

Superintendent Guy Buller stands in front of the school's main entrance.

# Sir James Whitney facing closure

By Henry Bury

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Sir James Whitney School — once the only school for the deaf in Ontario — may be in danger of closing.

"Rumors have been circulating for many years that Sir James Whitney would be closed or divested to local school boards. Now the conversation is much more serious," superintendent Guy Buller said Tuesday.

Discussions have only begun now on how to consolidate the three provincial schools for the deaf into one operation because of declining enrolment and government-imposed financial restraints.

"We know at some point, some decision will have to be made," Buller said. "It's not going to happen in September. In the coming year or two, everyone will have a say on it."

Sir James Whitney — formerly the Ontario School for the Deaf — opened in Belleville in the 1870. For 90 years, it served the deaf from throughout Ontario.

The E.C. Drury School in Milton opened in 1963 and, in 1972, the Robarts School in London began serving deaf students.

At one time, more than 1,000 deaf students were served by the three provincial schools. Enrolment now stands at 500, including 146 junior kindergarten to Grade 13 students at Sir James Whitney.

In the early 1960s, the local school had upwards of 600 students. But enrolment has dropped steadily as deaf students integrate into regular school systems.

Sir James Whitney now serves families from throughout eastern and Northern Ontario. About half the families involved moved to Belleville specifically to be with their children.

As well, it has another 36 students in the Sagonska School — a demonstration facility for children with learning disabilities. The other two provincial schools have similar demonstration schools.

Superintendent Buller said the idea behind discussions is to consolidate the three schools for the deaf and the three demonstration schools into one location. As well, some thought is being given to satellite locations for classes of 50 to 80 deaf students.

Buller said announcements of the government consolidation study were made late last week at all three schools. He's since met with Sir James Whitney staff and students to discuss the situation. He'll meet with parents Feb. 16.

"As of this moment, no decision has been made and therefore no time lines are being proposed. These are, I stress, only preliminary discussions. We want everyone to express their views on possible closure or alternatives," Buller said.

And the local school may not necessarily be the one chosen for closure, he added.

The Dundas Street West school employs 230 full and part-time employees and has an annual operating budget of \$12.3 million.

It's located on 95 acres of land and has some 30 buildings.

Besides educating students on campus, school staff visit 80 pre-school children throughout its jurisdiction teaching them to communicate and develop the basis for learning. As well, its consultants work with 240 deaf students enrolled in various school boards.

"The school has added immeasurably to the province and community and to the deaf population in Ontario. And until we hear to the contrary, it's business as usual," said Buller.