

**VIA** **SEAT SALE** UNTIL JANUARY 31 **BOOK NOW**  
 VIA Rail Canada

**TORONTO.COM**  
**ULTIMATE GUIDE**  
*to the City*

-5° Toronto (/cities/toronto/weather)

Sign In ([https://my.thestar.com/users/sign\\_in](https://my.thestar.com/users/sign_in))

# COMMENTARY

- HOME
- NEWS
- YOUR TORONTO
- OPINION
  - Editorials
  - Commentary
  - Readers' Letters
  - Public Editor
  - Corrections
  - Editorial Cartoon
- SPORTS
- BUSINESS
- ENTERTAINMENT
- LIFE
- AUTOS
- PHOTOS
- DIVERSIONS
- CLASSIFIEDS
- OBITUARIES

Opinion / Commentary

## TDSB needs a new kind of leader

Provincial rules prevent the Toronto District School Board from casting a wide net in its search for a new director. The result: the wrong people tend to get hired.

Tweet G+1 2 + reddit this!



RICK MADONIK / TORONTO STAR [Order this photo](#)

The culture of fear that pervades the TDSB is not just the work of former director Donna Quan, but has become part of the institutional fabric of the board, writes Sachin Maharaj.

By: **Sachin Maharaj** Freelance Opinion writer, Published on Mon Dec 07 2015

Since its inception in 1998, the Toronto District School Board has gone through six directors while developing a reputation not for education excellence, but for dysfunctional leadership. Now as it looks for yet another new director to turn things around, the board needs to take a hard look at itself. If it is really going to live up to its potential, the board does not just need a new leader, but an entirely new way of doing things.

First, it cannot be overstated how low morale has become in many parts of the TDSB. The "culture of fear" that was first identified in a report by Julian Falconer, and more recently in another report by Margaret Wilson, permeates the entire organization. Contrary to what was stated in the Wilson report, building this culture of fear was not just the work of a few trustees or the director Donna Quan (whom she later implicated), but has become part of the institutional fabric of the TDSB. How else to explain the revelation from just this past April that the board had secretly placed a hidden surveillance camera inside the office of one of its own school principals?

So if creating this dysfunction wasn't just the work of one person, can just one person now radically change the way that an entire organization of over 36,000 people operates? Perhaps. But finding such a person requires that the board cast as wide a net as possible. However, provincial regulations prevent the TDSB from doing this. The result is that the best person for the job is often prevented from being hired. That is what happened in 2008 when trustees wanted to hire someone from outside the traditional teacher-principal-superintendent-director career path, but was prevented from doing so by then education minister Kathleen Wynne. As a result, the board hired Chris Spence, someone who had all the experience of someone who had pursued the



**HORSESHOE**  
 SKYLINE RESORT  
 BARRIE

3 ANYTIME LIFT TICKETS FOR JUST  
**\$129**  
 BOOK NOW

### Latest Opinion Videos

Some advice for Justin Trudeau: Star cartoonist



### Top News

- Updated** Rob Ford broke rules with fundraiser ad, watchdog says
- NEW** City of Toronto outside workers closer to labour disruption
- Updated** Justin Trudeau arrives in La Loche
- Jian Ghomeshi trial to begin in Toronto Monday
- Most tickets for big concerts are not available to general public: report
- Peel police board unanimously picks Ahluwalia as new chair
- Updated** New Zika case reported in Canada, but risk 'very, very low'
- No more presumption of innocence for police

#### Inside thestar.com



Rob Ford broke rules with fundraiser ad, watchdog says



City of Toronto outside workers closer to labour disruption



Injured workers unfairly kicked off benefits are falling into poverty



Create biodiversity in your yard with these 5 tips

traditional path, but who was “in over his head” (as one trustee put it). He later resigned amid a plagiarism scandal.

It is completely paternalistic for the provincial government to dictate who TDSB trustees can and cannot hire to run the organization. If trustees, who are elected by the people of Toronto, determine that someone from outside the traditional career path is the best person to lead the school system in their city, who is the province to tell them otherwise? And if ever there were a case for special treatment it would apply to the TDSB, which educates over 400,000 people and operates a budget that is larger than the entire budgets of Vancouver, Calgary and Ottawa.

So what type of person should the board look for? Someone with a bold vision for transforming the TDSB’s culture and the way it operates. This means finding someone who is not mired in the old ways of doing things. It also means that just having experience within school systems is not enough. And in fact, this may even be an impediment to real change as progressing up the ladder within a school bureaucracy (as with any large, hierarchical system) is often based on internal politics and pleasing the right people, instead of merit.

That is why it is just as important that the board select someone truly interested not in fulfilling personal ambitions, but in serving Toronto’s students and their families. This type of approach was termed “servant leadership” by management expert Robert Greenleaf. Writing in the 1970s, Greenleaf elaborated on this kind of leader in his important book of the same name: “The servant-leader is servant first ... That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions ... The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served.”

Thus TDSB trustees should not just rely on people who actively apply for the job of director, but should also reach out to and recruit any person who could do the job well. Selecting the right leader could be the first step in transforming the Toronto District School Board from a byword for dysfunction to an international role model on how to effectively educate one of the most diverse student populations on the planet. With the stakes so high, we have to ensure that this time we get it right.

**Sachin Maharaj** is a PhD student in educational policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto and is a teacher in the Toronto District School Board

**More on thestar.com**



[Here's what's changing in the GTA in 2016](#)

[As U.S. schools falter, Trump rises. Coincide...](#)

[The ultimate Doritos pizza nachos recipe](#)

[Look beyond job applicant's paper cred...](#)

**Editorial Board**

Meet the Star’s editorial board  
The Atkinson Principles

**The Star's Public Editor**

The Star’s Public Editor welcomes reader comments and complaints about news and feature content in the print and online editions.

- About the Public Editor
- Recent Corrections
- Report an Error

**Most Popular**

- Horoscope for Friday, Jan. 29, 2016
- Comics
- TTC problems run deeper than chronic underfunding: Hume
- Sale of concert tickets a ‘fixed game,’ inquiry finds
- Rob Ford broke rules with fundraiser ad, watchdog says
- Raptors win franchise-record 10th straight game
- Michael Phelps creates quite a distraction for free throw shooter
- Japan announces negative interest rate in bid to boost economy
- Nova Scotia girl’s death sparks acts of kindness around the world
- Durham Region gives incinerator green light