

Review of the Near North District School Board
Submitted to the Honourable Paul Calandra, Minister of Education
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Contents

I.	Introduction and Mandate	3
II.	Review Process	3
III.	Background.....	4
i.	History of Governance Dysfunction and Leadership Issues.....	5
	2019 Ombudsman of Ontario Investigation.....	5
	2019-2020 Ministry Special Advisors	6
	2024 Ombudsman of Ontario Investigation.....	6
	2025 Ombudsman of Ontario Investigation.....	7
ii.	Chronology - JK-12 Parry Sound School	7
IV.	Findings & Analysis.....	12
i.	Governance.....	13
	Understanding Roles and Responsibilities	13
	Legislated Responsibilities – Director Performance Appraisal.....	13
	Legislated Responsibilities – Ensuring Effective Stewardship of the Board’s Resources.....	14
	Legislated Responsibilities – Declaration of Conflict of Interest.....	16
	Legislated Responsibilities – Develop and Maintain Board Policy	16
	Level of Cooperation among Board Members	17
	Cooperation between the Board and Director of Education	18
ii.	Leadership.....	20
	Relationship between Director and Senior Leadership Team	20
	Director of Education - Communications and Accountability	21
	Human Resources Practices	22
iii.	Delayed Opening of the New JK-12 Parry Sound School	24
	Performance of the Board of Trustees	25
	Performance of the Director of Education	26
	Delayed Opening – Procurement and Oversight.....	28
V.	Conclusions	30
VI.	Recommendations	31

I. Introduction and Mandate

On August 29, 2025, I was appointed by the Minister of Education, the Honourable Paul Calandra, to conduct a review of the Near North District School Board (NNDSB or “school board”)¹ following media reports and concerns raised by parents, community members, and trustees about governance dysfunction at the school board. The Minister initiated this expedited review pursuant to subsection 16(2) of Ontario Regulation 43/10 - Provincial Interest in Education, made under the *Education Act* (the “Act”).

I was directed to examine current governance and leadership issues at the school board, with a focus on accountability, transparency and the school board’s ability to foster public trust in public education. Specifically, I was mandated to review the performance of the school board in the context of the delayed opening of the new JK-12 school in Parry Sound. Finally, I was tasked with providing recommendations to the Minister that will ensure effective, accountable and transparent board governance and leadership at the NNDSB.

II. Review Process

Over the course of this review, I relied on publicly available records as well as documentation provided to me by the NNDSB, including Board of Trustees (“Board”) and Committee meeting agendas and minutes, communications between the school board’s Director of Education, senior leadership team², and elected trustees, and communications from the school board to its communities. I examined correspondence between the Ministry of Education (“ministry”) and the NNDSB pertaining to the new JK-12 Parry Sound school. I also reviewed three Ombudsman Ontario reports stemming from complaints of lack of transparency and problematic governance practices at the NNDSB, as well as a report written by special advisors appointed by a previous Minister of Education in response to leadership and governance concerns at the school board.

When a review is conducted under Ontario Regulation 43/10, the school board has an obligation to cooperate in the review. I must note at the outset of this report that, despite my clear communication with the Director of Education on the need for prompt and complete responses to my requests for documentation, there were ongoing delays. The school board initially withheld documentation I requested, and this issue was only resolved following conversations between the school board’s and the Ministry of Education’s legal counsel. When documentation was shared, many records were incomplete, duplicative or transitory. Other documents were not provided.

In addition to document review, I conducted interviews with all current trustees of the Board, a student trustee, four former trustees, the director of education, and 10 senior board staff³.

¹ In this report, “school board” refers to the school board as a whole, and “Board” refers to the Board of Trustees.

² The senior leadership team refers to the Director of Education, the superintendents and the assistant superintendent.

³ “Senior board staff” refers to senior-level staff, including but not limited to superintendents.

Given the timeframe within which this review was conducted, I did not have the opportunity to speak with many parents and community members, but I did interview representatives from the community organization, Parents for Parry Sound. That organization was founded to advocate for “transparency, accountability, and timely communication from the Near North District School Board regarding the delayed opening of the new K–12 Superschool”. I also relied on media accounts of community concerns in relation to the delayed opening of the new JK-12 school in Parry Sound.

The timeframe for this expedited review did not permit me to interview municipal leaders in relation to their concerns about the new Parry Sound school and their concerns over a lack of responsiveness and communication with the NNDSB. I was, however, provided with documentation by the school board that noted those concerns in detail.

III. Background

The NNDSB main office is located in North Bay and the school board’s jurisdiction spans more than 17,000 square kilometers including Almaguin Highlands, Mattawa, West Nipissing and Parry Sound. The school board serves just over 10,000 students across 28 elementary and seven secondary schools.

There are nine trustees on the NNDSB Board, one of whom is a First Nations trustee appointed to the Board by the First Nations served by the NNDSB as per Ontario Regulation 262/19 – First Nations Representation of Boards. Seven of the nine trustees were new members elected in the last school board election in October 2022. Since the new Board was sworn into office in November 2022, four trustees have resigned; the former Chair resigned in 2024, followed by three more recent resignations – two in June 2025 and one in August 2025. There are two student trustees, one of whom is serving the final year of a two-year term.

I note that since this review commenced, three new trustees have been sworn in; one is a returning trustee and former chair with considerable board experience. A second trustee has extensive governance knowledge and experience supporting elected school boards; the other trustee has no previous board experience or knowledge of governance.

The current Director of Education was appointed in December 2019 and assumed his role on January 6, 2020. His senior administration team consists of three superintendents, one assistant superintendent, and an executive superintendent. There are three additional staff that directly report to the director – the Executive Officer of Corporate Affairs and two executive assistants, one of whom is transitioning out of the position.

The NNDSB main office is in North Bay; that office houses school board administrative staff, two superintendents, the assistant superintendent and the boardroom where trustee meetings take place. The other two superintendents work remotely from Parry Sound. The Director established his office in a building approximately three kilometers from the main board office -

the former Widdifield Secondary School. The Director's Executive Assistant and his Executive Officer of Corporate Affairs also have offices at Widdifield Secondary School. Facility, maintenance and sanitation staff also work out of that site.

While the impetus for this expedited review was the mismanagement of the opening of the new JK-12 school in Parry Sound, concerns over leadership and governance dysfunction in the NNDSB have in fact been long-standing. Most recently, parents, students and community members have been vocal in their frustration over the lack of the NNDSB's transparency and accountability regarding the continuing delays with opening the new JK-12 Parry Sound school. Yet over the last several years, community concerns over a lack of transparency and poor governance led to complaints being filed with the Ombudsman of Ontario; those complaints resulted in three investigations of governance practices in this board in 2019, 2024, and 2025⁴.

Furthermore, a previous Minister of Education appointed two Special Advisors to the NNDSB in 2019 to provide him with advice on how the school board could improve its governance, human resources, and financial accountability practices to enhance public confidence in the school board. In their 2020 final report⁵, the Special Advisors provided advice on how trustees could work more cooperatively with each other, and how the Board could more cooperatively work with the Director of Education. Five years have passed since that report, and the same concerns – governance dysfunction and leadership issues – are once again the focus of concerns about this school board.

i. History of Governance Dysfunction and Leadership Issues

2019 Ombudsman of Ontario Investigation

In July 2019, the Ombudsman of Ontario investigated the NNDSB in response to complaints from parents, teachers and community members regarding a lack of transparency in the decision-making process on a school closure and consolidation. That investigation concluded that the trustees' decision-making process was indeed unfair and lacked transparency, and that trustees' private discussions about the school consolidation and closure were not permitted under the *Education Act*. Furthermore, the Ombudsman found that information and discussions relevant to the decision-making process were not made public ahead of the final decision, which deprived affected communities of the opportunity to meaningfully participate in the process and to understand the reasons for the Board's final decision. Those actions were found to have undermined public confidence and eroded trust between the community and the NNDSB. That 2019 report provided the NNDSB with 14 recommendations to improve meeting

⁴ Dube, Paul, Ontario Ombudsman. (July 2019) Transparency of Near North District School Board's decision to close Widdifield Secondary School after the 2016-2017 Pupil Accommodation Review process "Lessons Not Learned"; Dube, Paul, Ontario Ombudsman. (March 2024) Investigation into a complaint about meetings held by the Near North District School Board's Parry Sound Building Committee on December 14, 2022, January 12, 2023, and February 6, 2023; Dube, Paul, Ontario Ombudsman. (May 2025) Ombudsman Report Investigation into a complaint about a meeting held by the Chair's Council of the Near North District School Board on December 22, 2023

⁵ Joudrie, Wayne and Easton, Wally. (January 2020) Near North District School Board Special Advisors' Final Report

practices and promote increased transparency, fairness, and accountability in its student accommodation process.

