

Halton board flush with cash

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Special to The IFP

Having extra money and wondering where to spend it all is the fortunate and unusual position the Halton District School Board finds itself in.

Instead of the hand-wringing and worrying about whether there is enough money and how to balance the budget that often occurs every spring, the public school board is flush with some extra cash from the provincial government, and is in the process of allotting it for various purposes.

"I can't remember the last time we were in this great a position," a beaming Steven Parfeniuk told trustees at a recent school board meeting.

The board's business superintendent had the happy job of telling administrators, trustees and the few citizens sitting in the audience that the cash infusion will assure a balanced budget—the current 2007-08 operating and capital budgets total \$411 million—and also help immensely when budget deliberations for 2008-09 commence in earnest in early 2008.

The Halton public board has received an extra approximately \$4.5 million in government grants for '07-08. Parfeniuk said he expects \$3.9 million of that to be part of a permanent annual funding increase from the Ministry of Education.

The other \$673,572 is targeted for use with the Safe Schools initiative, in the areas of guidelines progressive discipline and school safety. Parfeniuk said it is unknown if such funding will continue beyond the current school year.

Besides the extra \$4.5 million for 2007-08, which is part of a \$182 million funding boost by the province for school boards across Ontario, the ministry also announced \$127 million more for boards for '08-09. It is not known what the Halton board's share of the latter amount will be.

At a more recent board meeting Parfeniuk intended to identify a host of items and school or student services where the additional, flexible \$3.9 million could be spent, totaling \$3.66 million, but trustees decided to scale back the spend-

ing to a more modest \$2.05 million for now.

The \$1.85 million still available for this year's year budget will be addressed at a board meeting in late November, said Parfeniuk.

Among the areas trustees OK'd for some of the extra funding was \$460,000 for the Halton Internship Program, \$225,000 for more learning resource teachers, \$40,000 for special decontamination shower units in science labs and \$39,000 for geography textbooks.

Given the good news about the extra funding, several trustees weighed in on where they believed the money should be spent.

A current hot topic, potentially shortening the current distances students need to walk to school before becoming eligible for bus transportation, is a primary one for many trustees; parent groups and school councils often plead with the board to allot busing based on what they perceive to be student safety concerns and/or onerous walking distances. The walk-to distance policy varies according to a student's grade, if they are in elementary or high school and whether they live in a rural or urban area.

Parfeniuk told trustees recently that there could be money to shorten the walk-to distances, which would make more children eligible for busing, and that the changes could be implemented later this school year or for 2008-09.

However, at a board meeting last week trustees turned down requests for a school bus from parents representing Centennial Middle School in Georgetown and another school in Milton. By 8-3 votes they opted instead to defer those matters while awaiting a staff report to come to the board in February on its transportation policy and safety issues around the region for students who walk.

Last month trustees did approve two buses for Silver Creek Public School in Georgetown based on safety concerns.

The operation of one school bus costs the board about \$40,000 per school year. The board spends more than \$10 million annually to bus students.



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