

School cancels acclaimed high school symphony orchestra

Plan outrages Lord Byng secondary parents, students

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Parents and students at Lord Byng secondary are confused and upset about plans to eliminate its student symphony orchestra in favour of a chamber music program next year.

The symphony, which was founded by teacher Scott MacLennan in 2003, is audition-based and runs a concert subscription series. MacLennan is the symphony's music director and conductor.

Each year, guest conductors work with the students. The Lord Byng Symphony Orchestra started as a club and evolved into a credit course. Most schools have band and strings courses, but none combine the two for a true orchestra. Last year, the orchestra travelled to England, Scotland and Wales to play. Students learned mid-January that the school was rearranging its programs. The school did not consult with parents or students, and parents have asked principal Maria Taddei to hold a special meeting with them Feb. 9. "We're asking her to be transparent and at least have a question and answer with parents," explained Monique Giard, whose son is in the symphony.



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Founded in 2003, the Lord Byng Symphony Orchestra runs a concert subscription series.

Giard said parents see the change in programming as drastic and don't understand the decision and how it was made. "Parents are appalled by the situation. The answer is not satisfactory--what we got is 'it's complex.' Well, that's not a satisfactory comment. We want to know more," she said.

Giard was not aware of any financial or enrolment problems. Every year, the parent group helps buy instruments, so she doesn't think that's an issue.

"[The students] are playing Schubert, Beethoven, Mozart, Tchaikovsky--top quality music and the students are top quality... I can only say when someone says it's complex that means it's personal."

The letter to parents from principal Maria Taddei, dated Jan. 13, said the school's new plans will "encourage more flexible programming, meet the needs of diverse learners and meet the challenges of creating different opportunities for high level performance."

The new chamber music program courses have been approved by the board, according to the letter, and were awaiting approval from the Ministry of Education.

Dali Burlington, Giard's 16-year-old son, said some students are upset, particularly those in the wind and string sections. The Grade 11 student plays trumpet, so his playing time is limited and it doesn't affect him as much, but he maintains school staff should have asked students what type of musical program they would prefer considering all of those involved are well-developed musicians and deserve a say about how they're taught.

"We just got a letter and that was the decision," he said. "Even if I don't have much personal disappointment regarding the replacement of the symphony with the chamber ensembles, I believe they should have consulted students and parents before making the decision."

Giard agrees. "It's very unfortunate because the opportunity for young people to be part of a symphony is very rare," she said. "Also, they get to understand if that's something they would enjoy doing in the future."

Dave Weir, school board spokesperson, said parents aren't usually consulted about the introduction of new courses. He said the school's principal is available to answer further questions from parents.