2019-2020 Ministry Special Advisors

Later that year, Special Advisors appointed by the Minister of Education conducted a comprehensive examination of governance, leadership, human resources, and financial practices in the NNDSB. The observations and recommendations in that report were based on three months of site visits, community meetings, surveys, and interviews with students, parents, community members, staff, senior leadership and trustees.

The Special Advisors Report, submitted in 2020, concluded that a deficit in leadership was the underlying cause of the lack of public confidence in the school board and the problematic governance, human resources and financial issues facing the NNDSB. That report offered 30 recommendations, including eight recommendations on improving leadership practices, five recommendations to address governance dysfunction, and four to enhance public confidence in the NNDSB.

2024 Ombudsman of Ontario Investigation

Four years later, the Ontario Ombudsman was again investigating complaints at the NNDSB, this time related to closed meetings held by the Parry Sound Building Committee. The mandate of that Committee, established by resolution at a regular meeting held by the Board of Trustees on March 24, 2015, was to monitor the project costs, spending and timely completion of construction of the new JK-12 Parry Sound school. The Ombudsman's investigation found that the Committee held in-camera discussions that did not fit within the *Education Act's* open meeting exceptions. The Ombudsman also determined that the Committee held electronic meetings with no option for the public to attend them in-person which was contrary to section 6(1) of Ontario Regulation 463/97 - Electronic Meetings and Meeting Attendance, under the *Education Act*. That report provided three recommendations to the Parry Sound Building Committee to enhance transparency in its meetings. In response to the report, the NNDSB informed the Ombudsman that they intended "to engage a Special Advisor with the Ministry to assist it in improving its governance framework and practices."⁶

The focus of that 2024 investigation is particularly relevant to this current review of the NNDSB as it demonstrates that the lack of transparency and problematic governance practices related to the new JK-12 Parry Sound school had continued into 2024 despite the Ombudsman's previous investigation and resulting recommendations to the NNDSB five years earlier.

⁶ Dube, Paul, Ontario Ombudsman. (March 2024) Investigation into a complaint about meetings held by the Near North District School Board's Parry Sound Building Committee on December 14, 2022, January 12, 2023, and February 6, 2023, p.18

2025 Ombudsman of Ontario Investigation

The following year, complaints about problematic governance practices were the subject of another Ontario Ombudsman investigation. This investigation focused on meetings of the Chair's Council⁷ and the Ombudsman concluded that the Chair's Council failed to record minutes of the meeting and failed to ensure that a member of the Chair's Council attend the meeting in person contrary to both Ontario Regulation 463/97 - Electronic Meetings and Meeting Attendance and the Board's governance by-laws. The Ombudsman further noted that the Board's actions were contrary to provisions in the Ombudsman Act.

ii. Chronology - JK-12 Parry Sound School

In 2013, the NNDSB's Accommodation Review Committee ("ARC")⁸ made recommendations to close Nobel Public School and McDougall Public School and the Parry Sound High School. Students were to be relocated to a new K-8 elementary school and a new 9-12 high school in one facility with some shared common facilities (e.g., the gym and library).

Based on these recommendations, in 2014, the NNDSB proposed to the Ministry of Education a plan to consolidate the three schools and build a new school.

Through the 2015 School Consolidation Capital Program, the ministry approved the school board's business case and initially allocated \$27.6 million in funding to support the construction of a new JK-12 school in Parry Sound with 1,085 pupil places, originally scheduled to be completed in 2016-2017. The ministry's approval was contingent upon the consolidation of the three schools. Further funding approvals in 2015 and 2017, would add a three-room childcare centre, and an EarlyON room to the new school.

Between 2015 and 2017, approximately 20 sites were assessed for the new school. In 2017, the NNDSB selected the existing Parry Sound High School site as the location for the new school.

Planning and design work was led by the Parry Sound Building Committee and included consultations in 2017-2018 with representatives from the five First Nations served by Parry Sound High School, as well as community members, local employers, school staff and students. Site and environmental studies were also conducted around this time.

In 2020, due to declining enrolment, NNDSB requested - and the ministry approved - a scope change to reduce the number of pupil places from a 1,085-pupil place to an 815-pupil place JK-12 school (238 elementary and 577 secondary). Enrolment trends indicated a future decline, and 815 pupil places would support long-term projections of student enrolment. As a temporary measure to manage peak enrolment beyond the 815 pupil places, the school board also received funding approval to acquire a six-room portapak.

⁷ Although not formally established as a committee, the Ombudsman found that the Chair's Council functioned as one.

⁸ An accommodation review, or pupil accommodation review, is the public consultation process undertaken when a school board is deciding how to reorganize a group of schools to best serve students and to manage underused school space.

In February 2021, the Board hired +VG Architects (The Ventin Group) as architects for the new JK-12 Parry Sound school and work began on the conceptual design based on the revised size of the school. The Parry Sound Building Committee was involved in this phase of the project, and conducted further consultations “to identify operational, pedagogical, staff and student needs in the layout and design” which allowed the committee to “[provide] the best solutions allowable given the existing approved funding allocation and Ministry requirements.”⁹

In June 2021, following presentations of planned designs and program work to the Parry Sound Town Council and community, several municipalities in the Parry Sound area that had previously supported the ARC recommendations in 2013 called for the NNDSB to establish a new ARC to review accommodation needs within the Parry Sound area.

In July 2021, the NNDSB hired a consultant to conduct an independent review of the board’s actions to-date related to the new JK-12 Parry Sound school. The August 2021 report provides a comprehensive history of the planning, approvals and construction of the school. In that report, the consultant notes that “if the Board were to consider the municipalities’ resolutions to establish a new ARC for the Parry Sound area, such an action would continue to delay addressing the accommodation needs within Parry Sound”.¹⁰ The consultant concluded that the NNDSB had “consistently followed its required process”, and cautioned the school board about “inadvertently [creating] expectations that may not come to fruition given funding constraints and Provincial requirements regarding the size of the planned school.”

In the last few months of 2021, school board staff continued discussions with representatives from some First Nations communities, Indigenous youth, as well as school staff members to help inform the design of the new school. With a revised opening date of September 2023, the partial demolition of the Parry Sound High School was underway following ministry approval of increased funding. At this time, the school board also indicated through their website that global supply chain challenges and rising costs from impacts of COVID-19 were affecting the region.

In April 2022, the school board again revised the school’s opening date to September 2024. This delay was communicated on the school board’s *Parry Sound JK-12 Build Community Feedback Report*, a living document on the board’s website used as a primary method of communicating updates about the new JK-12 Parry Sound school. In the months prior, the school board had put the project on pause to work with the Ministry of Education to confirm that the design continued to meet appropriate benchmarks. Upon confirmation, the project resumed, and in July 2022 the NNDSB submitted the required documentation and drawing package for the request for Approval to Proceed (ATP) to tender for the consolidation of the three schools into the new JK-12 Parry Sound school.

⁹ Dallip, Lygia. (July 2021). New Parry Sound JK – 12 School Project -- Final Report, p.22

¹⁰ Dallip, Lygia. (July 2021). New Parry Sound JK – 12 School Project, p.24

While the school board's application for ATP was under review by the Ministry of Education, staff from the Conseil scolaire public du Nord-Est de l'Ontario (CSPNE) visited McDougall Public School and communicated with NNDSB staff and the Director of Education over the summer requesting further information to support discussions with the ministry about the potential purchase of the school. In October 2022, CSPNE indicated that they would not be proceeding further with the purchase of McDougall Public School.

This same month, the NNDSB provided an anticipated timeline to the ministry for the new school to open in September 2024 but raised concerns that any further delay in receiving approval to proceed to tender would result in the school opening in September 2025. In December 2022, the ministry approved the school board's request to proceed to tender with a funding amount of \$43,950,510. The ministry also granted approval to use net Proceeds of Disposition from the future sale of McDougall Public School and Nobel Public School and two other schools. This again reaffirmed the closure of McDougall Public School.

In November 2022, the Board of Trustees began their new term of office. Seven of the nine trustees were newly elected.

In March 2023, a letter of concern signed by approximately 50 staff members from the Parry Sound High School was sent to NNDSB. Staff expressed frustration over the new school and over the lack of responsiveness by the board: "We have felt, and continue to feel, like our voices have not been listened to [...] It is important our voices are heard; we do not want our silence, imposed by a communication protocol, to be perceived as tacit approval [...] Our local municipal councils have clearly expressed significant concern to you regarding this planned project. NNDSB families and community members have also expressed concern. We echo and amplify these concerns." Senior board staff responded that the "concerns addressed in the letter are outside of the roles and duties of the staff at Parry Sound High School"; the letter of concern was not shared with the Board.

