

# Religious split feared in Renfrew

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PEMBROKE — Renfrew county residents fear the separate school board's plan to share schools in communities where there is one high school will split this county along religious lines.

The fear echoes in the sprawling Madawaska Valley District High School, which is more than a school to the community of Barry's Bay. It's a meeting place, the only large one in town besides the town hall, legion and church hall.

But because of full provincial funding for Catholic high schools, families discuss the high school's future with voices filled with concern.

In communities where there is only one high school, the separate school board plans to share the high school with the public board, creating a Catholic high school within the existing school.

"Nobody wants the school split in half," says Shirley Cybulskie, 15, of Wilno. "We're going to lose a lot of our friends."

Her friend Bonnie Coulas, 17, agrees.

"My parents don't like it," says the Killaloe girl, who attended a Catholic elementary school.

"Religious lines are now blurred," says a Catholic teacher at the high school. "This (school funding) seems to be pulling us apart."

Sean Conway says he's been in his Renfrew North riding almost every weekend since he was appointed education minister, and while he recognizes that there is "some concern," he doesn't sense a feeling of fear among local residents.

"I should make very clear that one of the fundamental principles of Bill 30 (the separate schools bill) is that we are going to allow extension only in those areas where public education will not be jeopardized," he says.

Barry's Bay principal Geoff Post says having two schools in one building is "not merely a question of who's in charge. There are so many technical problems."

This fall, the provincial government extended public money to Grade 11 in Catholic schools. Until now, separate schools have been funded only to the end of Grade 10.

It plans to extend financing to the end of high school if the provincial Court of Appeal rules that full funding is constitutional.

This fall, the Renfrew Catholic board began offering Grade 11 in its two high schools and next year it plans to proceed with Grade 12.

But a few years hence, once full funding is in place, the separate system is looking at sharing high schools in communities such as Deep River, Barry's Bay, Eganville, Renfrew and Arnprior, says Frank Turner, director of education for the separate board.

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Sign of the times  
for school system

The public board has seven high schools in the county.

"Our plans are very tentative beyond next year. But the idea of sharing is to afford Catholic ratepayers, where it is possible, a Catholic secondary school within a school that has students from both systems."

Although the board hasn't developed a model of how the sharing would work, it could mean existing schools would have two administrations and two sets of teachers for some courses.

"It's going to be a challenge to be able to establish within one building the kind of atmosphere we want for our students."

The county board already has declining enrolment. Besides the natural decline, it lost 45 students and three teachers to the separate system this fall because of full funding of Grade 11.

There are 5,370 students in the board's secondary schools and 6,311 students in the



Hinsperger chairs public board

elementary school system.

"One of the major concerns is the divisiveness (school sharing) will bring to our community," says Barbara Hinsperger, chairman of the public board of education.

The board has said it will not discuss school sharing until after the constitutionality of Bill 30 — separate schools legislation — is determined in the courts.

Hinsperger says public meetings are planned to make people in the county aware of Bill 30 and the board's concerns.

The mood in communities throughout the county "is one of absolute unrest and fear," she says. "Most of the people I talk to want things to stay the way they are."

They can remember the tension that used to exist in the area.

"I can remember the absolute competition and the meanness that went on," says the chairman, who lives in Eganville.

"Our rotary clubs, our legions, church affairs, all have to be supported by everyone in a small community to make them viable."

The county extends about 200 kilometres from Arnprior to beyond Deux Rivières along the Ottawa River and about 120 kilometres north to south from Pembroke to the border of Hastings county.

Towns such as Eganville and Pembroke have large German and Irish communities, school board officials say. The population is roughly split down the middle between Protestants and Catholics.

The town of Deep River, where Mackenzie High School is located, is a government town with a cross-section of well-educated public servants who come from across the country.

Arnprior and Renfrew also are fairly evenly split between Catholics and Protestants.

Turner says the board will not propose a block transfer of students from the public to Catholic system. If schools are to be shared, students will be phased into the separate program at the rate of a grade a year.

"We don't propose any change for students now in high school."

"It's incumbent on us to create a school that will be effective. "We're not going to do anything or present ourselves in a way in which we would be perceived as trying to impose our philosophy or objectives on any students. We're not out to do any missionary work in the community."

Turner says sharing will likely start in the Eganville area at Opeongo High School, where interest has been high.

"Sharing may happen only in one instance or a couple of instances or maybe not at all," says Joey Trimm, separate board chairman.

"There may be some communities that won't want shared schools at all," he says. "We have to face that fact."

## Education minister escapes funding fallout at home

Education Minister Sean Conway's government car winds its way through the streets of Pembroke to a Herbert Street bungalow near Kinsmen Park.

It's here every weekend that the 34-year-old MPP for Renfrew North unwinds after a week as one of the major decision-makers at Queen's Park. Here, he moves into a hectic schedule of politics, but of a local nature.

Here, Mr. Minister becomes just plain Sean.

Although the public school board chairman charges full funding to separate schools is "causing unrest and fear" in Renfrew County, people aren't blaming "Sean."

Even public trustee Stewart Mark, who said Catholic school funding would be the "gang rape" of the County's public school system, says the fault lies with the Conservatives for introducing the plan.

As a past-president of the local Conservative association, Mark says he's "more annoyed at the Conservatives over the issue than I am with the Liberals. At least the Liberals have been consistent in their position."

Despite the unrest over the issue, Mark says Conway has a political cushion in the

county and likely won't be affected personally because he's the minister who's implementing full-funding legislation.

"He (Conway) is a very capable politician," says Mark.

"He's very well-spoken, very personable. Geez, he's a great guy to spend some time

Geez, he's a great guy to spend some time with. If things are dull, he'll keep you entertained if nothing else.

— Tory opponent

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Ask Barbara Hinsperger, chairman of the public school board, however, and she says Conway's political future may well depend on what happens in schools.

Hinsperger is especially concerned about the future of single-school communities in the riding — communities where the sepa-

rate board wants to share the local high school and divide it into separate and public sections.

But the minister says he's following events in Renfrew County.

"My future is at stake in every general election and that's as it should be. I'm quite prepared to put my record and reputation on the line at election time and I remind you that I did the last time. I didn't disguise where I stood."

"There are a number of single-school communities like Barry's Bay and Eganville where there is some concern about the future of the high school," Conway says.

Conway's parents now live on Conway Street in Barry's Bay and his brother owns the pharmacy in Eganville. The rest of his family lives in the Toronto area.

One of six children, he was born in Pembroke and raised in Barry's Bay. His Irish roots in the region go back to the 1840s. His grandfather, Thomas Murray, was the provincial Liberal member for Renfrew South for 20 years.

The education minister went to separate school until Grade 10 and completed his high schooling at Madawaska Valley District High School.