



MAINTENANCE & CONSTRUCTION SKILLED TRADES COUNCIL

95 Shorting Road, Mezzanine Level
Scarborough, Ontario M1S 5B9

Phone: 416-406-0115
Fax: 416-406-3410
Jim Hazel Cell: 647-201-5002
Mike Morgan Cell: 647-201-5892

www.tradescouncil.com

Open Letter to TDSB Trustees

Dear Trustees:

I am sure that you have been just as troubled as the Council and its members have been at the media coverage we have seen over the past two weeks. While some legitimate issues have been raised, a rather one-sided and distorted picture has been presented. I am writing to share my thoughts on costs, the Skilled Trades Council, the work ethic and commitment of TDSB's skilled trades employees and how I believe that we can move forward together.

First, I believe it is important to keep this in perspective. Some 190,000 work orders (TDSB data) are issued by TDSB every year. The media has identified specific issues with five, some dating back to 2009. Management's review of these jobs has turned up reasonable explanations, satisfactory resolutions to complaints and in some cases shortcomings of both skilled trades and of managers. Like any other employee group at the TDSB; both management and union, we can resolve these problems by working together as partners.

I also want to reiterate that we have been actively involved in developing joint recommendations and continue to be willing to work with TDSB management to make improvements. In fact, we were actively involved with management in developing recommendations for the comprehensive - some would say "deep" - Blackstone review of 2007. The proposed restructuring of the maintenance and construction departments to improve service and pricing was strongly endorsed by the TDSB Executive Board, the Maintenance and Construction Skilled Trades Council, representatives of the School Administrators Association and CUPE 4400 yet it has not been implemented to date. Despite the two-year comprehensive review, only a handful of Blackstone's recommendations have been implemented to date. The Council strongly and fully supports the recommendations and has urged the Director of Education to implement them on several occasions since the report was completed. We continue to be prepared to work with TDSB management to implement the recommendations.

The Council is the collective bargaining agent for TDSB's skilled trades employees. We don't set budgets for school projects. We don't dispatch skilled trades to jobs or direct their work. We don't see, review or approve work orders from schools, hours that have been worked on a job or time sheets for work performed. This is management's responsibility.

Every work order request from a school, every time sheet and all the hours of work have to be approved by management, without exception. You should also know that the Council does not hire TDSB skilled trades employees. Management does. I have attached a set of

Questions and Answers about the Council which you may find helpful in understanding our role.

I would like to address some of the specific issues that have been raised to set the record straight and pave the way for moving forward to improve the system for the benefit of our teachers, staff and students.

- **Competitive bids**

TDSB in-house skilled trades employees do not automatically get medium and large-scale construction work. In fact, we are required to bid against outside private-sector contractors. Contractors must build in profit margins. We don't because we are not-for-profit. In many cases, TDSB's in-house skilled trades win these bids because we are the lowest bidder. I think this says a lot about the competitive cost of TDSB's skilled trades.

- **The cost of jobs**

We hear stories about the price of construction projects in our schools from staff who have little real knowledge of what these jobs entail and that's understandable since this is not their field of expertise. To the unskilled and untrained eye many paint, plumbing and electrical jobs seem simple. However, there are many factors that go into the price.

Remember that we are dealing with a large number of schools built before 1985, many between 50 and 70 years ago. These are institutional buildings with full public access. Building codes and health and safety procedures are far more stringent than those in the residential sector to protect students and the general public.

You cannot simply slap a new coat of paint over the many walls. Most older schools have paint and plaster that contain residues that would be harmful to human health if disturbed. In many cases, this has to be removed.

To protect students, teachers and staff, ventilation systems must be closed, work sites sealed and hazardous material removed and hauled away according to strict safety standards and sometimes using specialized equipment. As a result, the actual painting and paint can sometimes be the lowest cost of a job.

Seemingly simple electrical projects can involve fishing wire through walls that are decades old. Plumbing and electrical projects often deal with the removal or containment of asbestos which is found in older school walls, floor tiles, ceilings and around pipes. TDSB made the decision years ago not to remove asbestos that is encased in plaster, pipes and floor tiles. As a result, asbestos is often encountered in many school work orders both small and large.