In May 2023, the ministry provided written approval for the school board to award the tender for construction of the new JK-12 Parry Sound school to consolidate Parry Sound High School, Nobel Public School and McDougall Public School, as well as the childcare centre and EarlyON room, for a total of \$58.5 million. The following month, the school board selected Van Horne Construction Ltd as the contractor for the project. The expected school opening was now scheduled for September 2025. This was announced through a media release posted on the board's New JK-12 Parry Sound School webpage. That was the last media release until August 7, 2025.

Construction began in July 2023 and by the end of the year, the project was approximately two weeks ahead of schedule.

By the end of 2023, some trustees began raising concerns from the Parry Sound community that the new JK-12 Parry Sound school would not be big enough to meet the area's needs.

In January 2024, following approval from the Board, the Parry Sound Building Committee's Terms of Reference changed to reflect that the committee would only meet as required. The Committee Chair has not called a meeting since December 2023.

On April 9, 2024, Board Chair and Zone 2 trustee Erika Lougheed resigned.

At the June 11, 2024, Board meeting, the Board passed a motion to establish an ad hoc committee to gather data on the McDougall Public School area and report back before the end of June 2025 – it is unclear whether that work was completed. At that same meeting, Dale Robinson, Mayor of the Municipality of McDougall made a deputation about improving communications between the NNDSB and the West Parry Sound community.

In October 2024, the Board passed a motion to send a letter to the Ministry of Education asking to keep McDougall School open and allow NNDSB to reconfigure the new school build in Parry Sound. The Board requested a response from the ministry by February 2025; however, prior to the writ period leading up to the provincial elections, a response was not sent to NNDSB.

In November 2024, the school board confirmed in the *Parry Sound JK-12 Build Community Feedback Report* that the new school was on track to open in September 2025. The update also included enrolment information and a commitment to “excellence in communication”. Although this document makes references to providing construction progress, no such updates were provided.

By March 2025, the build phase was approximately 70% complete and committees comprised of board and school staff were established in preparation for various aspects of the move. A Consolidation and Move Management Plan was shared with staff in the affected schools. At the same time, the Director of Education told the Ministry of Education that the Board had submitted a notice of motion to keep McDougall Public School open and raised questions about the implications of such a decision.

On March 17th, the ministry responded to the Director of Education and asked that NNDSB “defer the motion and debate until the ministry has the time to review these questions and confirm the implications”. The next day, the Board received a staff report that contained updated enrolment figures and a simulation confirming that the new JK-12 Parry Sound school would have sufficient space to accommodate students even at peak enrolment, as well as financial and legal implications of reversing the original 2013 decision to consolidate the three schools. After a brief discussion amongst themselves, trustees voted 7-2 to keep McDougall Public School open for the 2025-2026 school year.

On April 14, 2025, Minister Calandra sent a letter to the Board Chair in response to the Board's decision regarding McDougall Public School. The Minister stated: “it is my hope that you and your board will realize the gravity of your decision and reverse it quickly, without the need for the ministry to take further steps [...]” On April 17, 2025, the Chair and Vice-Chair, without

approval of the Board, replied to the Minister confirming their firm stance on the decision to keep the school open for the 2025-2026 school year.

In May 2025, media reported that significant work still needed to be completed on the new JK-12 Parry Sound school and that the NNDSB did not have the necessary building permits to complete the build.¹¹ Later that month, Minister Paul Calandra toured the site of the new JK-12 Parry Sound school.

In June 2025, the Minister confirmed that students from kindergarten to grade 6 would remain at McDougall Public School until December 2025. The school board was expected to provide regular updates to the ministry and to parents and was directed to prepare and submit a detailed contingency plan in July in the event that the new school would not be ready in September.

On June 10, 2025, the Board accepted the resignations of trustees Chantal Phillips and Jeanie Fuscaldo. At this meeting, the Board also voted against declaring Nobel Public School as surplus, contrary to the Board's previous agreement to close the school as a condition for the new JK-12 Parry Sound school.

On July 20, 2025, senior board staff raised concerns with senior board leadership that the new school would not be ready in September. Later that week, senior leadership confirmed with the Minister that the school opening would be delayed. The Minister directed the NNDSB to submit their contingency plan by July 30th, noting his expectation that board to act with urgency and transparency.

On August 7, 2025, the NNDSB announced on their website that "NNDSB is unable to confirm when the new school will be ready to welcome students."

On August 13, 2025, the board confirmed "that the new facility will not be completed in time for the first day of school in September 2025." This communication was sent directly to families of the Parry Sound High School and was posted on the school board's website.

By August 15, 2025, the NNDSB provided the ministry with the contingency plan for the 2025-26 school year and released the plan publicly. That same day, Parry Sound parents and students rallied in the community over the delayed school opening and lack of transparency and assurance for students' safety returning to a partially demolished school.

On August 19, 2025, a special meeting of the Board was held to discuss the status of the new build and the contingency plan, as well as the swearing in of two newly appointed trustees, Jay Aspin and John Arkwright. A motion was also brought forward to request that the Ministry of Education investigate the governance and administrative practices of the NNDSB. Although it was an unduly constituted meeting because the Director of Education was absent, the Board proceeded and voted in favour of the motion. On August 25, 2025, the Chair issued a public

¹¹ Mendler, Andrew. (May 9, 2025) "[Parry Sound super school still without permits](#)". [My Parry Sound Now](#).

apology on behalf of the Board of Trustees regarding “recent events concerning the unfair treatment of NNDSB administration.”

On August 26, 2025, one week before the first day of school, NNDSB announced it would move Parry Sound High School students to remote learning because the school was not yet ready to be occupied.

On August 28, 2025, Julie Bertram resigned from the Board.

On August 29, 2025, Minister Calandra sent a letter to the Director of Education requesting it to be shared with parents “as soon as possible”. The letter announced the governance review of the NNDSB. This letter has yet to be shared directly with parents or through the school board’s website.

On September 9, 2025, Krista Messenger was sworn in as a newly appointed trustee.

On September 10, 2025, the school board announced that students could return to Parry Sound High School on September 15.

IV. Findings & Analysis

Effective school board governance is demonstrated by a Board’s focus on its mandate, transparent and evidenced-informed decision making, effective use of resources, responsible financial stewardship, and accountability to the communities served by the school board.

School boards that govern themselves in a manner that engenders public confidence have a steadfast focus on student achievement and wellbeing, allocate resources based on student need, use data to inform decisions, and engage with - and are responsive to - the communities they serve. Well-governed school boards have elected leaders and senior administrators that have a clear and shared understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities, work respectfully and collaboratively in the service of the students and communities they serve, and are accountable to those communities and to the provincial government who funds district school boards.

I was mandated to examine governance and leadership issues at the NNDSB, and to do so I assessed trustees’ and the Director of Education’s understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities, including their responsibilities set out in legislation and regulations, as well as responsibilities dictated by principles of good governance. I also assessed the level of cooperation amongst trustees, between the Board and the Director of Education, and amongst the senior leadership team. Finally, I reviewed the Board’s and the senior leadership team’s actions in relation to the delayed opening of the new JK-12 Parry Sound school.

I will first offer my general observations on the state of governance and leadership in the NNDSB, and then provide my observations on the school board’s management of the opening of the new JK-12 Parry Sound school.

i. Governance

Understanding Roles and Responsibilities

The 2022 school board election resulted in seven new trustees serving on the nine-person Board. All but one of those new trustees had little to no prior experience serving on a board. Two of those new trustees campaigned on a platform to keep McDougall and Nobel schools open, despite the previous Board's decision to close those schools and proceed with the new JK-12 school in Parry Sound.

Throughout my interviews with the current trustees serving on the Board - as well as former trustees who had served on and resigned from the Board in the 2022-2026 term of office - the majority of trustees demonstrated only a superficial understanding of their roles and responsibilities as individual trustees and the role and responsibilities of the Board as a whole. A notable exception was the former chair who did have previous Board experience and did demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of board governance; she resigned from the Board in 2024 due to frustration with ongoing governance and leadership dysfunction. While others who had the benefit of a longer tenure on the Board were certainly more knowledgeable of their responsibilities and understood and respected the distinct roles of trustees and the senior leadership team, they have been in the minority since the 2022-2026 term of office began.

The Board has recently made three appointments to fill vacancies. I note that one of those trustees has previously served on this Board and has extensive experience and expertise in board governance. Another recent appointment also demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of governance and has prior experience supporting this Board as a former staff person.

