

I'm Laura Ankcorn - this is my 6<sup>th</sup> year as a parent at this school and I currently have 3 children enrolled. I love being a part of this community and Park West School, being at the centre, was a major draw for us to move here.

I'm going to start off by telling you about some revelations I've had over the past year or so to help explain how I went from a parent who was assured my children were well served by the school, to an advocate for change.

I always knew the school was busy and likely over capacity given the portables outside, but it wasn't until last year I realized the severity of the issue. When my Primary student was moved to a class with 53 4 and 5 year olds - I felt something was wrong here - I started talking to parents at other schools to find out their kids were in classes of 19 or 20 – something my kids have never experienced.

I started looking a bit deeper to find our school was arguably the most overcrowded in the region. This year we are 140% over capacity, which means there are 240 additional kids using facilities intended for 590. I learned that legislated class cap sizes don't apply to Park West because we don't have the room. I realized how unjust this was for our kids compared to those at other schools.

There is no question that this school is overcrowded – there simply is not enough space for the number of students enrolled. This includes classroom space, the washroom facilities, gymnasium, cafeteria, and all other resource space. This lack of space has a direct impact on our children and the teachers and staff at our school. We've recently had great news that schools will be getting additional resources for inclusive education, this is wonderful and much needed. But where will these extra resources go? We currently have a psychologist and a speech therapist sharing what was a storage room to do one on one work with kids. How is our one resource room functioning? Do staff have the space they need to work with children effectively? Do our children who get support from a storage closet feel valued?

In a recent press conference, the Minister of Education asserted that the school is a healthy and safe environment for our children. I have requested multiple times to the minister's office what regulations are in place to know a school healthy and safe, but to date I have not received an adequate response to these inquiries.

When there are 240 extra children using toilet facilities than the number for which they are intended, I do not feel this is healthy. When children need to go outside unsupervised from a portable to enter the main building just to go to the bathroom, I do not feel this is safe. If there were to be a crisis situation outside the school with a lockdown initiated, do you think the kids in the portables are as safe as those in the main building? I don't. When legislation dictates our youngest children be in classes of 20 or less, but ours are at 27, this is not acceptable. When I hear my kids say their class is too loud, there is not enough room for activities, and they feel cramped in the portables – this isn't right. The portables are about 736 square feet. According to the Department of Education a nominal classroom size starts at 900 square feet – there are up to 27 kids in each of those portables this year, there have been even more in the past, and we're being told they're not cramped? There's plenty of space? It's just not right.

That being said, we all have our own opinions on what is best for our school and our community, and that includes our teachers. The teachers and staff here are phenomenal and I think that is why many of us, myself included, did not see how overcrowding is affecting children.

At the April meeting of the SAC, teachers expressed that:

- Classes are over capacity and staff are challenged due to high numbers of students.
- They are running double gym classes
- There is a lot of wear and tear in the school, especially the washrooms.
- They said there aren't enough washrooms. There is no space for a gender neutral washroom.
- Staff members do not fit in the staff room [I will add here, there are also not washrooms for staff]
- It is a challenging environment – if numbers go down, school success will be greater.

In addition to this parents are saying that:

- The kids are not getting enough gym time or enough time to eat in the cafeteria because of the numbers of students having to filter in and out of these shared spaces.
- At peak times, there are lineups for the bathrooms and some kids choose to wait until they get home.
- Though some kids may enjoy the portable classrooms, there are others who dread going to school every day being in a smaller space outside of their school. Having to ask a buddy to go outside in all weather conditions just to use the washroom is less than desirable.

We know that kids in our youngest grades are not in classes at the cap size of 20 that is legislated for them, and that evidence shows it is these grades where smaller class sizes have the greatest impact. Having the 2 floating teachers to support our overcrowded primary to grade 2 classes only provides our teachers with a total of 1 day a week extra support, whether this be an hour a day, or 2 half days a week, it does not provide the same benefit as having a class of 20 kids or less, as they have in other schools. I've heard from several teachers that they can't teach our children the way they would want to because there is not enough time to give the kids the attention they need. This isn't fair or right for anyone involved.

This year none of our 9 Primary to grade 2 classes are meeting cap sizes, nor are they meeting the "hard cap", which is 2 more than the stated cap. This "hard cap" is in place to allow for flexibility in the legislation to form reasonable class configurations. There is no other school exceeding hard caps in these grade levels to this extent. The grade 1s exceed cap by 7 students, hard cap by 5 in all 3 classes, that's 25% larger than the highest limit allowed by legislation. In grades 3 to 6, 70% of the 13 classes are not meeting cap size, though they are meeting the hard cap of 27, which is an improvement over last year. In Junior High, all grades are under cap. Again, it is our youngest students who are not receiving the benefit of capped classes, as do their peers in other schools in Halifax or elsewhere in Nova Scotia.

I have heard many myths over the past several months, things people believe about this situation that are not true. Some people believe that Park West has more resources than other schools. I confirmed with the HRCE that Park West is not resourced differently than any other school. The portables do not increase the capacity of the school – they are overflow, a temporary solution to house students. Unfortunately our overcrowding is not a temporary issue – this is our long term reality. I have heard about a plan to expand Park West School by building on another pod, however, do you think this is something the Department of Education would entertain given they have committed to building a new Junior High for the area? I am very doubtful of this.

Regarding the capital plan to build another school, construction will not begin until 2020/2021, it takes 3-5 years to build a school. What grade will your child be in 2023? 2025? Will they benefit from this new school? There is no plan to help the kids who are here right now, however there are options. There is room in nearby schools for Junior High students – these schools are running below capacity, there's no need for us to be 40% over. Other schools have made changes to grade configurations and boundaries to best meet the needs of their students – this is nothing new. Just last year Basinview Elementary made the decision to move the grade 6's to another school – they were only 17% over capacity. Their projected numbers for 4 to 5 years down the road have been our reality for years and we've done nothing but add more portables.

There was a boundary review for Park West in 2014, where the decision was made to keep the school as is, by a vote of 3 to 2. Here we are over 4 years later in a much worse situation, our enrollment has increased, there are more portables, less space. Waiting another 5 to 7 years for a change should not be an option.

I believe that the best possible outcome for our children is for this school to function as it was designed within the capacity of the building. The only way I can see to do this is to reconfigure the school to be for grades P to 6. I'm not alone with this opinion, I am one parent of many who feel the same way. If we went through with this change our children would then reap the benefits of smaller class sizes, they would have more room to play, grow and learn. There would be more opportunity for different learning experiences, space for small group work, adapted learning environments, and for a more cohesive school where children are less likely to get lost in the shuffle. This is what I want for my kids and I imagine you would like the same.

It would mean a significant change for grades 7 to 9. Moving to a different school is an adjustment, one most kids in Halifax and Nova Scotia do make at this grade level, and we can make the change as smooth as possible. Yes, it may be an inconvenience, there will be some adjustment, but we can't put this ahead of the best interests of our children. Kids being in a school large enough to accommodate their needs is something all grades would benefit from. This is an interim solution that would benefit all our kids while we await a new school.

I appreciate having the opportunity at this meeting to share the point of view of many parents in our community on the overcrowding situation we are all facing.

Thank you for your time.