

## In a bid to reduce excess school space

# Halton board toying with idea of junior kindergarten

By DENNIS SMITH  
Special

Halton District School Board may look to four-year-olds to prevent school closures.

The board is expected to approve at tonight's (Wednesday) meeting a cost/benefit analysis on the implementation of junior kindergarten. Halton's Catholic board already provides JK, which pupils usually start at age 4.

The public board is considering junior kindergarten to reduce excess school space. The board must eliminate a capacity surplus of 6,773 pupil places to ensure provincial funding for new schools. Final decisions are expected by Dec. 16.

Education director Dusty Papke emphasized there's no recommendation yet to actually implement junior kindergarten. He said the board is starting

with the financial impact of establishing JK and whether it can save schools.

"We aren't that far along and we don't know if it's doable," said Papke. "But at the end of the day, no one wants to be in a position of being told we didn't look at all the alternatives to closing schools."

The education director said JK could reduce the board's capacity surplus in two ways.

He noted junior kindergarten takes up more space, so implementing it could reduce the number of classrooms. And the addition of JK students would reduce surplus in elementary school capacity.

"We have space for it in some schools, but there would be overcrowding in some areas," said Papke. "It's not as clear cut as it seems. Having junior kindergarten may not make a lot of sense."

Provincial funding is available for extra pupil places, but



DUSTY PAPKE

the look at junior kindergarten, but adding the grade has merit, according to Milton trustee Erica Andrew.

"There are educational programming reasons for having it," said Andrew, who made the JK feasibility motion. "The earlier you get students in, the better it is. That's general knowledge."

Trustees were unanimous about wanting a cost analysis of junior kindergarten, but there were reservations about implementing JK, she added.

Junior kindergarten is strongly supported by the Elementary Teachers Feder-

ation of Ontario. "We think it adapts the students to what school is all about and it helps families who can't afford nursery school," said Kathy Clarke, president of the ETFO Halton. "It's good to provide a head start for kids. The earlier they're learning, the better it's going to be."

The official surplus at elementary schools is about 2,800 spaces. But Papke said its actually about 2,000, because a few Halton schools closed some time ago should be calculated.

JK and kindergarten students are counted as filling half a space because they attend school part-time.

He said there an infinite number of options to consider if JK is approved.

"At some point, we'd have to make a decision about whether it's done in clusters, at selected schools or across the board."

He said the board would

probably break even on JK operating costs, but the financial impact of starting it up would have to be determined.

To follow a provincial government mandate, the board provided junior kindergarten at some pilot schools A few years ago. When the government changed, the board dropped the program.

The board is also expected to remove 38 schools from its closure review at tonight's session. The public portion of the meeting will begin at 8 p.m. in the board offices, which are located on Guelph Line, just north of Upper Middle Road.

Public information sessions on closures and consolidations will be held Thursday at 7 p.m. at several Halton high schools, including M. M. Robinson and Nelson in Burlington.

The next accommodation management committee meeting will be held Nov. 3 at 7 p.m. in the board office.

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