

Toronto, Ontario school boards open new parent support offices

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Parents will have a one-stop shop to ask questions or escalate concerns as five Ontario school boards open the province's first student and family support offices.

While critics say the offices merely reinvent the wheel - and cannot replace elected trustees, given the initial rollout is in boards under provincial supervision - supporters say they give parents a clear place to turn to, with quick response times expected.

They are believed to be the first such offices anywhere in the country.

"We are focused on making it easier for families to access the support they need, when they need it," said Brendan Browne, director of education at the Toronto Catholic District School Board, in an email to parents about the new "student and family support offices," or SFSOs, that open Monday.

"... When families feel supported and informed, students are better positioned to learn and succeed. As always, we are here to help and support families along the way."

Mandated by the province, and to be available in all boards next fall, they'll be a place for families to get information or address issues they haven't been able to resolve with a teacher or principal at their school.

Stacey Zucker, interim director of the Toronto District School Board, said in an email to parents that this is "a direct way to raise concerns, get help, and find solutions faster."

In the past, parents might have turned to trustees for help on certain issues, but in the two Toronto boards, Ottawa public, Dufferin-Peel Catholic and Thames Valley public, the province has taken charge and stripped the elected officials of their duties and powers.

(A sixth board, Near North, was also recently put under supervision but is not included in the first round.)

"The only difference with the new offices is there aren't any trustees - so people can reach staff, who can, as in the past, address many of their concerns, but can't push back against the ministry's underfunding and partisan politics that negatively impact students and families, and staff don't have the power to make policy changes," said Michelle Aarts, the elected trustee for Beaches-East York in the Toronto public board.

"Staff already have massive workloads, so there is limited capacity to take on the broader system change needed to improve outcomes."

The offices can be reached via phone, or online and email, and are expected to go live Monday morning.

The goal is for parents to receive an acknowledgment within 48 hours and a response within five days, though more complex cases will take longer.

Markus de Domenico, a Toronto Catholic trustee who represents Etobicoke Centre, said he's "always in favour of having a voice or having a route for parents to express their concerns for their children," but elected officials "played a very vital role. I'm not sure this is going to fill that gap."

He said the offices may be a "stopgap measure" until Education Minister Paul Calandra reveals reforms to school board governance that could include doing away with elected trustees in public boards, but keeping some Catholic and French trustees as required constitutionally.

When Calandra first announced the offices, many in the sector felt they were a first step toward a system with no elected trustees, though the education minister has said the two aren't related.

Calandra has said the vast majority of concerns are already dealt with by staff.

"Better access for parents means better outcomes for students," said Emma Testani, press secretary to Calandra, in a statement.

"Student and Family Support Offices will give families clear answers and timely solutions when it comes to their child's education," she added. "We're going to continue overhauling an outdated school board governance model so that more resources go into classrooms, teachers have better support and students have the best chance to succeed."

But de Domenico said he ran for public office because "there were policies in place that I felt did not help my children with special needs, because I have three of them - and it wasn't the personnel, it wasn't the teacher, it wasn't the spec ed person, or whatever it was. It was the policy. So you need someone to change policies, to modulate them, to listen to parents, and to help parents, and that role is for elected trustees."

At each of the Toronto public and Catholic boards, two staff members have been reassigned to work in the office, and they say no extra costs have been incurred.

It's expected parents might reach out to get an update on school construction or renovations, how to rent out a gym or other space, or to obtain a copy of a transcript, along with school-based concerns, and will be given a reference number.

Boards will be tracking queries as well as response times.