

'SHORT-SIGHTED': MORE LAYOFFS, PROGRAM CUTS AS HALTON DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD FINALIZES ITS BUDGET

KATHY YANCHUS
kyanchus@metroland.com

The Halton District School Board's budget has yet to be made public, but there is already confirmation of more layoffs and a "significant program" cut proposed.

Recent layoff notices to child and youth counsellors, social workers and speech language pathologists represented a 5.5 per cent reduction in front line service to the most vulnerable students, said Tom Golightly, president of the Professional Student Services Personnel (PSSP) District 20 Halton of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF).

"At a time when student needs

and pupil enrolment are increasing, this reduction in service levels will mean that children lose support and wait longer for psychoeducational and speech and language assessments," said Golightly.

"Fewer students will have access to social worker and child and youth counsellor support in their schools, leaving our neediest students without help. The long-term financial and social cost will outweigh any short-term financial savings."

The "short-sighted" cuts will affect students struggling with learning disabilities, autism, mental health illness, behavioural challenges, poverty, poor attendance and other complex needs, said Golightly.

The fallout of the recent potentially redundant notices issued to 154 elementary and 154 secondary school teachers will greatly impact the board's operations and student learning experiences, Director of Education Stuart Miller has already warned.

Among those whose jobs were eliminated were Bronte Creek Project instructors; the environmental leadership course is now on the chopping block. Students who have chosen the four-credit outdoor program, which has been in existence for almost 30 years, will have to re-select courses.

"We talk about this just about every year at budget time because it's a very expensive pro-

gram," said David Boag, Associate Director of Education. "There's no disagreement around the quality of the program; we think it's a good program for kids. We've debated it a lot this year."

With a budget estimated at more than half a million, it was hard to justify the numbers, said Boag. (Costs included transportation, lease of the Sidrabene property on Appleby Line, two fulltime teachers plus two teaching assistants).

"For the last several years we've only gotten on average 15 kids per class. In addition to the one teacher in the class, there's also a teaching assistant so we have two adults with on average 15 kids (per class), whereas in our schools, we're going to have one adult on average and in many cases, numbers (of students) into the mid-30s, so there's a significant discrepancy there," said Boag.

"Our recommendation is that this program no longer run, but ultimately it's the board of trustees that will make the decision," said Boag.

For much of its 30-year histo-

ry, the Bronte Creek Project had between 60-80 students per year with a waitlist. About 13 years ago, due to dwindling numbers, the program was divided into two, one for Grades 11/12 and a new Grade 10 course.

"It would be huge loss to students to cancel it, especially at a time when teaching kids about nature and our planet is so important," said parent Denise Davy, who urged the board to look at creative ways to save programs, by charging a fee and/or arranging for parents to carpool.

"Once the budget comes out, you'll see lots of other things in the budget where reductions have occurred for other what we would consider really quality and important resources, people and programs," said Boag.

Another program caught between smaller class sizes and budget restrictions is the Extended French program which has also been recommended for elimination.

Students entering the program in Grade 7 next year, however, will be allowed to complete

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45 Mountainview Rd. N., Georgetown

905.877.7958

hassellsauto@bellnet.ca • hassellautomotive.com