

Religion classes are a possibility

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The Renfrew County Board of Education in general and Opeongo High School in particular would be more than willing to offer religious education courses to students.

Addressing a meeting on the impact of full funding of separate secondary education on Renfrew County Board of Education schools at OHS last Tuesday evening, both principal Don Whillans and board trustee Art Charbonneau said credit courses in the subject could be offered for students who wish to take it.

Questions would likely arise about how to fit the course into the scheme of things "but there's nothing that can't be resolved," Mr. Whillans said.

"The Renfrew County Board of Education is just as concerned about religious education," said trustee Charbonneau in response to a parent who commented the faith dimension must be looked at if the board is seriously concerned about the future viability of Opeongo. "We're prepared to do what we have to do. The Renfrew County Board of Education has no objection of having priests come into the school to teach religion."

While it appeared that separate school supporters are interested in a religious education course, they stressed that it be an option, not compulsory. From its end, the RCBE has made a request to the Ministry of Education that it be given authorization to offer such a course, but thus far the ministry has yet to reply.

Religious education was just one aspect of full funding which was raised in what RCBE chairman Barbara Hinsperger called a "very, very good dialogue" between the board and residents from the Opeongo High area.

The meeting was the first on the agenda of six public meetings the RCBE has planned in the county. Fielding questions on behalf of the board from the stage were Mrs. Hinsperger, Mr. Charbonneau and trustee Dr. Stewart Mark.

At either end of the stage were administration officials, including Director of Education Howard Hempstead and a number of

trustees, Ted Barron, vice-chairman Ron Grenier, Kathy Marion, Lorraine Flynn, Clarence Vice, Aline Maguire, Betty Brisbois and Elmer Raycroft.

Parents, ratepayers, politicians and other interested citizens were in the attentive audience which filled up about three-quarters of the school's cafetorium. Their questions, which were being recorded by the board, were for the most part intelligent and right to the point.

"I'm gratified by this evening's turnout," said Mrs. Hinsperger at the start of the proceedings. "Everyone here is affected by the government's bill (30).

Not Practical

Trustee Mark said the school-within-a-school concept that has been proposed by the Renfrew County Roman Catholic Separate School Board is neither "practical or possible."

Interestingly, the RCRCSSB had just announced the night before the Opeongo meeting that it was going to hold off on the school-within-a-school plan for awhile and concentrate on its existing Catholic secondary schools in Pembroke and Renfrew.

The trustee said the concept "is not simply a matter of sharing schools," noting some philosophy would vary and administration could be rocky with two principals receiving directives from two distinct school boards.

"We don't think you can have two bosses within one school," said trustee Mark bluntly.

Mr. Whillans combed through a short history of Opeongo, where he has been principal since it opened in the fall of 1968. He noted that during the years the school has encouraged teachers to include Christian values in their instruction and has "developed its own unique personality, style and identity."

Bringing students from different communities and backgrounds has enabled the young graduates to compete with students from across the province and "because they came together and only because they came together were we able to provide the options."

See page 3

Full-funding will mean sharing courses at rural school: principal

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EGANVILLE — The principal of Opeongo High School says courses and options must be shared by public and separate high school students if full funding of Roman Catholic schools is implemented.

"Coming together to share courses and options is the only way we will keep the programs we offer here," said principal Don Whillans.

Speaking at a meeting called by the Renfrew County Board of Education to discuss Bill 30, which would provide provincial financing to separate schools through Grade 13.

The meeting was the first of a series sessions arranged by the public board that are to be held across the county.

Whillans said he "sees little possibility" for establishing separate classes in single high school communities such as the area served by Opeongo High School.

Declining enrolment over the years has forced the school to combine classes to keep certain program options, he said.

Whillans approves of sharing courses and programs, but rejects the idea of forming two school systems under one roof at Opeongo.

Religion

From page 1

Enrolment is declining at Opeongo though and stands at 659 students today, making it difficult for administrators to offer options. Mr. Whillans predicted OHS will "bottom out" at 500-525 students after earlier stating that studies have shown that a school under 600 is not viable, unable to offer a full program.

"The problem with declining enrolment is critical," he said. "Already we have lost some options, and we have combined many other small classes to save courses."

In 1971, for instance, there were no combined classes while there are 44 this year. The number of classes has also dropped from 311, 14 years ago, to 210 this year.

Taking it a step further, Mr. Whillans said he had looked at the numbers carefully and offering one class for Roman Catholics and another for "public" students is statistically, virtually impossible. Thirty percent of the students at the school are Catholic.

"We can't split a class because it's too small, and we can't split a

combined class, because it doesn't split evenly."

More questions arise about the logistics of offering a separate Catholic curriculum. "In addition to hiring more teachers to deliver the curriculum, more department heads would be required to develop the necessary curriculum and more superintendents would be required to supervise instruction from the 'Catholic' perspective," he said.

Overall, Mr. Whillans told the audience, "the staff would be increased by one-third to deliver the quality of programs and service intended, and we all know the major cost of education is salaries."

Harking back to the formation of Opeongo, Mr. Whillans remembered that people wrangled over a number of items "but they did agree on one thing and nothing divided them on this objective, which is to provide the best education for the students."

"I'm challenging you, whether you like it or not," he told the audience. "At some point the community is going to have to get together again."

Rev. Ian Fleming of Melville United Church in Eganville is firmly against the school-within-a-school concept and read a statement to that effect.

Stressing the statement is without prejudice or bigotry, Rev. Fleming said he was not only talking as a minister but also as a member of the community with a deep interest in the education system.

A separation of students within one school, he said, "would be a tragedy in a society and world where people seek unity and understanding." It would also be a "disservice" to the students.

Gus Cammaert, principal of St. Michael's School in Douglas, pointed out that Catholic ratepayers had supported both the separate and public systems for years and "congratulated" former Premier Bill Davis on his stand to extend full funding. He noted that perhaps the public system is presently going through rather a painful period of adjustment.