Even the seemingly simple installation of a shelf in a classroom, mentioned in one media story, may not be a do-it-yourself project for an enthusiastic teacher or principal with a drill. Electrical, plumbing and gas lines can be behind the walls. As well, there is asbestos in walls of many older schools that will be disturbed and becomes airborne as soon as someone drills into them. These shelves often contain heavy books, glass aquariums,

and other materials. If the shelf was incorrectly installed and fell, it could present a significant hazard to students.

Do It Yourself or DIY for your home is one thing. In our schools, it means rolling the dice with the safety of our students, staff, parents and teachers.

- **Smaller jobs**

Both the Council and management agreed to use site-based caretakers for small jobs in 1998. We spent several years training caretakers in how to do this and identify situations where this is beyond their abilities and the skilled trades should be called in. What is not clear is how well this has been communicated by supervisors and we see instances where the policy has been ignored.

For example, a carpenter should never have been directed to install a pencil sharpener in a school. It would be like directing an electrician to screw in a light bulb. It is a waste of their time and taxpayers' money.

- **Reviewing the TDSB's Construction and Maintenance Division**

I have told the Chair of the Board that the Council welcomes and will participate in any review of the construction and maintenance departments, including pricing and tendering. We have always embraced continuous improvement. The Council regularly brings management's attention to improvements that can lower costs or stretch construction dollars.

In addition to our strong support of the recommendations in the Blackstone review mentioned above, please keep in mind that just six months ago, I met with Director of Education Chris Spence and reviewed with him projects where outside contractors were charging more than TDSB's inside skilled trades employees for construction and modernization jobs in our schools. In fact just three months ago, the Council and the TDSB signed a new Letter of Agreement, which has the effect of allowing TDSB skilled trades in the construction department to be given an opportunity to undertake jobs originating from the maintenance department if they have the expertise and if the price can be lower than outside contractors. The Letter of Agreement represents a long awaited step to reduce the "silo effect" of construction and maintenance departments and improve the coordination of work from these departments. This was also a recommendation from the Blackstone report.

The Council would also strongly support new measures to "flag" pricing irregularities and most importantly, document and itemize in more detail known and unexpected factors that can give rise to additional work and prices to work orders. Moreover, work orders should make note of the time it takes to travel to and from job sites, pick up materials, worksite preparation and cleanup in addition to the scope of work outlined in the work order. All can add time to a job but often may not be included in the work order. I understand that hundreds of thousands of past work orders will now be provided to a

third party for possible release to the public. It is too bad that only now management has seen fit to ensure work orders are as detailed as possible.

There are some 600 skilled trades employees at the Board and they are an essential part of delivering top-quality education. Schools that are safe and in good repair create positive learning and working environments for our students, teachers and school support staff.

I have heard from some of our skilled trades employees who share concerns about the stories in the media based on allegations directed at the quality and cost of their work. This has been hurtful and I think in many cases not true. We have even read unnamed sources from our employer, the TDSB, quoted in the media making accusations based on confidential employee personnel matters. To what end is anyone's guess.

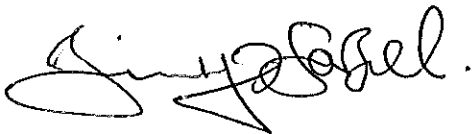
Yes, we have seen complaints played out in the media. No doubt there are other complaints that have been dealt with in the proper customer service and union-management environments. At the same time I have also received many words of appreciation from school managers. I have posted on the Council's website a mere snapshot of the hundreds of compliments and positive feedback TDSB's skilled trades employees have received from school managers.

If employees have been unfairly criticized and treated, I will stand up for them and I hope that management would as well. However, as was reported in the media, I have told my members that we expect them to be professional and exercise due diligence. We have high expectations of our members and we don't condone abuse of the system.

Skilled trades employees are as hardworking and dedicated as any other employee group at the Board. They take their job seriously and they know that failure to get the job done right can have ramifications for student and co-worker safety.

We care about our schools not just because it's our job but because many of our children attend our schools. The Council and TDSB's skilled trades employees stand ready to work with management to make the needed improvements and move on.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jimmy Hazel". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "H".

Jimmy Hazel