

Board blames province for 'almost impossible' fiscal bind

KIM ARNOTT
Special to The IFP

The provincial government must step up to the plate to help the Halton District School Board out of an "almost impossible" financial bind that board officials say was created by provincial rules.

"It is an untenable situation," Steven Parfeniuk, the board's superintendent of business told trustees at a meeting on Wednesday night. "I think we need to make sure the Ministry (of Education) solves the problems that it created for us and other school boards in the province."

For years, the Halton District School Board, along with many others across Ontario, complained bitterly about the funding formula for building new schools.

Imposed by the province, the formula required boards to either fill, or eliminate vacant class space before new schools could be built.

It was a formula in Halton that pitted north against south, and forced the school board to embark on a divi-

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sive program of closing underutilized schools in areas like south Burlington and south Oakville, in order to gain provincial grant money to build new schools in rapidly-growing areas north of the QEW such as Halton Hills.

Despite the pain of the process, however, the board established a plan to rid itself of what was known as "excess capacity," so that desperately-needed new schools could be built.

"The board had a well-conceived plan in place in 2003 to deal with its capital construction needs," explained Parfeniuk.

In the midst of that plan, the current Liberal government was elected to Queen's Park, and, in December 2003, declared a moratorium on school closures.

While that helped to save pupil places in older and established areas south of the highway, it has also left the board with a funding formula hangover.

Between 1999 and 2006, the board has built nearly 8,000 new pupil places in 13 schools, on the basis of a plan that would have provided it with the grants to finance that construction.

But because expected school closures didn't take place, the board now has what Parfeniuk calls "a \$2.6 million disconnect" between the amount of grants it will receive and the amount of money it needs to cover the debt incurred for the construction of those 13 schools.

That disconnect, also described as "stranded debt" by board financial staff, threatens the board's ability to build new schools over the coming few years.

It may even require the board to dip into its operational funding to help cover the cost of financing its debt.

Parfeniuk told trustees that the problem is a very serious one that the board needs to pressure the province to resolve.

"It's the stranded debt issue that allows us the ability to build new schools or not build new schools," he said, noting that otherwise, the board will need to funnel capital grants to cover the cost of paying for existing debt.

If the issue is resolved, the board expects to be in a position to build up to six new elementary schools in the next five years.

However, those schools may have to be pared down versions of the types of elementary schools that have been built in the board recently.

Provincial funding doesn't include the cost of added features like multi-purpose rooms, auditoriums, science and technology labs and air-conditioning - features the board has been including in its design of new schools.

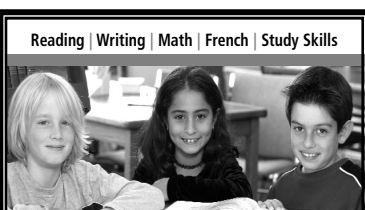
"We build an excellent elementary school," said Parfeniuk, who admitted the board would have to find a way to pare back about \$1 million in costs from each new school, in order to finance the construction of six schools.

The two new elementary schools that the board will open in September each cost about \$9.5 million.

In the near future, Parfeniuk doesn't see the board receiving adequate funding to build a new secondary school, despite demand from some expanding areas in Halton, including north-east Burlington.

"We are growing in a substantial way at the elementary panel, but we are not yet seeing growth in a substantive way at the secondary level," Parfeniuk said.

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