

PARK WEST SCHOOL IS DROWNING ~ WE NEED TO TAKE ACTION NOW

I am the mother of a beautiful, 9 year old girl in grade 4 and of a very curious little boy who will be attending primary at Park West School next year. When my daughter was still a baby, I had spoken with several parent's whose children attended Park West School at the time, and they couldn't speak more highly of how mannerly the students were and of the multicultural community it encompassed.

I am also a member of the Parent Teacher Association and have been since my daughter started attending here, 5 years ago. I became a member of the PTA because I felt it was important to build a relationship with the people who would play such an important role in the education and future of my children.

I am so proud to be part of this family. Park West School celebrates diversity in a way that no other school does. My daughter is learning first hand what it means to be accepting. She is learning that she does not have to share in the same beliefs as her fellow man to co-exist. She is learning that she can support others as they celebrate their own beliefs and cultures without compromising her own. This type of education is so rare and is so very precious. It is the reason I chose Park West School to help raise my children. I worry we are at risk of losing what makes our school so special, and that is why I am standing here before you.

I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak. I'd like to use this time to express my concerns about our growing school. I'm not going to throw stats at you, or discuss how we do not meet the mandated caps. You are well aware of our numbers. I just want to share my observations and my perspective on the growing population of our school.

Life throws all sorts of obstacles at us. How we handle them helps to shape the persons we become. Sometimes, you may find yourself in a situation where you just need to survive. And for a short time, that is ok, but at some point you have to find a way out. You have to learn from the situation, and grow stronger by concurring that obstacle. Surviving is just that, Surviving; continuing to exist despite the odds. There is no growth in surviving. It is not an environment where things thrive. It is an ugly environment where resources are limited and everyone is out for themselves. The proud, polite and weak get left behind. I'm not implying Park West School is a sinking ship where it's everyman for himself. We are a proud, united body who is just trying to survive in an ocean of other schools trying to do the same.

When you are in an ocean, surrounded by others who are treading water, you have to thrash about, get attention, demand the resources you need to keep up, else you risk getting left behind. The longer you struggle to keep your head above the water the more focused on just doing that you become... you forget that if you do not scream out for help, you will eventually tire and drown.

I worry that we are so focused on keeping our heads above water that we do not realize the damage that "just surviving" is doing to our school and it's students. I worry that our pride in our ability to manage has clouded the fact that we don't have to. We have the power to solicit change. We do not have to continue to quietly tread water; because that only has one outcome.

Our most vulnerable students are those in the younger grades. Our little ones face a lot of challenges when they first start school. Some of the primary students have never been in a classroom setting, some are coming from daycares where the cap is 8 children per teacher. They are learning to tie their shoes, to dress themselves, and to speak in a large group. Some come home with pee-soaked clothes because they were too shy to ask if they could go to the washroom. School can be a very scary and intimidating place for a 4 or 5 year old. With almost 900 students, with grades from primary to 9, I imagine Park West School

is quite intimidating. But these are struggles any primary student would have, no matter the size of their school.

But, Park West is not just any school; we are busting at the seams. Two years ago, to survive, we put our most vulnerable children in a class of 52 primary students. Grade primary is a lot to handle for both the student and the teacher. Having such a large class, no matter the number of teachers, makes for a very unpleasant first year experience for our littles, and it was not acceptable! I know that was not our proudest moment, but we are never at our best when we are just trying to survive.

This year we continue to manage numbers and struggle to find space for our highest student enrollment yet! In doing so, we have 3 teachers working on small desks in the back room of the library. It's full of storage and several refrigerators; the room is hot and hard to maneuver through. The refrigerators are used by the PTA and when we need access to them, we disrupt those teachers making it even harder for them to work. But they smile, and they are accommodating and forgiving; they are amazing. And they are part of the reason this school is surviving. But this is not acceptable. These teachers have no real place to work, no classroom to set up visuals to help teach our children; they have become a traveling act and that benefits no one.

Due to our overcrowding, the staff has had to get creative, pulling all our available resources and using every inch of space this school has. Because of that, our junior high students can't have their schoolbags with them in the classroom and have traffic lanes in the halls to help manage the congestion so as to avoid fighting.

Panic strikes when I think of what may happen to our school when all of the amazing people who keep it going are gone. No one would argue that we are surviving because of Principal Carter and the amazing people he has surrounding him. But teachers move on to different schools, and principals retire.

The area around our school is expanding, and our school is already bursting at the seams. Our situation is only getting worse and there is no immediate plan to deal with this. We need to start thinking of the future. We need to demand change right now, for our students, both new and continuing; for the teacher's forced to work in less than ideal conditions; who are forced to survive, rather than teach. Change takes time, building a new school takes time; I'm worried Park West School is running out of it.

If we continue to tread water we will surely drown! Our school is in a state of emergency. it's time we start acting like it! We can no longer afford to be quiet, it's time for us to scream out for help.

*Comment added by speaker during brief discussion: We shouldn't worry about the toes we step on, we need to demand the attention of whomever can make change happen. Being polite is getting us no where.

