

HDSB PASSES DEFICIT BUDGET IN WAKE OF DOUG FORD FUNDING CHANGES

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Facing the loss of millions in provincial funding, Halton District School Board (HDSB) trustees passed an operating budget of almost \$755 million last Wednesday, \$8.3 million lower than the current year's budget.

The "significant" shortfall in funding has resulted in the board being in the "unusual" position of running a deficit of \$2.5 million, while anticipating a 1.3 per cent increase in growth.

"We will not be the only board in the province with a deficit budget this year," said Stuart Miller, HDSB's director of education.

Challenges also resulted from increased operational pressures and a per pupil level of funding that is below the provincial average.

Jobs and programs across the board have been

THE ISSUE: FUNDING A GROWTH BOARD WITH A DEFICIT BUDGET

LOCAL IMPACT: FEWER TEACHERS, COURSES; MORE PUPILS PER CLASSROOM

slashed or outright eliminated. A total of 189 positions are gone, affecting classroom teachers, teacher librarians, special education and ESL resource teachers, IT support, math coaches and corporate staff. Departmental budgets have been decreased in the areas of transportation, technology and professional development.

Reductions to more than 800 classes available to sec-

ondary students will result in higher secondary class sizes and possible cancellation of some compulsory and elective classes, said Miller.

"We have lost \$22 million in revenue due to new (Ministry of Education) education reforms and changes in funding, and made conscious decisions to reduce \$25 million in costs. Of course, those are netted off by growth and the costs associated with growth," said superintendent of business services, Roxana Negoj, who outlined a two-year deficit recovery plan.

Come this fall, fewer staff will be doing the work associated with those lost positions. Staff will also be absorbing the anticipated influx of 812 new students, said Negoj.

There was some good news: Of the 154 elementary school teachers declared redundant several weeks ago,

all but a few were recalled last week to permanent positions and the remainder are anticipated to be recalled by Aug. 31, said Debra McFadden, human resources executive officer.

In the secondary panel, of the 154 teachers declared potentially redundant, 72 of those teachers have been recalled full time; 31 have been partially recalled, with the remaining 51 positions lost to the board, said McFadden. With 24.85 students to every teacher this fall, the board moves toward a provincial target of 28:1. HDSB's ratio is the highest in the province and growth factors into that equation, said McFadden.

Every teacher vacancy generated by growth, retirement, resignation or leave of absence, is one fewer teaching position that must be protected. That position is therefore lost to the board and not replaced, and that's

how class sizes rise, she explained.

"So, we can't hire teachers, so we just stuff classrooms with more students," said HDSB chair Andrea Grebenc in a blunt interpretation of the challenging position the board finds itself in this year due to funding shortfalls.

"At the end of the day there are fewer teachers working with our students in our buildings and the impact of that is yet to be measured," commented Halton Hills trustee Jeanne Gray.

Miller and Negoj predicted even greater budgeting challenges next year.

"At best, they'll be the same, but they won't get better," said Miller. "At this point in time we anticipate the challenges will be greater and more positions will be lost."

Longtime Oakville trustee Kelly Amos said she has never experienced a deficit

budget before, "so this is a very unusual and difficult situation especially for the lowest funded board in the province. It's kind of concerning."

Amos, along with other trustees, thanked staff for their hard work in coming up with a document "that we can live with but not happily."

"Many of us around the table are very ambivalent about this budget. There are things in there we wish we didn't have to present to trustees," added Miller.

A capital budget of just over \$64M was also passed.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY:

Metroland Halton continues to shine a light on the challenges the Halton District School Board faced this year in compiling its budget in the face of significant provincial funding shortfalls and increased growth.

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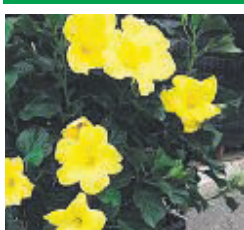
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