

July Student Trustee Report
Jen Serdetchnaia and Sepideh Soltaninia

STUDENT TRUSTEE REPORT

At this time, Student Trustee S. Soltaninia made the following remarks.

“Good evening Madame Chair, trustees, superintendents, ladies and gentlemen.

I distinctly remember the day I was elected Student Trustee. I came home, ecstatic, and ran through the halls while telling my entire family I had won. I remember my first Ontario Student Trustees’ Association (OSTA) Conference, where I was introduced as ‘the incoming’ and where I felt out of place. I remember meeting Jen and feeling doubtful that we would ever become friends. I remember having reservations, being worried that this position was going to be too stuffy, too professional, too time consuming, too difficult, and simply too much.

Now, I smile at all my former doubts. I could not have been more mistaken. Yes, I still get confused looks when I suggest we have icebreakers at the OSTA conferences, but it has been almost a year since I have felt intimidated or hesitant. Now, looking back, I realize how oblivious I once was. How little I knew about the education system to which I had dedicated so many hours and so much of my life.

Jen and I recently met with the incoming Student Trustees for a very long transitional meeting. In those hours, we tried to place together a list of the issues that, throughout the year, we attempted to tackle, the lessons we learnt and the knowledge we acquired. Although it was strange to see an entire year’s work listed in bullet points, we were proud to share with our two new colleagues some of our accomplishments. We told Ariya and Vithushan of the event we planned, with the York Region Presidents’ Council that brought together student councils from across York Region at a Pizza Hut up in Newmarket, for a Hawaiian night of pizza and networking. We gave them copies of the booklet we created to bring further awareness about the position of Student Trustees, and the monthly newsletters we released, the Student Voice, which features one student’s accomplishments every month. We shared with them the importance of writing reports that address issues and are representative of the student opinion. We told them not to underestimate the power of what they say, that one day a report about student administrator relationships could be handed out at a principals’ training course to teachers becoming school administrators or that a report about private credit schools could be sent by the Director to the Minister’s office. I told them that persistence does pay off, that at a recent OSTA conference the Minister of Education addressed my question about private credit schools by stating that she plans to change the course codes to show that the credit was from a private school. She also stated that such private schools would face stricter regulations and screening. Jen and I also spoke about the Student Trustees’ Award for Character, an idea that was born two years ago, by the then Student Trustees, that we had the privilege of continuing and completing.

The four of us also embarked on executing an idea that Jen and I have been toying with for months. An idea that has been tweaked and changed countless times after consultation with our constituents and the Board's Secondary School ESL Heads. Building Relationships in Diverse Group Environments, or BRIDGE, which is a social tutoring program meant to help new students who are not fluent in English gain academic help while meeting fellow students. It is our intent, with the help of the incoming Student Trustees, to create a guidebook that both students and ESL departments can use to implement this program within their school. We hope that with the creation of such a program in our secondary schools, students who are new to the country can feel welcomed while receiving academic assistance.

Our meeting with Ariya and Vithushan was also a source of reflection. The questions they posed allowed me to examine not only my accomplishments and failures, but how much I have grown over the past year. Such growth could not have been possible without the help of many people at this Board. Firstly, I must thank my co-Trustee, Jen. You are living proof that my instincts about people are terrible. I am proud to call you one of my best friends and a source of inspiration. At the last OSTA conference I learnt that it was rare to have such a close relationship with your co-Trustee. I am fortunate to have had such a great partner and amazing friend. Without your planning, your "let's finish" attitude, and your insight this year would have been very difficult. I am certain that our friendship will last much longer than our term as Student Trustees.

I would also like to thank the Director and his entire team. I am astounded by the number of meetings you attend every year, and further astonished by your dedication to education. Your commitment to students and your insistence on transparency is an integral part of our Board's success. I would like to especially thank Trustee Services who trained us and was a constant source of aid and support throughout our term. Lori, Lisa and Audrey, without your emails, your reminders, and your incredibly quick replies, we would have been lost.

