

# **SAFE CHILDREN**

*Bluewater Citizens for Education*

## **2009 ANNUAL REPORT**

*Hanover Winter Retreat 13 January 2010*

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Bluewater Citizens for Education (BCforE) is a non-governmental public service organization; its principal concern is: Safe Children. Working in the context of Bruce/Grey/Owen Sound's Bluewater District School Board (BWDSB) it draws on the resources of the public, the Ontario government, and various regulatory agencies to ensure that children may be safe at BWDSB schools, and that the BWDSB is meeting all of its obligations to citizens.

BCforE was constituted a year ago to respond to the increasing difficulties our trustees were encountering in meeting their legislated requirement to keep our children safe. Now, a year later, we have met in the first of a series of quarterly retreats to assess our performance in the initial year and set objectives for 2010.

## 2009

The past year was a disappointing one for very many people.

Shortly after our founding, our MP, Larry Miller, issued a call for action by the trustees on the very issue we had formed to assist with. A staggering outpouring of emotion followed.

After some time, our MPP's felt they had to call for the Education Minister's involvement; regrettably, they now refuse to discuss the situation.

The Minister took action, asking two consultants to discuss the matter with only the board and its allied institutions. She showed a surprising bias in refusing to have anyone meet with any independent citizens. And, regrettably, our trustees have failed to move on many of the consultants' recommendations.

An independent public inquiry at that time would have reassured her, the trustees and the public that the province's interest was in an impartial review of the difficulties.

Since that time, the trustees have appeared to be pursuing a kind of "diffuse and defuse" approach to the absence of safety for children in our schools, treating one big problem as though it's a thousand small problems, perhaps hoping that no-one will notice the big one.

A great deal of busywork by expensive consultants has resulted in a blizzard of paperwork, but very little action, and none on the core problem. Perhaps two action items seem memorable:

1. **Communications Coordinator**

Rather than a communications problem, the trustees have a conduct problem; those families who have been damaged in board schools know full well how effectively bad conduct communicates. Another pricey layer of bureaucracy between families and their trustees is of no benefit.

2. **Evening Monthly Board Meetings**

Rescheduling a “public” meeting at which the board continues to refuse to talk to the public helps no-one. The public requires fully-engaged and responsive trustees. The public must have full access to the board at all times, and that is one of our prime tasks for 2010.

Throughout this frustrating year we have been a constant presence at board meetings, offering guidance to the trustees. We recognize that their job is a difficult one, pursued under difficult conditions imposed from outside their operation and from within it. While we have not succeeded in helping them towards concrete action, we find some satisfaction in having helped begin the improvement process.

## 2010

In 2010 we will continue to focus on the primary impediments to BWDSB ensuring we have safe children. We will direct ourselves towards the following:

1. **Safe Children**

Once again, our children must be **safe to learn** and this is the overarching goal all programs will address.

2. **Refreshed Staff**

Half of our staff members do not recommend working for our trustees; more than that many disagree with the leadership provided by our director and superintendents. A staff wellness survey, improperly kept secret from the public by our trustees, reports that employee dissatisfaction is extremely high. We are very concerned that our staff is labouring under threatening conditions, and we will be examining board operations to see how we may improve conditions for our employees.

The BWDSB staff complement has become somewhat hidebound, and at each level some staff positions (thankfully, very few overall) are held by employees who either ignore or act against the safety of the children in their care. We will assist the trustees in finding new, up-to-date personnel who can bring vision and honour to board operations. This program we will strive to achieve, in the main, by year’s end.

3. **Seeking Inquiry**

We will join with the trustees and the Bluewater Inquiry Coalition in seeking a provincial commission of inquiry into the past six years of complaints against the trustees and their personnel. We would never want our trustees to be able to be accused of conflict of interest or whitewash or cover-up, and we know that they would never want that themselves. The commission’s inquiry may well take a year.

4. **Trustee Access**

There has been much talk of “*openness, transparency and accountability*,” but very little in the way of definition of specific steps that can be taken to achieve these aspirations, and even less concrete action on them. Our trustees can satisfy these requirements very simply: meet with any citizen (including students) at any reasonable time and place. This change should begin immediately.

5. **Legislation Upgrading**

Many of the difficulties that people experience with their boards (and this is an endemic problem across Ontario and has been happening for decades) come of the regulatory context in which trustees must work. The provincial government has attempted to address this problem with its very ill-received School Board Governance Act of last year, to little avail. We will be liaising with the Ontario government to see how we might help create the proper context, as a continuing initiative. And we look to our MP and MPPs to provide assistance as needed.

6. **Ombudsman Authority**

Ontario is one of a few provinces whose ombudsman does not have authority over school boards. We will work with the government and the opposition parties to see that this changes. This process will begin this month.

7. **Victim Assistance**

We continue to receive requests for assistance from distraught parents, and are mobilizing to provide more substantial help. We shall be maintaining a registry of cases, and preparing assistance information packages for families’ use. We expect to be ready to do this in about a month.

8. **Election Preparation**

We will be seeking and assisting good candidates for the November trustee elections, and assessing all those who propose to let their names stand. This project will necessarily be complete in November.

This is a broad workplan, but readily accomplished. We look forward to working with the public, our trustees, our other governments and their regulators to help see that by the end of 2010 we can safely say that with the Bluewater trustees we truly have Safe Children.

*Bluewater Citizens for Education*  
*21 January 2010*