

School funding formula changes expected soon

By JASON MISNER

Special to The Champion

The Halton District School Board is getting new money to fix schools, but staff and some trustees are still awaiting more information about what they feel is the most important detail — how money will flow to build much-needed schools.

The Ministry of Education announced last week funding of \$280 million for school boards to leverage \$4 billion in loans to repair, expand and build new schools.

The Halton public board has been earmarked \$1.46 million to help finance about \$20 million worth of work, said a grateful Director of Education Dusty Papke. He added the board needs to file a plan by October, which will detail what schools — where some maintenance work has been deferred for years due to lack of funds — will get repaired and refurbished.

While not identifying any specific schools that will get repair money, Mr. Papke said, "Older schools are likely to get most of the dollars." He noted Burlington's Central High School is 100 years old and Georgetown High School is 115 years old.

"They're the ones that are going to need the work."

But the part of the announcement that has the director and at least one trustee perplexed is how the board will pay to build new schools.

"The announcement does help us with renewal, but does not deal with our needs for new schools. That is still a problem for us that we don't have answers yet."

The ministry said it will introduce funding formula changes, but hasn't given a timeline for when that will happen. What has been made clear is Ontario boards will no longer have to close schools to free up pupil spaces to build new ones.

Trustees have been critical of the education funding formula introduced by the previous Tory government in 1996. It stipulated all surplus pupil capacity had to be eliminated in older communities to qualify for provincial funds to build new schools in growing areas.

"There have been a record number of closures over the past several years, but the current guidelines for school closings don't

meet all of the obligations that boards and the Province have to students, the community and the overall system," said a release from the Liberal government, explaining its recent announcement.

"The ministry will no longer recognize closed schools as creating eligibility for new school grants."

Also, new guidelines for school closings will require boards to develop rules taking into account the value of the school to students, the community, the school system and the local economy.

Mr. Papke said the board needs to know as soon as possible how the money will flow so it can begin the process of firmly establishing where new schools will be built. In particular, new high schools and elementary schools are desperately needed in Milton and southeast Georgetown where the populations are bursting.

Oakville Trustee Mary Chapin applauded the move to provide money to fix up schools. But it's disconcerting not knowing how the money will flow to build new schools, important changes the

board has been waiting to hear since last fall.

"I believe (the announcement) is good news generally, but the devil is in the details," she said. "What we don't know is exactly how we get money to build schools where we need them."

"If it's not tied to the utilization of current buildings and enrollment numbers, how do we get it?"

Locally, school closures and consolidation has been contentious among public school trustees.

In a narrow 6 to 5 vote January 12, trustees decided against studying closing or consolidating four elementary schools — Gladys Speers, Lorne Skuce and Sheridan in Oakville, and Ryerson in Burlington. That had meant new schools may not be built for at least a year.

At the time, staff said that decision meant students would have to swamp already overcrowded schools or be bused to schools

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