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NEWS

HALTON DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD WELCOMES POSTPONEMENT OF AUTISM PROGRAM CHANGES

KATHY YANCHUS
kyanchus@metroland.com

Controversial changes to the province's Ontario Autism Program (OAP) have been postponed six months from the initial April 1 deadline, providing a temporary reprieve for parents and school boards across the province.

The announcement from the government was made the day following a regular meeting of the Halton District School Board, where preparations were discussed for an influx of more than 103 students with autism who would be "increasing their attendance" at HDSB schools, said Mark Zonneveld, superintendent of Education, Student Services at the March 20 meeting.

Although Zonneveld said the board was ready for the April 1 deadline - as new stu-

dents regularly come into the system - the difference was in the numbers arriving at once and the complexity of needs.

Another detriment to the quick turnaround was the timing in the school year, added Stuart Miller, director of education, at the meeting, putting pressure on the children and staff to implement unfamiliar routines within the remaining three months.

"Many of these students have routines and their routines work well for them and their routines will change."

The most recent announcement from the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services minister, Lisa MacLeod, was welcome news, said Miller.

"And I believe it will provide us more time to be prepared for either an influx of

students and/or some attending our schools full time (some students are already in the system, but do not attend every day)," commented Miller. "We absolutely do our best to support and accommodate all students in our system and in particular those with special needs. We do so by being prepared and informed of the needs of the students prior to their arrival (as part of the process).

Although the board was preparing for students coming back or becoming full time through the OAP, the delay will enhance its efforts to do so, added Miller.

In its quest to clear a backlog of 23,000 children on the waitlist for private behavioural therapy, a new funding model was presented by the government in February that sent parents

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