With the exception the recent appointments, I asked trustees about professional development they received when they first took office. All of those trustees referenced supports offered through the Ontario Public School Boards Association (OPSBA) as well as professional development provided by external consultants brought in by the board. With the exceptions noted above, despite those supports, there was little evidence of any clear, comprehensive understanding of the role and responsibilities of individual trustees or the Board of trustees. I concur with the observation of one trustee that "the majority of the new Board were inexperienced and didn't know about governance," and some of them "didn't want to learn".

Legislated Responsibilities – Director Performance Appraisal

A key legislative duty of the Board is to monitor the performance of the Director of Education. The current Director of Education is in his sixth year in this position and ought to have had five completed performance appraisals, and the sixth appraisal should be underway. The assessment of the director's performance since 2024 should have been conducted in compliance with Ontario Regulation 83/24 – Director of Education Performance Appraisal. I found that the Board was not compliant with the regulation for the 2024-2025 director

performance appraisal year and to date, the Board has not met the requirements for the 2025-2026 cycle. While the Board has a Director Performance Appraisal (DPA) Committee, none of the trustees, including those on the DPA Committee, demonstrated an understanding of the appraisal process required under Ontario Regulation 83/24. I note this in the context of the trustees' acknowledgment of the professional development provided by OPSBA which includes an instructive and current module on director performance appraisal.

While the failure of the trustees to have knowledge of - and act in accordance with - the regulatory requirements for the DPA is indeed concerning, the process that the Board has used to assess the director's performance is even more problematic. That process involves trustees providing feedback by way of a questionnaire, which is then reviewed by the DPA Committee. Some trustees indicated that the Director's performance rating is discussed at the Board table, while others indicated that the rating is simply brought to the table by the DPA Committee with the Director present for approval without discussion. The Director of Education also attends DPA Committee meetings, including the discussions to determine his rating, and I heard some accounts that he reviews the questionnaire results along with the trustees. While the Director could not recall doing so, one trustee shared that in the course of determining the performance rating, the Director brought legal and contractual considerations to the attention of the Committee. One trustee said the Director "is sitting in and directing his performance appraisal, using legal to defend it all." The Director also confirmed that he discussed his contract at DPA Committee meetings.

In addition to the Board's failure to comply with Ontario Regulation 83/24, I find the process used to assess the performance of the Director to be lacking in integrity and to be compromised by the inclusion of the Director in Board discussions on the determination of his own performance rating. While discussions between the DPA Committee and the Director are indeed appropriate during the year and at the time the Board delivers its rating to the Director, it is another matter entirely to have the Director involved in discussions to determine the rating. While the Director stated he did not have confidence in the ability of the Board to conduct a performance review, it is difficult to comprehend how an employee would not be concerned with the ethics of involving themselves in what ought to be confidential and frank discussions of their performance.

I also find that the Board has conflated the performance appraisal of the Director of Education, the only employee who reports directly to the Board, with discussions of his terms of employment, specifically his salary. This further undermines the integrity of the performance appraisal process and is a highly questionable human resources practice.

Legislated Responsibilities – Ensuring Effective Stewardship of the Board's Resources

Evidence of this conflation is found in the DPA Committee's report and motion to increase the Director's salary in 2024. Several people I interviewed raised concerns about the Director's contract renewal and most recent salary increase. Despite numerous requests, the Board did not provide me with a copy of the Director's current contract. However, even without the

contract, the records that are available indicate that when the original contract was signed in 2020, the director's salary was \$171,000. Later that year, the NNDSB underwent a restructuring of its senior leadership team based on recommendations from the Special Advisors' Final Report and the Director's salary was subsequently increased to \$221,000¹².

In January 2024, the Board passed a motion to extend the Director's contract. No detail was provided in the motion. At a July 15, 2024, Committee of the Whole closed session, the Board discussed the "Director's Performance Appraisal Compensation Report," which was "endorsed and supported by"- and seemed to be written on behalf of - the DPA committee. This closed session was meant to be an opportunity for the Board, as the director's employer, to determine whether to increase the salary of their employee. Although one trustee requested that the Director be excused for this discussion, five out of seven trustees present voted for him to stay in the room.

The report indicates that the salary increase was discussed in the context of the work of the DPA committee. Although one trustee asked that the compensation report be deferred, "noting it can be considered outside the DPA process and that more data can be gathered," she was told there was enough data in the report. The report provides rationale for a 37.48% increase as a salary "correction" to ensure NNDSB is "fair and equitable" and "prudent". Part of the justification for the increase were the additional duties taken on by the Director due to the restructuring; I note however that those additional duties appear to be the basis for the salary increase in 2020. Neither the report nor the trustees' discussion appear to consider the Board's duty to ensure effective stewardship of the school board's resources or requirements under the *Broader Public Sector Executive Compensation Act* (BPSECA). After minimal discussion, the Board voted in favour of increasing the director's salary to \$303,830.80 to take immediate effect.

Despite my requests, I was not provided with a copy of the Director's current contract. Regardless, I share the concerns that trustees and staff have raised about the salary adjustment and the process followed to approve the salary increase. These questionable practices, including the Board's apparent disregard of their fiduciary responsibilities, warrant a closer review of the Director's contract and compensation.

I also note that it was brought to my attention that on at least two occasions, the Director's corporate card was used by a family member for personal use. It is the Chair's responsibility to approve the director's expenses, and the Chair did confirm that when she questioned these expenses, she was assured that the Director intended to reimburse the school board for those purchases. Corporate cards are intended to be used solely in relation to school board business;

¹² Though not attempting to interpret legislation and whether the NNDSB was in compliance, I note that the *Broader Public Sector Executive Compensation Act* (BPSECA), which imposes salary freezes, also contemplates permissible salary increases based on bona fide executive restructuring.

it is unacceptable that the Director allowed his corporate card to be used for personal purchases, irrespective of his intent to reimburse the school board.

What is equally, if not more, troubling is that when I asked about what checks and balances are used to ensure compliance with ministry and school board expense guidelines, I was given a vague response about making a determination based on whether the amount seemed “realistic.” This indicates a lack of understanding of the role and responsibility of the Chair and does not give confidence in the financial oversight of the Director’s expenses.

Legislated Responsibilities – Declaration of Conflict of Interest

During this current term of office, no trustee has declared a conflict of interest at a Board or Board Committee meeting. Under the *Municipal Conflict of Interest Act*, which applies to school board trustees, any Board member who has a pecuniary interest, whether direct or indirect, in any matter being considered by the Board shall not use their office to influence any decision or recommendation. The trustees on the Board, all of whom referenced the professional development resources available to them through OPSBA and through external consultants, had access to information on the application of the *Municipal Conflict of Interest Act*. Accordingly, they ought to have been aware of their obligation to declare a conflict of interest if they or their parent, spouse, or child had a direct or indirect pecuniary interest in relation to a matter before the Board.

During my interviews, I heard concerns that a trustee whose spouse is a teacher in McDougall Public School failed to declare a conflict of interest in advance of discussions and decisions before the Board relating to keeping McDougall Public School open. I confirmed with that trustee that they do in fact have a spouse teaching at that school, that they did take part in Board discussions on the matter of the school closing, and because they did not view this as a conflict of interest, they did not make such a declaration. The failure of that trustee to seek confirmation on whether he was in fact in a conflict of interest reflects the willful disregard of legal obligations and good governance practices. Although several trustees raised this case of an undeclared conflict of interest, none filed a code of conduct complaint against that trustee. Such behaviour, on all parties, reflects poorly on the Board and undermines public confidence.

Several trustees also suggested that another trustee failed to declare a conflict of interest. That circumstance involved a non-financial relationship between the NNDSB and an organization that is the employer of the trustee. I received Board minutes that confirmed that this trustee appropriately declared a conflict of interest. I note that despite evidence to the contrary, the allegations that that this trustee failed to declare a conflict of interest further demonstrates the level of distrust and fractured relationships among trustees on the Board.

Legislated Responsibilities – Develop and Maintain Board Policy

Under the Education Act, Boards are required to develop and maintain policies that promote the school board’s goals and encourage students to pursue their educational goals. Although the Act does not specify how school boards should develop and maintain policies, school boards

typically follow a collaborative process led by trustees with support from the Director of Education and senior school board staff. To support transparency and accountability, Boards are expected to conduct this process in an open way, with input from the public through a consultation process.

The NNDSB's Governance Policy 202: Development of By-Laws, Policies and Administrative Guidelines aligns with these principles, requiring that all policies of the school board be reviewed on a four-year schedule with a stakeholder consultation period of 30 calendar days. I found the Board to be in contravention of its own policy; none of the policies have been updated since 2020. Though some trustees were vague and unclear about their involvement in policy review, they confirmed that the Board initiated the policy review process, led by a third-party in 2023-24. That process had since stalled, and I was assured that the Board intends to resume the work in the near future.

