

School Board faces big challenges in '99

BY ETHEL GARDINER

Chair, Halton District School Board

1998 was a year of unprecedented change in the history of education in Ontario. The fewer School Boards Act (Bill 104) eliminated boards of education and created district school boards. The results, as the title of the act implies, were fewer boards, and fewer trustees involved in the governance of education in the province of Ontario.

The Halton board was left as a "stand-alone" board, and thus, was not impacted by the significant restructuring problems of amalgamating boards. The number of trustees representing constituents in Halton was reduced from 18 to 10.

The Education Quality Improvement Act (Bill 160) also brought significant change in terms of funding public education, staffing and service delivery. The Halton District School Board has made adjustments to staffing and program options in direct response to the funding formula, in order to live within the parameters of the model.

I have been asked to write an article which would address some of the challenges to be faced by the Halton District School Board in 1999, so I will not elaborate on the specific changes and challenges of the past year, but instead focus on what I see to be some of the major issues for the Board in the coming year. I would like to make it very clear that my comments reflect my opinion, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the corporate body.

I believe that the following will be some of the critical issues with which our board must deal in 1999.

Accommodation - The Halton District School Board has undertaken an accommodation study which will ideally increase the number of students within walking distance of their schools, reduce the number of portable classrooms and decrease transportation costs. Halton is one of the high growth areas of the province. Like many boards, we are struggling with the issue of eliminating excess capacity in our schools in order to trigger provincial dollars for construction of badly-needed schools in growth areas. Ultimately when we are dealing with eliminating excess capacity, we are also dealing with the emotional issue of school closures.

Trustees will have to make some tough decisions around our accommodation problems, which are increasing with every new subdivision that pops up in Halton Region. If we continue with the status quo, we will see the need for many more portable classrooms. As an example, in Halton Hills alone, the area which I represent it is estimated that by the year 2002, the Board would place 70 portables in the Georgetown area in order to cope with expected growth unless new schools are built. In my opinion, the closure of some schools in Halton is a necessity.

Establishment of a Policy Governance Model for school board operations - Some boards in the province have already established a governance model. This will be a high priority for our Board in 1999. As stated in the Education Improvement Commission's document "The Road Ahead II - A Report on the Role of School Boards and Trustees", we need to create a vision for our system. This should be achieved through extensive consultation with staff and our communities. Policies should be established and evaluated with a view to achieving that vision. Our budget allocations must be consistent with the priorities of our vision and our poli-

cies across the region.

In short, everything we undertake at the Halton District School Board must relate to our vision which would provide educational excellence for our students. Clearly we need a governance model which establishes common ground; one which all trustees, staff, schools and communities can embrace in order to achieve the vision for our system. Understandably, a task such as this will not happen overnight, but it is hoped that as the year progresses, we will have made major gains towards a shared vision.

Leadership - Our system recently reinstated a leadership program which will hopefully attract and support potential leaders from within our system. Over the past few years we have offered little to staff in terms of preparation for advancement to principal or vice-principal positions. Given the expected number of school administrators leaving our system through retirement, it is critical for us to actively provide leadership training to exemplary educators in Halton.

Teacher Shortage - With fewer and fewer young people entering Ontario teacher training facilities, and more and more teachers retiring, the Halton District School Board, as well as all boards in Ontario, may soon face a severe teacher shortage. Already, we are having some difficulty filling positions in secondary schools, specifically in Math and Science areas.

I believe that we must begin an active program to recruit teachers, one which promotes Halton as the finest place in the province in which to teach.

Restructuring of Special Education Delivery Model - As a result of the fact that the Board must adhere to the funding model, and with our inability to increase revenue through local taxation, we will be spending six to eight million dollars less on the delivery of Special Education programs. Clearly, it will be a considerable challenge for our Board to produce a delivery model which will provide the level of service that people have come to expect in Halton. We must continue to meet the needs of our exceptional students, but given our position, a new structure for service is essential.

Curriculum Implementation and Secondary School Reform - Staff developments will be a major focus in the new year. As staff deals with new curriculum, and as we prepare for a four-year high school program, the need for intensive staff training is imperative. We have established system training teams which have been working with every high school on Secondary School Reform and on curriculum training at the elementary level. All boards in Ontario will find the extent and pace of program change a challenge in 1999.

As a Board, we must also address issues such as:

- * Enhancing staff morale
- * Ensuring, through diligent inspection, mould-free portable classrooms
- * Improving communication strategies throughout the system and the region

Suffice it to say, 1999 will present significant challenges for our Board, but not importantly, we must focus on the positive things happening in our schools, and always take the time to celebrate the excellence of our staff and students.



