

# Mother starts group to address school funding woes

By HOWARD MOZEL  
Special to The Champion

Cathy Bickley's new advocacy group for publicly-funded education in Halton has no name yet, but its mission is crystal clear: be a non-political information source for other parents who in turn can help generate positive change.

"We have reason to be concerned," says Ms Bickley, mother of a grade 2 student at Maple Grove School in Oakville.

Referring to a special edition of Education Matters, the Halton District School Board's newsletter, Ms Bickley pointed out that the board indicated a shortfall of almost \$20 million in 2001-02. Of the \$20 million, \$7.2 million represented expenses over which the board has no discretion, such as salaries, benefits and transportation costs.

The board has been forced to defer school repairs and maintenance, reduce special education services and cutback on programs and services that broaden children's education, such as librarians and technology programs in grades 4 and up, Ms Bickley explained. The Halton board has yet to pass its 2002-03 budget but parents should expect no change over 2001-02 unless action by parents is taken now, she added.

"Cuts to school repair and maintenance budgets are hurting our children," stated Ms Bickley. "At my daughter's school... our kids have to be restricted to the blacktop when it rains for safety and sanitary reasons. As a school council, we would have to raise over \$40,000 just to repair the grass for the kids to play on. And we are not alone. The Georgetown high school has ceiling tiles that are falling down and bathrooms in serious need of renovation and repair. It's a disgrace."

Already sensitized by the lack of money for special needs students and forced to help raise funds for basic school supplies, Ms Bickley found herself faced with "confusing information" when she tried to get to the bottom of the provincial funding formula. She approached her trustee Mary Chapin who in turn steered Ms Bickley toward the school board.

"She put me in touch with the superintendent of finance and I got educated," said Ms Bickley, who characterized the board as "very open" about its financial dilemma and about helping her.

Ms Bickley, a graduate of the MBA program at the University of Western Ontario and a former banker, also had the opportunity to independently review board finances for 2001-02.

"There is no way they could possibly find enough savings in their budget to make up the \$20 million and not start cutting into basic services," said Ms Bickley. "Heck, in my opinion, they couldn't even find enough money to pay for the estimated \$5.1 million in deferred repairs and maintenance for 2001-02."

"This new funding model has resulted in nothing less than a complete mess," Ms Bickley continued. "If public education was a public company and the Ministry of Education the management team in charge, I'd be questioning their ability to properly manage the company at the next annual shareholders' meeting. The Ministry of Education is managing the business of public education in this province into the ground."

Board Chair Ethel Gardiner introduced Ms Bickley to Nancy Deligiannis, the mother of four children attending Georgetown schools, and together they joined forces to create their as-yet-unnamed advocacy group for parents who may be at a loss about what they can do.

"First join together with other parents. Our group will be having its first meetings sometime in late April. Public notices will be placed in local newspapers. Keep you eyes out for our meetings and come on out," said Ms Bickley. "Second, a copy of a petition asking the provincial government to address funding shortfalls in its next budget is available from myself or Nancy Deligiannis. Get a copy, circulate it among friends, neighbors, other parents at your

school, and get as many signatures as you can. Get it back to us. We'll forward all petitions to the Minister of Education, the new premier Ernie Eves and your local MPPs."

Ms Bickley also said she plans to attend "every single one" of the board's budget meetings. There she wants to just sit and listen,

then disseminate as much important information as she can to other parents. Anyone wanting further information on these meetings, or to obtain a copy of the petition, can contact either Ms Bickley via e-mail at labric@aol.com or Ms Deligiannis at NancyDeligiannis@hotmail.com.

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