As a whole, trustees did not seem concerned by the fact that their policy review cycle was stalled and that they were not fulfilling one of their duties under the *Education Act*. In general, trustees did not recognize that their governance manual does not reflect legislative and regulatory changes that occurred during their term of office, specifically regarding trustee code of conduct, Director of Education performance review, and electronic meetings. This is consistent with my observation that trustees have a limited understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

Level of Cooperation among Board Members

My observations on the relationship among Board members are based on the Board as it was constituted at the beginning of this current term of office, November 2022. As previously noted, there have been recent appointments to fill vacancies. With these new members, I heard cautious optimism about the ability of this Board to function in a more productive, cooperative, and professional manner.

Prior to those recent appointments, this Board was inexperienced and needed on-the-ground support so that Board business could be conducted in accordance with good governance practices and in compliance with legislative, regulatory and school board policy requirements. As I have previously noted, trustees did have access to professional development and opportunities to learn about principles of good governance, roles and responsibilities, legal obligations, and school board policy and bylaws. Despite those supports, I was told that rules of order were not observed, motions were brought forward without proper notice, and discussions and requests for information involved operational rather than governance matters. However, in addition to that professional development, this inexperienced Board - led for a period by an inexperienced Chair - needed governance expertise to guide Board and Committee meetings; that expertise should have been provided by the Secretary of the Board. Based on interviews and Board minutes, I note that at times the Director did attempt to provide guidance to the

Board. However, because of the fractured relationship between the Director and most of the trustees, those attempts may not have been perceived as being provided in good faith.

In addition to that lack of hands-on guidance, the dysfunction at Board meetings can be attributed to several trustees who, despite having access to resources to support effective governance, conducted themselves in a manner that was contrary to their obligations as members of this Board. I was told that there was intentional disruption or filibustering when some trustees realized that the direction the Board was taking was at odds with their individual positions. I note that a former Chair, who attempted to enact good governance practices, resigned in frustration part way through her term of office.

Trustees and staff alike confirmed that this is a dysfunctional and divided Board. I was repeatedly told that some trustees had “personal agendas” or “positions” which created obstacles that prevented this Board to function cohesively and cooperatively. One trustee observed that the dysfunction was due to “people feeling that they were individual Board members, not part of Board proper” and that they never “worked as a whole”. A former trustee described other Board members as “pretty useless”, others observed that this Board never “clicked” and was “not harmonious”. I was told that relationships deteriorated during the term of office and some trustees were focused on obstructing Board business and “tearing down” the Board. One trustee observed that conflict at the Board table has gone on for too long and has “snowballed into an avalanche.”

I find that in addition to the inexperience of most of the trustees, there were several trustees who could be considered “bad actors” insofar as they conducted themselves in a manner that was at odds with the interests of the Board and their responsibility to uphold Board decisions. Those trustees, who advocated to keep two schools open contrary to a previous Board motion, willfully disregarded information provided to them from the professional senior staff and relied on other sources of data that did not benefit from any scrutiny to further their position.

There is a lack of professionalism, collaboration and respect among trustees and despite the efforts of some trustees who were in the minority, this Board has not governed itself in a manner that upholds public confidence.

Cooperation between the Board and Director of Education

A hallmark of effective school board governance is a respectful, collaborative, and productive relationship between the Board and Director of Education. I find that such a relationship does not exist in the NNDSB. In fact, the level of distrust and animosity between the Board and the Director is so entrenched that it is challenging to see a path forward. However, with the recent appointment of three new trustees to the Board, there may be an opportunity to reset this relationship.

I find the relationship between the Director and the Board as constituted from November 2022 to September 2025 to be fractured to the point of being beyond repair. Both the Board and the Director bear responsibility for this dysfunction. Trustees told me that they believed that the

Director withheld information from them; that distrust eventually extended to the rest of the senior leadership team. The Director and senior leadership team told me that the trustees' requests for information were excessive and often operational in nature. A collaborative and professional relationship between the Chair and the Director would have helped to mitigate those tensions and frustrations; such a relationship does not exist. Instead, trustees' frustrations with perceived delays or non-responses to their requests built over time, and the senior board staff found the demands on their time to compile reports that were, at times, operational matters, similarly frustrating.

The extent of this dysfunction and these fractured relationships played out at the August 19th, 2025, special Board meeting which was intended, in part, to discuss the status of the new JK-12 Parry Sound school and the school board's contingency plan for students. Just prior to the meeting, a trustee brought forward a motion that called for the Ministry of Education to "conduct an investigation into the withholding of operational and financial information from trustees and any systemic or structural barriers that may be preventing the Board of Trustees from fulfilling their statutory responsibilities".

When the Director became aware of that motion, he informed the Chair by email that neither he nor his staff would attend the meeting "due to the nature and content of the Notice of Motion." He also cautioned in that email that "both slander and defamation are matters for which there can be personal liability." When the Chair received the email from the Director informing her that he was not attending the meeting, she tried to contact him; he did not respond. Out of frustration, the Chair informed the Director's executive assistant that she was resigning; that resignation was later withdrawn. Though staff were not present to speak to the status of the new school or the newly released contingency plan, the meeting nonetheless proceeded. The Board passed the motion calling for an investigation and two trustees who had been appointed to the Board were sworn in at that meeting.

The meeting was subsequently determined not to have been duly constituted because neither the Director nor his delegate were in attendance. The fact that the meeting had proceeded despite the required presence of the Director demonstrates this Board's lack of understanding of – and adherence to – basic governance practices and legislated requirements. The motion that was brought forward just before the meeting began reveals the fractured and dysfunctional relationship between the Board and the Director and school board staff. That this dysfunction played out in public further eroded confidence in this Board's ability to provide the leadership that the NNDSB community deserves.

The following week, on August 25th, the Chair issued a statement apologizing for the Board's treatment of the "NNDSB administration" and stated that the Board's actions "did not reflect the standards of fairness, professionalism and collaboration that our communities expect of us." The statement included a commitment to "strengthening governance practices." I did not hear of any efforts the Board is undertaking to meet this commitment.

ii. Leadership

In 2020, the Minister’s Special Advisors on the NNDSB found “significant shortcomings in the areas of communications, governance and human resources practices” and attributed those issues to a “lack of effective leadership”.¹³ I find that there is a continued absence of strong, visible and accountable leadership from the Director of Education, and that is, to a great extent, at the core of the governance dysfunction and the erosion of public trust in this school board.

I must note, however, that I found that every superintendent on the NNDSB senior leadership team brings expertise, professionalism, and a commitment to serving students to their respective roles. I find that they work collaboratively and, despite the fractured relationship with the Board of Trustees and the lack of visible leadership from the Director of Education, this is an executive leadership team that is competent and committed to the NNDSB.

I have found that the deficit of leadership noted in 2020, under the previous Director of Education, still applies today and continues to prevent this school board from securing the confidence of the communities it serves. At the root of this deficit is a Director who has not demonstrated the visible and accountable leadership that is expected – and indeed required – of his position. I have found that the Director of Education has not demonstrated an appreciation of the importance of visible leadership with his Board, staff, or the parents and communities served by the school board. The Director’s leadership style was characterized as “absent”, “peripheral”, and “in the shadows”, and it has not served this school board well, particularly in the context of the delayed opening of the new Parry Sound school.

This *leadership in the shadows* is evidenced by the extraordinary choice of the Director not to work at the main school board office, but rather several kilometers away in an unused school. Staff commented that they would have expected the Director to be working in the main school board office alongside his senior leadership team and school board staff, and further noted that the Director’s absence from the main school board office did have an impact on his relationship with senior staff. The Director did not understand the troubling optics of his choice nor the impact that it had on his ability to establish relationships with staff at the school board office, including members of his senior leadership team. While the Director justified his choice to have his office in Widdifield Secondary School due to a lack of space in the main school board office, this claim appears to have little merit.

Relationship between Director and Senior Leadership Team

I have been mandated to provide observations and recommendations on how the NNDSB can ensure cooperation between the Director of Education and the school board’s senior staff to provide good governance and leadership. As noted above, I have found that the overwhelming perception among staff is that the Director is essentially a shadow leader. While the Director described his relationship with his senior leadership team as “pretty good”, I heard that

¹³ Joudrie, Wayne and Easton, Wally. (January 2020) Near North District School Board Special Advisors' Final Report, p1

relationship described by others as “distant”, “unique”, and “not engaged”. I heard staff struggle to understand why a director who had the potential and the ability to be a strong, visible leader instead chooses to act otherwise. The Director suggested that he “distributes leadership”; that however is often experienced as diffused accountability. The Director, who was described as “removed”, does not provide the visible leadership that is needed to motivate and lead senior staff. Staff confidence in the Director is reserved at best.

