

Halton Catholic board getting least amount of cash per square foot for school repairs and construction

By KIM ARNOTT

Special to The Champion

Are the Halton Catholic board's school buildings the best in the province?

A recent provincial funding announcement seems to suggest that's the case, said board superintendent Giacomo Corbacio.

The "Good Places to Learn" initiative, rolled out by the provincial government in mid-February, announced \$280 million in annual funding for school repairs and new school construction.

That money is to be used by boards to debenture funds of up to \$4 billion for school repairs and replacements across the province.

While the Halton public school board will receive about \$1.46 million in 2005, the Catholic board will only get \$113,280.

In fact, that allocation is the least per square foot given to any school board in Ontario, Mr. Corbacio told trustees Tuesday night.

"We got less than a nickel per square foot," he added, noting that it currently costs about \$150 per square foot to build a new school.

But while some trustees were bemoaning the lack of funding the board received, Mr. Corbacio noted that the provincial cash was allocated to deal with urgent school facility problems such as leaky roofs and ineffective ventilation systems.

Since the Catholic board was given the least amount of money per square foot, as well as per student, Mr. Corbacio assumes the board has the fewest urgent school problems in the province.

"Therefore, one could conclude that the board has the best schools in Ontario," he added. "We've taken very good care of our facilities."

Funding isn't enough: Corbacio

Still, Mr. Corbacio said the \$1.5 million that the board's funding will debenture isn't nearly enough to address maintenance and upgrade issues throughout the board.

Director of Education Lou Piovesan said the Halton Catholic board is being penalized for its past prudence.

"This is a very serious concern," he said.

"We took care of our schools and now, with this new funding formula, boards that didn't do that are being rewarded and we're being punished."

Throughout the 1990s, the Catholic board renovated and

upgraded all of its older schools to bring them up to the standards of its newest facilities.

And Mr. Piovesan said the board had to take money from "here, there and everywhere" to make that happen.

As a result of that, when expert assessors visited every school in the province to look at building conditions, there were few major concerns to be addressed at Halton's Catholic schools.

The assessment deemed 120 schools in the province to be "prohibitive to repair" and money is being provided to replace those facilities, although the Catholic board won't see any of that either.

Oakville Trustee Alice Anne LeMay questioned why St. Thomas Aquinas didn't fall into that category.

"To me, the building's probably going to fall down," she said.

"When is a school beyond help?"

But Mr. Corbacio said he raised the issue of that school with the assessors and was told that even the board's worst schools were better than the best schools at some other boards.

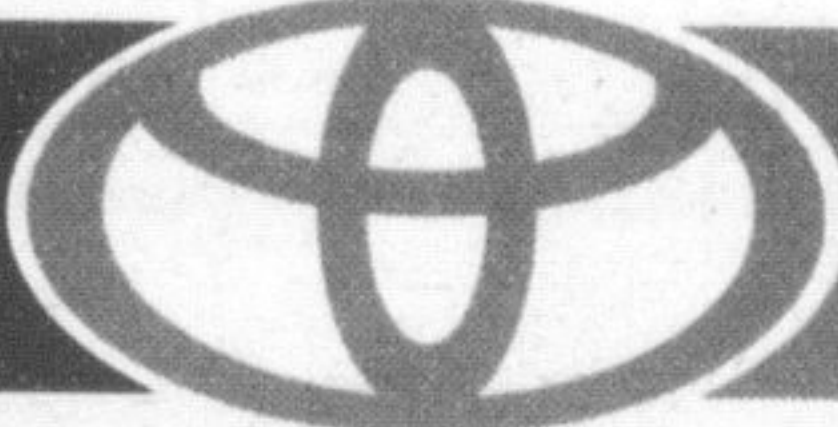
After urgent problems have been addressed, the "Good Places to Learn" initiative will provide cash to help boards create enough elementary classrooms to allow junior kindergarten to grade 3 classes to be capped at 20 students.

Money will also be directed toward accommodating 16- and 17-year-old students who can no longer legally drop out of high school, ensuring schools are accessible to disabled students, and providing early education space.

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