their mandate for education continues to evolve over time. Today schools are called upon to assume significant responsibility for supporting the development of physical and mental health, social-emotional competence and relationship skills alongside the teaching of academic disciplines, provision of education and career guidance and individualized programs for children with exceptional needs. Society's aspirations for education are high; it is perhaps not surprising that we are sometimes disappointed in schools' performance in meeting such a multi-faceted, complex and competing set of objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> MacKay, Wayne. 2012. Report of the Nova Scotia Task Force on Bullying and Cyberbullying, *Respectful and Responsible Relationships: There's No App for That*.  
<http://ssrn.com/abstract=2123494>

The primary responsibility for the healthy development of children and youth rests rightly with families and communities. Public institutions and agencies provide services that complement and support these responsibilities and that intervene when things go wrong. The avoidance of all tragedies of human development is, of course, impossible; however the public sector has an obligation to bring to bear the best available evidence of effectiveness to the social issues it tackles. Best evidence is not easily reconciled with deeply held beliefs and values about the best course of action involving human behaviour.

### **Some longer-term challenges**

We note several initial challenges within the mandate of the Review Panel and others that are inherent in the mandate, structure and organization of schooling that may be considered in a longer-term strategy. Further longer-term issues may arise as the Review progresses. Several questions that we are considering include:

- Policy is insufficient, in and of itself, for promoting new effective practices on the ground in schools; professionals in any field need opportunities to learn not only what new practices are required but also how to do them. Are there adequate supports for implementation of evidence into practice for all levels of educators?
- Given that schools are society's primary formal institution in support of child and youth development, is the mandate to promote social-emotional development understood by educators as 'core' rather than as an 'add on' to the academic agenda, especially during adolescence?
- How do we gauge the effectiveness of schools in promoting social-emotional development or relationship capacity that is as important to future success as literacy and numeracy?
- What have we learned about inter-organizational collaboration that might enable systems of support for children and youth to be more effective?
- How can we support youth in appropriate use of social media on their own devices and in their own time?

### **The Panel's Approach**

The Panel has adopted a qualitative research approach to review relevant documents and to collect facts, perceptions, innovations and responses to answer the questions posed to the Review Panel. A careful analysis of each question has been completed to identify the information required so that conversations can be structured to gather all required information in a single session. Conversations will be conducted in person to the extent feasible within the timelines granted to the Review. Some interviews or meetings will be conducted by conference calls or via the Internet if needed.

To support openness and frank discussions, all participants have been assured that all conversations will be confidential to the Panellists; any electronic recording will occur only with participants' permission, and the panellists will destroy any such recordings when their work is completed. Should any direct quotations be significant to the final report, speakers will be identified by their position only. Where only one person holds a position and could be identified, permission to for use a specific quote will be obtained prior to submission of the Final Report to the Minister.

Interviews and conversations will be facilitated by at least one of the two panel members in person and, wherever possible through Skype or similar technology, by both panellists, if one is unavailable to be physically present. To answer the ten questions posed for the review, protocols have been developed to assist in gathering reliable information pertinent to each role and setting related to the Parsons' case.

We have collected and begun analysis of formal and informal documentation that specifies policies, procedures training and guidelines at the provincial, school board and school levels concerning each of the questions. Provincial Departments of Education, Health and Justice; the Halifax Regional School Board and the schools that Rehtaeh attended will be asked to collect assemble all relevant written documents for review by the Panel. The analysis will be guided by the Panellists' understanding of the state of the field in policies and practices relevant to this Review.

The Panel's mandate does not include a formal review of provincial policy or guidelines in relation to Rehtaeh Parsons. However since most regional and local policies cascade from direction provided by legislation, regulation, and associated guidelines, we will consider these as the frameworks that guide the actions that are within the Review's mandate. We will meet with Regional Superintendents and Principals since the issues raised in HRSB are of critical importance throughout the province.

Weekly meetings between the Minister responsible for the Review and the panellists have been scheduled to report on progress, address any questions, and resolve any issues as they arise.

The timeline for Panel's work plan is provided in Attachment 2. The groups with whom we are arranging to meet or whom we will invite to meet with us are listed in Attachment 3.