Furthermore, thank you to all the superintendents who listened to our suggestions on policy and answered our many questions. A special thank you to Coordinating Superintendent of Education B. Harper who never treated us as students but as colleagues. Your explanations, guidance, and advice helped us tremendously. Lastly, thank you to the Trustees who always shared their wisdom, be it about prom dresses or policy.

Being a Student Trustee has been an amazing experience. The appreciation for our opinion and comments is extraordinary. I hope that in the future the York Region District School Board continues to value the student voice as it has during my term as Student Trustee.

Thank you."

At this time Student Trustee J. Serdetchnaia made the following remarks.

“Good evening Madame Chair, Mr. Director, fellow trustees, staff, ladies and gentlemen.

Pink Floyd insists that “we don’t need no education” and asks that “teacher leave the kids alone”. Although I am a true believer in the value of classic rock, I could not disagree more.

“We unite in our purpose to inspire and prepare learners for life in our changing world community.” So goes the mission statement of the York Region District School Board. This year I gained true appreciation for the meaning assigned to every single word.

After a year as Student Trustee on the Board, the word that most catches my attention is purpose. At the Board table, every decision must be made with purpose and every action must be taken for a reason.

The notion of purpose is important to me both as a Student Trustee and as a person. While working on the Character Award with Sepideh and the awesome Character Team of Gunter and Steve, I was intent on research by talking to my teachers and my peers about character traits. “Which one do you think is most important?” I would chime over and over again.

My Calculus teacher considered carefully and finally stated that initiative was the most overrated trait on the York Region District School Board list. Instantly I felt defensive –hadn’t I built my whole academic career on initiative? However, it didn’t take long for me to see my teacher’s point. After all, initiative drives students to take action – to start clubs and organizations, to change the system and fight “the man” and to become a part of everything that there is time for in the daylight hours. But where is the purpose in pure initiative? Do we need a brand new Equity Club when there is already an established Multicultural Club? Should students try to fix what isn’t broken in the education system for the pure sake of making any sort of difference? Is it okay to join the Cancer society, the AIDS committee, the Social Justice club and the STAND group to “be involved”?

Although initiative is essential to get things done, it is an empty effort if not driven by purpose. This idea wholly changed my approach to my role as Student Trustee. I went in with the notion that I wanted to be in the pair of Student Trustees that work within the system to change it. I soon realized that this billion-dollar corporation was already focussed on supporting students and that my role was to work toward this common goal as opposed to affect change where it wasn’t needed. At no other time was this realization more clear than as we discussed the need for an official Student Trustee vote at the Board table.

In everything we aim to accomplish, Sepideh and I ask ourselves – “so what?” Why are we doing this? Who will benefit? How is this better than what’s already being done? If you will, we consider the bang for our buck.

Regardless, I do not measure our success as Student Trustees based on the number of initiatives we took nor really on the change we were able to affect. Instead, I look at the difference we made in how well we served. Did we heed student concerns? And I believe the answer is yes.

Day to day, we have received an enormous amount of help. We would like to thank the Character Team – Gunter Meyer and Stephen Rensink – for all of their help with the Character Award. Never have I considered the meaning of the word happiness as carefully as I had with this team.

A huge thank you goes out to the Trustee Services team – Lori Barnes, Lisa Reinhardt and Audrey Ballard. They fielded our countless emails and were constantly understanding of my numerous requests for just one more hour past the deadline.

We would also like to thank the Trustees and Superintendents – you are the reason that the York Region District School Board is one of the most reputable boards in the province. We thank you on behalf of the Board's 110,000 students. Coordinating Superintendent of Education Bob Harper, we really appreciated all of your support. The countless ellipses you include in your emails let us know that you are open to anything we suggest and that you are there to listen.

Finally, I would like to thank Sepideh, my partner in the role of Student Trustee. I could not ask for more in a colleague or in a friend. Sepideh, you are the most passionate and purpose-driven person that I know, so thank you for enriching every single day of my life.

As I struggle to say goodbye to this familiar setting, I think again of the mission statement: "We unite in our purpose to inspire and prepare learners for life in our changing world community." This time, I think of the word unite and I feel better in saying goodbye because I believe we are forever united in our goals and in our purpose. For that, I am deeply grateful. And to Pink Floyd – we do need our education.

Thank you".