The senior leadership team, with their Director, holds regular meetings called “Executive Council”. I found that the Director was more often than not absent from his Executive Council meetings, which is further evidence of a leader disconnected from senior leadership team. In fact, I was told that the Director only attends approximately 25% of those meetings. As a result, the decision-making process at the senior executive level of the school board is often hindered. In addition to delaying that process, the Director does not have the benefit of participating in discussions of key issues facing the school board. Despite the regular absence of their leader at these key meetings, the senior leadership team works collaboratively to ensure that decisions are made in a timely manner, sometimes without the Director’s input. I was informed that the senior leadership team has found ways to make decisions and carry out their work effectively despite the absence of leadership from the Director.

Director of Education - Communications and Accountability

The inaccessibility of the Director was a consistent theme in my interviews with trustees, staff, and parent representatives. Trustees and staff told me that it is often challenging to contact the Director, and this unavailability hinders school board business, including decision-making and timely communications. I was told that his executive assistant often conveys messages to staff and trustees rather than the Director himself. While it is certainly reasonable to expect that some degree of gatekeeping would occur at this most senior level, the consistency of this observation certainly aligns with and contributes to the perception of this Director working on the periphery.

Like many school boards, the NNDSB has a communications protocol that directs parents and community members to first address issues at the school level with the teacher, principal and school superintendent and escalate if needed; the school board’s protocol does not involve direct communication to or from the Director of Education. The Director disputed the suggestion that his lack of direct communication with parents and the NNDSB community leads to a perception of a non-transparent and unaccountable school board; he referred to the need to follow the communications protocol. He also suggested that information is available on the school board’s public website and that information on the new Parry Sound school is contained in the *Parry Sound JK-12 Build Community Feedback Report*. That report has been updated on an ongoing basis since 2021; the Director last signed off on an update in 2022 and subsequent updates are attributed to the Communications Department.

A communications protocol should facilitate, not hinder, communication with parents. I find that the Director’s reliance on and strict adherence to the communications protocol is

detrimental to his ability to establish relationships and is used to circumvent his responsibility to communicate directly with members of the communities he serves. It also demonstrates a lack of appreciation that an essential component of a Director of Education's job is to be an accountable, visible and transparent leader.

Human Resources Practices

Pursuant to my mandate to examine the Director of Education's performance in relation to his duties under the *Education Act* and any other applicable legislation, regulations, policies, guidelines or directives, I conducted a review of senior level human resources practices at the school board, focusing specifically on hiring and compensation. I found those practices to be lacking in transparency and fairness, and they raised concern that the compensation of the Director of Education and some members of the senior leadership team may not be compliant with the *Broader Public Sector Executive Compensation Act, 2014*, and *Ontario Regulation 406/18 - Compensation Framework Regulation*. With respect to the establishment of senior and executive level positions, and the subsequent recruitment and remuneration of those positions, the Director of Education has not conducted himself in a manner that aligns with reasonable and fair human resources practices. Such practices do not foster confidence among school board staff and undermine the integrity of the office of Director of Education.

Almost immediately upon assuming his position in 2020, the Director created a new senior position – the Corporate Affairs Officer. The job posting was vague and unclear as to actual responsibilities of this position. This senior level position, reporting directly to the Director, was posted for four business days - February 28th to March 5th, 2020. There was one internal applicant - an individual who had a previous working relationship with the Director. When I asked the Director if he considered reposting this senior position for a longer duration given that the four-day posting attracted only one applicant, the Director responded that he had assumed no one was interested in applying. Within six months of assuming the position, based on available information, it appears that the level of remuneration for this position, which did not require supervisory officer qualifications, was higher than the salary of some superintendents.

The Corporate Affairs Officer position title changed in 2024 to Executive Officer of Corporate Affairs. The Director explained that the position title changed in response to expanded system needs and concerns raised by the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC). According to the Director, the "OPC compelled us to remove the [Corporate Affairs Officer] position from the principal classification because of the additional roles/responsibilities." The Director informed me that the duties changed with the new position title, although those changes "were not formally written down".

According to the NNDSB senior level organization chart provided to me by the Director's office, the Executive Officer of Corporate Affairs is responsible for, among a number of duties, "public image", "community liaison", "grants and ministry reporting", "leadership development" and "other projects as determined by the Director". Especially relevant to this review is that this position is also responsible for communications; the communications staff in the NNDSB report

directly to the Executive Officer of Corporate Affairs. Given that a lack of transparent communication is at the centre of this school board's current problems, it is relevant to note the Executive Officer of Corporate Affairs does not have any expertise or experience in strategic communications.

As to the level of remuneration associated with this position, I was told by the Director that it was established at the system principal level. However, the salary associated with this position exceeded the salary band of a system principal position. The Director explained that the salary reflects the fact that the Executive Officer of Corporate Affairs "takes on contracts" in addition to her regular duties. I did not find that explanation to be plausible. Staff that I interviewed confirmed that they did not fully understand the responsibilities of the Executive Officer of Corporate Affairs, and I appreciate why some questioned the compensation level of this position which is higher than staff with supervisory officer qualifications.

I find that the establishment of this position lacked clarity and legitimacy, and the very questionable recruitment and hiring practices followed to fill this position demonstrate poor judgement on the part of the Director of Education. I further find that the level of remuneration, which may not be consistent with transparent and fair hiring practices and may not be compliant with executive compensation restraint measures in law, negatively impacted the relationship between the senior leadership team and the Director. It is problematic that the Director did not anticipate the impact his actions would have on his senior leadership team.

In February 2025, the Director created a new position - Executive Superintendent. I requested a job description for that position but received none. Instead, the Director shared that the executive superintendent had "additional responsibilities to support the business departments and the Parry Sound crisis". The Director confirmed that there was no job posting or transparent recruitment process followed for filling this position, the second-highest level in the NNDSB. Two superintendents expressed interest in the position, and the Director confirmed that his selection was based on seniority and the geographic location of the successful applicant. As to the level of remuneration for this new executive superintendent position, the Director's office stated that "a stipend was provided in line with the additional responsibilities"; the Human Resources department at the school board subsequently confirmed that the salary was a 16% increase to the incumbent's previous salary.

It is not unreasonable to expect that the recruitment for the second most senior level position in a school board would be conducted in accordance with transparent, fair, and ethical human resources practices. In fact, the confidence of school board staff relies on such practices. The creation of this position, created with urgency to respond to a "crisis", demonstrates a lack of any strategic human resources planning. As with the Executive Corporate Affairs Officer position for which the Director was responsible, I find that the creation, recruitment and remuneration of the Executive Superintendent also lacks legitimacy, fairness, and transparency.

The Director failed to consider the impact of his actions on the executive and senior staff and failed to demonstrate ethical leadership when filling this position.

At the same time that the Executive Superintendent position was established, an assistant superintendent was moved to the senior leadership team and assumed some of the responsibilities of the superintendent who was moved into the Executive Superintendent role. There was no formal change in the assistant superintendent role description, despite that this assistant superintendent now has a direct reporting relationship to Director as well as the executive superintendent. I further note that although this appears to have been a promotion – with this position now at the level of the senior leadership team – there was no corresponding compensation adjustment. This seems to further indicate a troubling pattern of a lack of transparent or formal human resources practices and warrants a more focused review of human resources and compensation practices.

Finally, with respect to human resources practices, the Director confirmed that he has not undertaken performance reviews with any of his direct reports since he assumed the position in January 2020. In addition to lost opportunities to monitor the performance of his senior leadership team and support their leadership, the failure of the Director to engage in formal performance appraisal discussions is further evidence of a lack of respect for - and potential adherence to - fair and transparent human resources practices.

iii. Delayed Opening of the New JK-12 Parry Sound School

The impetus for this expedited review was the delayed opening of the new JK-12 Parry Sound school. I have been mandated to provide my observations on the performance of the Board and the Director in relation to this matter. Understandably, there has been considerable frustration in the community over the delayed opening. The lack of consistent, direct, proactive and responsive communications from the school board has only made this challenging situation worse. What was needed to navigate this contentious circumstance was a visible leader who was accessible and forthright with the community, and a Board that provided accurate and relevant information and managed communities' expectations; both were absent.

There were three distinct factors at play in the delayed opening of the new JK-12 Parry Sound school that contributed to the crisis in public confidence that the NNDSB currently faces. The first involves the actions of the Board and some individual trustees. I have already provided my observations on the inability of this Board to govern effectively, and that inability coupled with several trustees who acted in bad faith, contributed to the erosion of confidence in the school board, particularly in the Parry Sound and surrounding communities. The second factor was the absence of leadership from the Director; he offered only peripheral leadership in a situation that required visible and accountable leadership. And finally, delays occurred on the building site that impacted the subsequent phases of construction. While I cannot comment as to whether those delays were avoidable, closer school board oversight may have allowed for more direct and timely communication from the Director would have eased the angst and frustration in the communities, as well as kept the Ministry of Education informed.