We have been asked whether we will "name names" or "assign blame". We will not. The Government of Nova Scotia established a mandate for this review to

learn from the terrible tragedy of Rehtaeh Parsons' death. Many people are affected by the circumstances surrounding it. Her grieving parents, family and friends, the school staff and students who ask themselves what more could or should they have done; the young people alleged to have committed dreadful acts and their families and the decision-makers charged with helping to keep young people safe and secure are all in different ways seeking answers to difficult questions. All no doubt want us to learn from this experience and to apply those learnings to make the world a more safe and secure place for young people, a place where they seek and find comfort and support during the sometimes tumultuous journey to adulthood, now being navigated with the added complexity of social media. We hold a compassionate stance towards all involved, while at the same time deploring abhorrent behaviour. It is our hope that our work will be valuable in helping Nova Scotia's continued development of safe, secure and caring schools for the benefit of all its young citizens.

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## Attachment 1

### Questions to be addressed by the External Review

1. Were all HRSB policies, procedures, training and guidelines respecting bullying, cyberbullying and sexual violence followed in the Parsons case?
2. Are the existing HRSB policies, procedures, training and guidelines respecting bullying, cyberbullying and sexual violence adequate?
3. What support services are in place for students who self-identify, or are reported to be, facing issues of bullying, cyberbullying and/or sexual violence from or within:
  - a. The Halifax Regional School Board?
  - b. The IWK Health Centre?
  - c. The Capital District Health Authority?
  - d. The police?
4. To what extent are the support services identified in response to Question 3 coordinated, and when are they best serving students as independent and/or integrated care providers?
5. What is the level of understanding of staff within the HRSB about the support services identified in response to Question 3?
6. What are the required reporting procedures within the HRSB related to bullying, cyberbullying and sexual violence? This includes HRSB and school procedures for investigating both formal complaints and informally-raised concerns related to student well-being, as well as internal communication protocols related to sharing information about students who may be experiencing problems related to mental health and/or substance abuse issues.
7. Are policies and procedures in place to track and continue to provide support to students who transfer between schools, or families of schools, both within HRSB and within the province? If so, what changes should be made to increase their effectiveness and staff's awareness of their existence?
8. What interaction exists between staff within Health Authorities and/or the IWK Health Centre, and school boards where a student receives care or undergoes a hospitalization to ensure appropriate supports are in place when the student transitions back to or re-enters the class or school system?
9. What methods are in place to provide student-specific information and updates to primary teaching and support staff, while respecting individual privacy concerns and privacy laws?
10. What is the expected level of knowledge on the part of school staff of indicators of crisis used to help identify students who may be experiencing issues related to severely disruptive behaviour, particularly in cases where it is affecting the students' wellbeing and/or mental health.

# Review Panel Work Plan and Timelines

## Attachment 2

April 21-27	Apr 28- May 4	May 5-11	May 12-18	May 19-25	May 26-Jun 1	Jun 2-9	June 10-14
Work plan design							
Initial meeting with Minister							
Initial meetings with provincial and regional officials							
	Document review						
	Identification of meeting participants						
	Scheduling meetings						
	Development of meeting/interview protocols						
	Meeting with Minister						
		Draft and deliver Interim Report					
		Complete protocol development					
		Conduct scheduled meetings/interviews					
		Develop analytical framework					
		Meeting with Minister					
			Conduct scheduled meetings/interviews				
			Begin identification of key gaps, barriers				
			Meet with Minister				
				Conduct scheduled interviews/meetings			
				Identify any additional meeting or document needs			
				Meeting with Minister			
				Prepare Final Report outline			
					Analysis and conclusions		
					Check interpretations of data		
					Meet with Minister		
						Draft Final Report	
							Finalize, deliver Final Report

## **Planned Meetings and Interviews**

**Parents of Rehtaeh Parsons**, to be invited

### **Government of Nova Scotia**

1. Deputy Ministers of Education, Health and Justice and Social and Community Services
2. Other responsible officials if recommended by DMs.
3. Minister More - weekly meetings

### **Halifax Regional School Board**

1. Superintendent and responsible senior administrators
2. Principals of the middle and high schools attended by Rehtaeh Parsons
3. Focus group of student council representatives
4. Parent representatives of School Advisory Councils
5. A focus group of high school teachers

### **Regional Representation**

1. Superintendents of all Regional School Boards
2. Selected principals representative of the regions

### **Health and Justice Authorities**

1. Regional officials recommended by DMs
2. Local officials with responsibilities for protocols between education, health and justice authorities

**Individual experts**, to be invited

1. Dr. Stan Kutcher
2. Prof. Wayne MacKay
3. Dr. John Leblanc