

Catholic board urges public to speak out against funding cuts to special education, transportation

By **HOWARD MOZEL**
Special to *The Champion*

Gravely concerned about the "drastic impact" that recent provincial special education and transportation funding announcements will have on its students, the Halton Catholic District School Board is encouraging the public to join its voice lobbying the government to reconsider.

"We believe that the public needs to be aware of these funding issues," explained board Chair Al Bailey. "We strongly encourage the public to write and speak to their local members of provincial parliament and the minister of education."

On the heels of a September 7 board meeting during which trustees urged administration to let Queen's Park know their feelings in no uncertain terms, the board fired off two strongly-worded letters to Education Minister Gerard Kennedy.

The first, dated September 13, dealt with the recent claw back of special education funding and said in part: "Acting responsibly and planning for the future has resulted in the (board) losing in excess of \$650,000."

The second letter, dated last Friday, outlined the board's response to the ministry's Transportation Funding Model proposed for the 2005-06 school year, which the board says "does not appear to adequately capture the realities" 905 school boards are facing.

Specific to Halton, this would mean an allocation of \$3,889,823 which, based on the 2003-04 allocation, would result in a \$769,104 – or 16.51 per cent – reduction in transportation grant revenues.

Both letters make it clear that the two funding changes will have a detrimental impact on the

board's budget not only for the 2004/2005 school year, but also for future years.

The claw back is a result of new rules for special education funding, money that had been allocated in the board's special education reserve fund for the support and development of effective programs and services for special needs students. Losing the \$650,000 for 2004-05 will impact the most vulnerable students, namely those identified with special needs, say board officials.

Bad timing

The announcement couldn't come at a worse time, when the board is poised to expand its services — not cut them back by as much as a third.

"Our board has consistently acted in a very fiscally responsible manner and has continually met all of the criteria established by the Ministry of Education," said Director of Education Lou Piovesan.

"Planning for the future by establishing a reserve fund has resulted in a very significant funding loss specifically designated for programming and services for our special needs students. We had planned to further expand services for autistic students, but these plans will have to be drastically curtailed if these funds are not restored."

This could include the planned Transition Centre — which superintendent John Fauteux explained was to be paid for by reserves established by the Board — plus the development of new and more effective services to support special needs students.

Mr. Fauteux explained that his board had 134 Intensive Support Amount (ISA) claims

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AL BAILEY

approved in November 2003 that were in full compliance with ministry criteria. Taken together with other Ontario boards, Fauteux maintains that the number of special needs students simply exceeded the total the province had intended to fund so it clawed back the money, "irrespective of what the boards budgeted for."

Saying he was not being flippant about the situation, Mr. Fauteux explained that size of shortfall can't be recouped by asking staff to cut back on paper clips.

Like Mr. Piovesan, Mr. Fauteux maintains that the board acted responsibly by adhering to all procedures and even creating reserves to plan ahead only to have the rules change after the school year started.

An announcement impacting the 2005-06 year would have at least provided some breathing room to plan, he said.

As it now stands, parents who have been as

patient as they can be waiting for supports may simply have to wait longer for services Mr. Fauteux considers a right, not a frill.

"How do you say sorry?" he asks. "How do you select between two children?"

Mr. Fauteux remains optimistic, however, and said he hopes the board's letter to Mr. Kennedy will prompt the minister to arrange to sit down with the board so that its services — and in turn its students — don't suffer.

"I'm pretty confident we will see the great work planned for here," he added.

Sizable reduction

As far as the new transportation model is concerned, 32 school boards, including both in Halton, would endure a sizable reduction in funding, while some other school boards would actually see a substantial increase.

"There appears to be something very wrong with this new funding model, which provides more money to a few urban school boards that may not require utilization of all of their transportation allocations, while decreasing funds to areas where public transit is not as easily accessible," said Mr. Bailey.

"It will undoubtedly have severe repercussions for our board's students and their parents, if implemented. We are questioning the fairness and equitability of this new model."

Halton's school boards have been operating an integrated transportation system for almost 10 years — a system the Ministry of Education has commended as one of the most efficient in Ontario.



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