Performance of the Board of Trustees

Prior to the start of the 2022-2026 term of office, the Board had agreed to close three schools - including McDougall Public School - as a condition of funding from the Ministry of Education to build the new JK-12 Parry Sound school. During the 2022 trustee elections, two trustees were vocal in their opposition to the new JK-12 Parry Sound school; they maintained that position once elected. Despite more than 12 years of work undertaken by the school board, including securing Ministry of Education funding, these trustees worked to undermine this new build and reverse a Board decision that was at the foundation of this project.

I note that the Board had established a Parry Sound Build Committee in 2015 with a mandate to monitor the project costs, spending and timely completion of the construction of the new JK-12 Parry Sound school. At the December 20, 2023, meeting of the Committee, a trustee who had been vocal in his opposition to the new Parry Sound school was re-elected as Chair. The minutes from that meeting reflect that “the Parry Sound Building Committee will meet next at the call of the Chair.” A meeting was never called. A senior school board official commented that had a meeting been called, there would have been an opportunity to communicate and build relationships.

Throughout the course of my interviews with former and current trustees, several made vague references to “data”, “statistics” and “information” to support their opposition to the new JK-12 Parry Sound school. None of those trustees demonstrated any comprehensive understanding of the data and statistics in reports provided to them by the senior leadership team. When asked why they did not value the data being provided by school board staff, the issue of the distrust between the Board and the administration surfaced. One experienced trustee observed that decisions are often based on emotion rather than fact.

What further compounded the already fraught situation with the new JK-12 Parry Sound school was the failure of trustees to manage the expectations of their communities, specifically those representing the communities that will be served by the new school. Rather than bringing information to their communities that reflected the decision-making process that had been followed over the past decade with respect to the new school, and explaining the school board’s financial and contractual obligations, trustees perpetuated the position that changing course was a viable option. One Board member suggested that those trustees “intentionally sowed discontent in their community”.

Several trustees referenced community concerns about the new JK-12 Parry Sound school and they positioned their opposition to the new school as being responsive to their constituents’ concerns. A senior staff person commented that misinformation was repeatedly brought forward by trustees and this information, which originated in the community, “became lore”. While it is indeed the role of a trustee to bring the concerns of their communities forward to the Board, it is also expected that trustees act in the interests of all students of the school board. The professional development supports provided by OPSBA acknowledges that trustees are required to balance their role as community representatives with their role as a member of

the Board as a whole. OPSBA's Good Governance Guide states that this "dual responsibility can mean that the ultimate decisions made are at variance with the specific interests of a particular geographical constituency, demographic population, or interest group ...[yet].. trustees are expected to act in the best interest of the board and its students as a whole".¹⁴

The willful disregard of their statutory responsibility to provide effective financial stewardship of school board resources and to make decisions in the interests of all students of the school board was evident at the March 18th, 2025, Board meeting. At that meeting, despite being provided with a comprehensive report supported by data and a legal opinion, and an opportunity to ask the senior leadership team for clarifications, the Board failed to accept the recommendation in that report to fulfil contractual agreements with the Ministry of Education and proceed with the closure of McDougall Public School. Contrary to that advice, seven of the nine trustees voted to keep McDougall Public School open for the 2025-2026 school year. While four trustees suggested that the motion be deferred to allow for the Board to further consider the financial implications of such a motion, the motion nonetheless carried.

The minutes of that March 18th meeting indicate that one trustee suggested there "were too many students for the building", and another suggested "facts have changed, including a growth in population not previously calculated". Despite the enrolment projections provided in the staff report and clear articulation of the serious financial implications for the school board, one trustee, voting in favour of the motion, encouraged the Board to "make a decision today and let the chips fall where they may and deal with it later". That this was the tenor of discussion in the context of a thorough report prepared by professional staff reveals the depth of governance dysfunction at this Board. One can conclude that there was either a lack of capacity to understand the facts before them as clearly set out in the staff report, or there was a wilful disregard of those facts. In either case, this is evidence of a Board that is not capable of governing in the public interest.

I find that while this governance dysfunction contributed to the erosion of public confidence and added to the tension in the community, the Board's actions did not have a direct impact on the delayed opening of the new JK-12 Parry Sound school.

Performance of the Director of Education

It can be challenging for a Director of Education to work with an inexperienced Board and I can understand the difficulties that this Director has encountered in the face of such dysfunction. However, those frustrations could have been greatly mitigated had the Director prioritized efforts to develop collegial relationships based on mutual trust and respect with the trustees, and especially with the Board Chair. Those efforts require a leader that is visible and accessible, and that is not the style of leadership this Director has provided to the Board.

¹⁴ Ontario Education Services Corporation. (2022) Good Governance: A Guide for Trustees, School Boards, Directors of Education, and Communities 2022-2026, p. 31

The Director's failure to be the public face of this school board, especially as community concerns grew, significantly contributed to the erosion of public confidence. I spoke with parents who said that despite several letters to the school board with questions about the new school, they never received an acknowledgement or response from the Director. They received one generic response from the Director's Executive Assistant but that was not signed by the Director. Parents noted that confidence "starts at the top" and were angry with what they view as a lack of accountability.

The reluctance of the Director to communicate in a timely and direct manner also contributed to the information void that communities experienced with respect to the new JK-12 Parry Sound school. Senior staff raised concerns with the Director about the misinformation shared by trustees at public meetings and implored the Director to correct such misinformation through "some form of communication"; he failed to do so. His inaction did nothing to manage expectations or build relationships with communities, including affected municipalities. When NNDSB senior board staff discussed a local township's request for NNDSB representatives to attend a council meeting to provide an update related to schools in West Parry Sound, including the new JK-12 Parry Sound school, the Director's response was to refer municipal officials to information on the board's public website, and suggested that the municipal officials needed to "educate themselves."

The Director has been consistently reluctant to engage directly with communities and has instead overly relied on the board's website as a means to convey information. Earlier this year, principals of affected schools wanted a communication they could share with their school communities about the transition to the new school. Senior staff sought urgent approval from the Director to provide the communication, signalling that it was an opportunity to build trust with the Parry Sound community, and cautioned that a delay in sending out the communication could further contribute to the perception that the board is not being transparent. The request for the direct communication from school principals was denied. Instead, the information was posted on the school board's website in the *Parry Sound JK-12 Build Community Feedback Report*. Staff response to this situation was disappointment and frustration; I was told that "we don't have the communication, trust has broken down, things continue to disintegrate."

I also note that on August 29th, the Minister of Education emailed the Director requesting that an attached letter be distributed to school board communities; that letter expressed the Minister's anger and frustration over the school board's mismanagement of the school opening. The Director did not distribute that letter and provided no plausible explanation for this failure to do so.

I heard that students' wellbeing and mental health has been impacted by the delayed opening of the new school. A student trustee confirmed that students are upset, and that they did not want to go back to online learning; their first few weeks of school have "not been pleasant [and] they can't thrive online." At no point during my interviews with the Director did he raise

concerns about the impact that the delayed opening of the new school has had on student mental health and wellbeing.

The fractured relationship between the Director and the Board and the entrenched lack of trust between the two parties hindered the school board's ability to demonstrate accountable and visible leadership and prevent the further erosion of public confidence. The relationship between the Director and the Board was so dysfunctional that it prevented the necessary collaboration to develop a proactive strategy to manage community expectations and to respond in timely manner to parents' concerns. I also note that the Director's decision to fill the senior position responsible for communications and public image – the Executive Officer of Corporate Affairs – with an individual who lacks any experience or expertise in strategic communications was a contributing factor in erosion of public trust.

I spoke with senior staff who have experience and expertise in overseeing new builds, and those staff were of the view that the actions of the trustees did not play a role in the delayed opening of the new Parry Sound school. While they certainly attributed trustees' actions to fostering community distrust and confusion, the progress of the build was not, in their opinion, affected by the governance dysfunction. Given the staff's expertise and role in the oversight of this project, I find their assessment to be credible.

However, when I asked the Director who was accountable for the delayed opening, he responded that it was "100% the responsibility of the Board"; he later clarified that response and attributed 80% of the blame to trustees. That response, at variance with the assessment of staff who worked closely on the project, signaled two things. First, the animosity between the Board and the Director has compromised his ability to objectively assess the situation in which the school board finds itself, to identify the issues at play, and to take necessary steps to address deficiencies. Secondly, it reveals a gap in the Director's understanding of the work of his senior board staff who are responsible for the oversight of the building and his lack of familiarity with the construction issues that prevented the opening of the new school. Such a disconnect may have been avoided had the Director been more connected to his senior leadership team and senior board staff, including attending Executive Council meetings where these issues would have been discussed.