YOUTH FUNDING: Rosslyn Dowell (second from left), executive director of Halton Hills Community Support and Information (HHCSI), accepts a \$15,000 cheque from the Healthy Community Funding Consortium to help open and operate a youth drop-in/ service centre in Acton. With Dowell are, left to right: Consortium chair Halton Hills Councillor John Day, Mayor Marilyn Serjeantson, Halton Health department representative Maggie Connolly, Halton Hills representative Stacey Green and Consortium co-chair Halton Councillor Lynda Schreiber.

- Submitted photo

A New Year's Dawning

So, all the hoopla is over for another year. Time to put away the decorations and hunker down for the long winter's night. For those with a real tree, remember that next week is collection week. For those with a fake tree I only have one word. Boooo. Christmas trees should smell like pine; not polyvinyl chloride. Pine spray air freshener does not count.

Did you have a nice Christmas? I hope so. The O'Leary's had a wonderful, if somewhat chaotic, Christmas. I was reminded that four big kids make more noise arguing than four little ones. Still, no one was killed, so I guess the season was a success.

Your scribbler made out like a bandit. In addition to a sorely needed new camera, Santa brought shirts and sweaters galore. In our age old family tradition, "If it gurgles, it's for Daddy," daughter Christine came through with some Christmas cheer. Our oldest got me a new micro-wave. Working kids give technology.

It's enough to bring a tear to these old eyes. My brother brought me a detailed map of the Forbidden City from his recent trip to Peking, China. My sister gave me a brick. So, all in all, it was a great Christmas.

Now, all we have to look forward to before spring is February; A.K.A. Yuck. We need a mid-winter long weekend holiday. MP Reed, please note: if you won't stop over-taxing us at least give us a break.

For all those who enjoyed the warming effects of El Nino and poo-pooed the effects of La Nina I only have one question. Did you enjoy the snow storm last weekend? It was the worst winter storm I can recall for a long time.

It's funny how the worst of weather brings out the best in people. Our street wasn't plowed until the early afternoon. Until then, it was pretty well impassable. Several cars got stuck in the road and neighbours from both sides of the street dropped shovels and pushed the vehicles until they were freed. Smiles were exchanged all around.

My vans were drifted up to the

The Way I See It

with Mike O'Leary



windows. I was looking forward (not) to a long and difficult job digging them out. My youngest daughter and I had just begun (love them fem-lib) when my neighbour Scott Lee arrived with his snow blower. Needless to say I was delighted and grateful. After digging me out he helped another neighbour before heading home. Then I noticed David Fleet also out with his snowblower clearing another's drive. Neighbours like this are priceless. It was darn cold last Sunday yet these men stayed out in the elements to render assistance. I wonder if they, and all the others I saw that day helping out, realize how much we appreciate their help. I hope so. Virtue may be its own reward but a pat on the back is also welcomed. Thank you all who helped out on my street and all over town. On the news front things were somewhat slow over the holiday season. At least that's how it seemed to be but we were pretty busy. There were a few stories that caught my eye.

There was a heart wrenching story on Christmas eve about baby Robbie who needs a heart transplant. It brought to mind a story I read some months ago which claimed that we Canadians have a poor record when it comes to organ donations. There used to be a form on the back of our Driver's Licence but now with the new plastic ones I'm not sure it's there. Evidently, the most important thing is to let your family know of your wishes. They can over-ride even your written wishes I'm told. Organ donation is a very personal decision with no right or wrong. But it is something we should all consider. In cases like baby Robbie, it is the ultimate gift of life.

The end of the year brought a bizarre tale of a police shooting that

left one man dead and his son critically wounded. Another son was jailed. One police officer was wounded and another beaten during the altercation. Two other officers are apparently unharmed; physically that is. There is a publication ban on the evidence presented at the bail trial but I predict this case is going to be a blockbuster. There is obviously something very odd about this incident. Stay tuned.

The story about prisoners being able to open new high tech cell locking systems caused me some initial concerns. It seems the cons could jimmy the locks with their combs. Ultimately, the story went on, provincial officials were able to correct the situation. I was greatly relieved. Not because I had fears about escapers - no siree. I was afraid, given the state of our prison systems, that one of the cons had sued the government for \$10 million for stress caused by him breaking his comb in an effort to escape. And that the government had paid it.

A last word about my Christmas brick. They tore down my old grade school I was one of the first students at St. Gregory's in Etobicoke. As a fundraiser this year's Grade 8 class saved some of the bricks and had a nice brass plate mounted on them showing the dates the school operated. Actually, it was my niece Emma's idea. My sister got one for all of us who went there. She also knows I handwrite this column, in pencil. So she got me a beautiful rosewood pencil box full of new pencils for a new year; one of which I am using right now.

I resurrected my Grade 8 graduation picture and it and my brick grace my desk. As does my new pencil box which I hope is full of brilliant columns.

I shall treasure both items forever, as I do my sister. Thoughtfulness is always in vogue.