

## EDUCATION

## TDSB mulls decision to cut junior high

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The Globe and Mail

Published Wednesday, Nov. 13 2013, 6:00 AM EST

Last updated Tuesday, Nov. 12 2013, 9:41 PM EST

The Toronto District School Board is considering phasing out the last of the city's junior high schools.

The board's newly appointed director of education, Donna Quan, has made it a priority to look at whether Grade 9 students in seven junior highs are receiving enough programs and if they could be moved into their neighbourhood high schools, a TDSB spokeswoman said.

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Junior highs combine elementary students – usually Grades 7 and 8 – and high-school Grade 9 students in one building. Middle schools are for elementary grades, generally from Grade 6 to Grade 8. Researchers have questioned the academic benefits of junior highs or even middle schools, but parents believe they can ease the transition for tweens from elementary school to the hormone-loaded years of high school.

Plans to relocate Grade 9s from junior high schools to secondary schools were approved a decade ago, but that strategy was stalled after three junior highs were phased out. The handful of junior high schools in the city were a product of the former North York school board before amalgamation.

“The real reason why it’s back on the table is because it’s something that Donna wants to move forward,” spokeswoman Shari Schwartz-Maltz said.

TDSB officials say that while some junior highs have a healthy enrolment, others have lower numbers in Grade 9, and the nearby high school could likely accommodate them. Manon Gardner, executive superintendent of school improvement and operational support, said high schools have more students than junior highs do and can offer more programs. She said board officials are considering whether they can do more for those in junior highs by moving Grade 9 out and using the buildings possibly for senior public schools. “Are we offering to the Grade 9 students [in junior high] the breadth of experience and courses that we can offer in a regular high school when you’ve got more of a critical mass?” she asked.

But Eddie Lok, parent council chair at St. Andrew's Junior High School, said the transition school experience has been invaluable for his daughter in Grade 8 and other students. He has heard rumblings of the TDSB's plans, but nothing concrete.

"I would like to think that they're not making the decision based on just economic factors. I would really like them to look at this based on the benefits for the children," he said. "Personally, I think it's a good transition for the kids."

A junior high teacher who requested anonymity said he was told by the principal that changes could take effect as early as September, 2015. The TDSB disputes this. "It's [junior high] a better model. It makes more sense," the teacher said. "It provides more support for the students. It allows us to help them over that bridge between elementary and secondary."

Junior high may be particularly useful for students who are highly anxious about making the transition to high school. Researchers have found these students report overeating, drinking, smoking or doing drugs. At Edmonton Public Schools, eight new schools built since 2010 were set up for kindergarten to Grade 9 so students could stay close to home in those years.

Still, researchers have found that the achievement gains in math and reading of students who attended middle school or junior high are not as great as those of students in the more common school system. Elizabeth Dhuey, an assistant professor of economics at the University of Toronto who has studied school transitions, said her research using data from British Columbia found that kids who struggle in school are particularly affected.

At the TDSB, officials say that parents and the community will be consulted before any steps are taken. "It's not going to happen if it doesn't make sense and the community doesn't want it. I think it would be absurd," said trustee Gerri Gershon, who has two junior highs, including St. Andrew's, in her ward.

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