Delayed Opening – Procurement and Oversight

Until staff raised the alarm in mid-July, 2025, I was told that the new JK-12 Parry Sound school build was on schedule, and the school was expected to house students and staff in the beginning of the 2025-2026 school year. So, what happened?

By June 2025, the building is said to have been 79% complete, staff in the affected schools were preparing for the move, and logistics were being finalized to accommodate all students – though, because of peak enrolment, space at the new school was "tight," but "doable." While there was still a lot of work to do before September, it still seemed feasible.

The architect hired by the school board is the prime consultant for the build, and the contractor is responsible for the construction. The delayed opening of the school was ultimately a matter of one stage of the construction work initially falling behind schedule; that initial delay snowballed, resulting in the school not being ready in September. Neither the prime consultant nor the contractor identified that the build would not be ready for September; that determination was made after experienced senior board staff conducted a thorough walk-through of the building site. Contractual agreements prevented the school board from changing course at that juncture.

I appreciate that contractual agreements and relationship management may have affected the school board's actions. The consultant hired by the school board had the duty to "sound the alarm" if they determined the school would not be ready on time; it appears that although they did inform the school board that construction was behind schedule, they did not indicate that the school would not open in September. However, in such capital projects, it is typical for school board staff to conduct frequent site visits, track progress and proactively mitigate issues. The school board staff site inspection in mid-July identified the lack of readiness at that time, but I am not aware of the frequency of school board staff site inspections prior to that and, if they did occur, why the alarm wasn't sounded earlier. While I cannot comment as to whether this was mismanagement on the part of the school board, it does raise the questions as to whether school board staff ought to have raised concerns sooner than mid-July. Had those concerns been raised prior to mid-July, it would have helped to ensure that communities and the Ministry of Education had advance knowledge of the delayed opening. It is also reasonable to have expected mitigation strategies to be in place when construction delays occurred, but that did not seem to have been the case in this situation.

I note that there were other elements that contributed to the delay, including issues with building permits and a limited pool of tradespeople in the Parry Sound area. The NNDSB could have been more proactive when they became aware that aspects of the project were falling behind, and clearly communicated those delays with the ministry. That said, what ultimately prevented the school from opening in September was a matter of construction delays that resulted from a limited pool of tradespeople and the misplaced optimism of those responsible for this project.

I note that the reference checks that are part of the school board's procurement process for capital projects are conducted by finance staff who do not have the experience or expertise related to new builds. In this circumstance, the reference checks and the selection of the contractor were the responsibility of a "purchasing agent" who had no construction expertise. Had reference checks for the new JK-12 Parry Sound school involved staff with capital project experience, they would have been more comprehensive and perhaps have resulted in the selection of a different contractor. Moving forward, the school board should ensure that such expertise informs the background reference checks of potential contractors.

The new JK-12 Parry Sound school has been characterized as a complex project, not with respect to the build itself, but because of the underlying tension between some rural communities and the NNDSB. Many local municipalities have opposed the new JK-12 Parry Sound school and several people I interviewed suggested that local municipal politics may have contributed to the delayed opening of the school, specifically in relation to the delays of the issuance of permits. NNDSB rural communities are fiercely protective of their schools, and there is a commonly held belief that students in rural communities are underserved relative to students in North Bay. Attempts to consolidate rural schools are met with the same concerns. Left unchecked over the years by an absent Director of Education, that tension and fear in communities has developed into a deep distrust of the school board, which has been fueled more recently by trustees sharing misinformation and allowing communities to believe that the decisions around the new JK-12 Parry Sound school could be reversed.

V. Conclusions

Public confidence in the NNDSB has been eroding over the past several years and parents, community members and school board staff have not been served well by the Board of Trustees or the Director of Education. The NNDSB struggles to earn and maintain the confidence and trust of its communities because of ongoing governance dysfunction and a deficit in leadership. The relationship between the Board and the Director is so deeply fractured and marred by an almost complete absence of mutual respect and trust that it is challenging to see a path forward for these elected leaders and Director. I am of the opinion that, with the recent appointment of experienced trustees who understand principles of good governance, it is possible that, if given the opportunity, the Board could demonstrate that it is capable of governing in the interests of all students of the school board and, in time, possibly earn the trust and confidence of the communities they serve.

The leadership deficit on the administrative side of the school board must be attended to if the NNDSB is to rebuild trust and confidence with its communities and staff. This school board requires a director understands the need to be the public face of the school board, who is accessible and visible, and whose relationships and actions demonstrate accountable and authentic leadership.

The frustration and anger over the delayed opening of the new JK-12 Parry Sound school laid bare the fact that this school board has not governed itself in a manner that earned the confidence or trust of its communities. Under the current leadership of the Board of Trustees and the Director of Education, I do not see a viable path forward in which this school board is governing and leading in a manner that restores public trust and confidence. Given the divided and dysfunctional nature of the Board, the absence of leadership from the Director, and the deep community distrust of the school board, I believe ministry intervention is warranted.

Nonetheless, I was mandated to provide the Minister with recommendations that support effective, accountable and transparent school board governance and leadership. In the absence

of ministry intervention, I offer the following 17 recommendations that, if acted upon, will help the Near North District rebuild public confidence and provide the accountable, transparent and effective governance that its communities deserve.

VI. Recommendations

Addressing Governance Dysfunction

1. The Board of Trustees should immediately retain the services of an external expert, subject to Ministry of Education approval, to undertake a robust, transparent appraisal of the Director of Education's performance in accordance with Ontario Regulation 83/24 – Director of Education Performance Appraisal. The performance appraisal must involve a 360-degree assessment that includes confidential feedback from senior administration, principals, teachers, students, trustees and representatives of the NNDSB community.
2. The Board should create a professional development plan and require its members to complete in-person professional development in the following priority areas:
 - a. Effective Financial stewardship
 - b. Director of Education Performance Appraisal
 - c. Conflict of Interest
 - d. Principles of Good Governance
 - e. Duties and Authority of Boards
 - f. Effective Community Engagement
 - g. Conflict Resolution
 - h. Code of Conduct
3. The school board should provide immediate and ongoing support for the Board Chair to ensure meetings and Board business are conducted in accordance with principles of effective and accountable governance.
4. The school board should ensure that recordings of all public Board meetings are posted to the NNDSB's website in a timely manner and provide for public delegations at its regular Board meetings.
5. The NNDSB should ensure that all agendas and minutes from Board and Committee meetings are posted on the school board's public website within 48 hours of those meetings.
6. The Board should schedule Committee of the Whole meetings and Board meetings on separate days to provide members with sufficient time to review reports and consider Board matters.

7. The Board should develop a timeline for, and complete a review of, its policies and procedures and ensure that they are distinguished from administrative guidelines. As part of this review, the Board should prioritize ensuring their Trustee Code of Conduct and policies on electronic meetings and director performance appraisal reflect recent legislative and regulatory changes.
8. The Board should require the Parry Sound Building Committee to hold monthly open meetings until all students have transitioned to the new JK-12 Parry Sound school.

Addressing Leadership Issues

9. The Director of Education's office should be immediately relocated to the main school board office.
10. The Director of Education should undertake professional development focussed on school board governance in order to effectively support the Board in his capacity of Secretary of the Board.
11. The NNDSB should procure the services of a human resources professional to establish a robust cyclical performance appraisal process for executive leaders, senior staff and other direct reports.
12. The NNDSB should procure the services of an external party to undertake a comprehensive review of human resources practices since 2020, including but not limited to the establishment of senior and executive positions, recruitment, transparent and fair hiring practices, promotions, and performance appraisals. The review should determine whether these human resources practices:
 - adhere to school board policies and procedures and any applicable ministry requirements or guidelines;
 - are appropriately documented; and
 - have received Board approval, as appropriate.
13. The Ministry of Education should direct an audit of executive compensation and compliance with BPSECA since 2020.
14. The Ministry of Education should undertake a review of trustee and Director of Education expenses from November 2022 to present day.
15. The Director should develop a community engagement plan focused on rebuilding public confidence. The Director should lead those engagements, and meetings with the Parry

Sound community should be prioritized.

16. The NNDSB should revise its communications protocol to reflect a more responsive and visible role for the Director of Education in responding to and interacting with NNDSB communities.
17. The NNDSB should ensure that regular and timely updates are made to the New JK-12 Parry Sound School webpage and that all relevant information is available through that page, including reports and minutes from regular Board meetings pertaining to the new school.