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NEWS

HDBS hires more EAs, ESLs

By Tim Whitnell
Metroland Media Group

Halton's public school board is hiring more educational assistants and English Second Language teachers.

At the inaugural meeting of the new board of trustees on Dec. 3, the 11-person board, including its six newly-elected members, waived the usual rules of protocol in order to discuss and vote that night on separate requests from board staff to add more EAs and ESLs.

Trustees voted unanimously to hire 30 more EAs and four more ESLs.

Board staff initially requested an additional 24 EAs but Education Director David Euale said the number sought was increased to 30 in time for the board meeting in light of pressing and anticipated needs in schools.

"This request (for 30) came forward a couple of days ago," he told trustees. "Twenty-four (more) only meets the needs of today; 30 would be a better number," he said, noting the board's 2014-15 budget can absorb the extra cost.

The addition of 30 EAs will cost the board an estimated \$757,500. Twenty-four EAs will be added as soon as possible and spread across the region; the other six EAs will be used when needed.

Educational Assistants support students with special education or English Language Learning (ELL) needs and also help with safety and instruction with the board's four high school Food School programs.

Educational Assistants typically have an EA certificate from a community college, are an Early Childhood Educator (ECE), a personal support worker or a qualified teacher.

Burlington trustee Amy Collard, re-elected as vice-chair of the board on Dec. 3, said at the meeting she is pleased by the hiring of more EAs noting the board has added 73 during the current school year, more than in the previous three school years combined (68). In early November, the board added 7.5 fulltime-equivalent employee (FTE) EAs.

The board now has an overall EA allotment of 773.5 FTEs. That makes for a ratio of just less than 80 pupils per EA, the board's lowest ratio in the last five years.

A board superintendent says they may

have to add even more EAs at some point.

"With our board's growth it's hard to say because we don't have a crystal ball. When you're population is stable the vast majority of students start in September..." but the Halton public board's rapid growth in north Oakville and Milton makes the process less predictable, said Mark Zonneveld.

He said the extra six EAs approved by trustees will allow staff to respond to school needs as they arise.

Among the factors driving the need is a general increase across Ontario of complex needs and medically fragile students entering school systems each year, new students coming from other school boards with complex needs and enrolment growth in Halton, mostly in the early primary grades and in full-day kindergarten (FDK).

FDK's full implementation as of 2014-15 has increased the number of kindergarten students with special education needs entering the school system; increased instructional time for students in FDK requires double the instructional support for them, says the board.

The board also will add four FTE English Second Language (ESL) elementary teachers as of Jan. 1, 2015.

The extra ESLs are needed due to the addition of 236 more high-needs English Language Learner students at board schools.

Those students require the direct support of an ESL teacher for things like understanding simply worded instructions, simple patterns in text, upper and lower case letters, and to locate information in text using visual cues.

"It takes about seven years for most students to become proficient in the English language," states a board report, advocating for more ESLs.

Lower needs ELL pupils also require support but it is provided indirectly by an ESL teacher, in concert with in-class support by the regular classroom teacher.

"The approval of 4.0 FTE ESL staff would provide needed support to large numbers of students in Milton and north Oakville with some additional support to other areas," stated a report presented at the last board meeting.

The cost to add the four FTE ESL teachers is estimated at \$200,000. It will be included in the revised budget estimates to be presented to the board in January.

Eighth Line closed beginning this week

Eighth Line will be closed between Steeles Ave. and Five Sideroad during daylight hours beginning Monday until Dec. 22 so hydro poles can be replaced.

One lane will be open for local traffic, emergency vehicles and access to local businesses during the closure. The full project will take four to six weeks.