

School board to hire 27 EAs, but Province has yet to give \$\$\$

By JASON MISNER

Special to The Champion

The Halton District School Board won't get special consideration for additional funding just because it's hiring extra special education assistants (EAs) when it has no money to pay for them, said Education Minister Gerard Kennedy.

If no funding comes forward from an emergency special education pool, the board risks going into deficit by nearly \$1 million.

"Boards will not get preferential access because they made hirings ahead of time," Mr. Kennedy said in an interview. "I think we tried very hard to work closely with them so they will know that we are looking at these acute-needs students, and that they understand that they're going to get first priority."

"We, like them (school boards), don't want to see students not served."

At a Sept. 15 board meeting, trustees endorsed a staff recommendation to hire 27 EAs — at a cost of around \$880,000 — as well as 25 lunch-time supervisors, at an additional cost of \$62,000. Lunch-time supervisors are needed because high-needs students can't be left unsupervised.

A surge in the number of acute-needs students entering the school system since the start of the year — roughly 20 more — has meant some aren't receiving a full instructional day because of a lack of teachers.

The 27 EAs would be used to teach a total of 45 high-needs students. A board

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GERARD KENNEDY

staff report to trustees says, despite a deficit budget staring the board in the face, "As the school year begins, we are experiencing tremendous pressure for additional EA support ... staff feel that we are unable to (accommodate) many high-needs students in school without the additional staff."

The board's 2004-05 budget of \$329 million was balanced and passed in late June and didn't include the additional EA hirings. It did, however, include spending a total of \$44 million on special education, to serve about 8,200 students as well as hire 431 full-time EAs.

The ministry gave the board \$3 million in July for Intensive Support Allocation (ISA) claims for the current school year. In doing so, it also took back the Province's boards' special education reserve funds. The Halton public board's reserve was around \$4.5 million.

What the board is stressing is that it had expected additional special-education resources would be needed once the school year started, despite passing a balanced

budget earlier. The reserve, it says, would have covered the additional expenses.

Now that the reserves are gone, the Province is in the process of creating a contingency fund of around \$50 million in which boards can apply for emergency funding for special education.

Mr. Kennedy said some early parameters of how to qualify for that fund could be ready in the next two or three weeks, and the Halton board can apply. He stressed school boards, through provincial associations of trustees and directors of education, will play a role in defining those requirements.

"I'm not going to be the only person having a say in this fund," he said.

The ministry has written school boards to tell them of some of the early criteria.

"The very simple principle here is wherever there's a student with acute special needs, we've got to give them first preference," he added. "If those children are in Halton and that's what that program is doing, then the board should be able to rest easy relative to the fund. If somewhere in there it's a little bit different, then they will find out in a pretty short period of time."

Mr. Kennedy noted he's not personally aware of other boards in a similar situation where they've hired extra EAs since the school year started.

"Halton must feel strongly about it if they made these decisions right now, so what could be characterized as urgent needs will get an early answer."

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