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School trustee says:

Hold plans until provincial funding known

By **TIM WHITNELL**
Special to *The Champion*

The vice-chair of the Halton Board of Education isn't convinced a funding freeze of provincial education grants for 1997-98

will have a neutral impact on all school boards.

"I am curious to see how the status quo funding works out when you take into account the grant formula," said Oakville Trustee Debbie Marklew.

She was reacting to word from Education Minister John Snobelen that transfer payments for Ontario's nearly 200 school boards, as well as its colleges and universities, will not be reduced for the next school year.

School boards in Ontario are slated to receive a total of \$3.9 billion in transfer funds for 1997-98, almost the same amount they were given for the current year. However, that represented a \$400 million reduction from the previous year. Colleges and universities will receive almost \$2.2 billion between them in '97-98.

Ms Marklew believes the government's method of funding redistribution could still work against school boards like Halton's.

"Even with no increase or decrease in funding, we could in fact end up with a shortfall after taking into account the grant formulas."

The Halton Board of Education, with its approximately 43,000 students and a 1997 projected deficit of \$24 million, was hoping to be spared from further funding cut-backs. The public-board trustees have put on hold, for up to three months, deliberation on the closure of up to six elementary schools, including Percy Merry in rural Milton. That would cut into a budget

deficit that translates into a potential \$189 per year education tax increase for Halton's taxpayers.

The president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) issued a similar warning about the government's funding announcement, saying it may have been an early Christmas gift but one that might have come with some strings attached.

"We won't allow this government to lull us into a deep winter's sleep because we know significant changes to education and more funding cuts may be just around the corner," noted Lynn Peterson.

Despite her guarded approach to Mr. Snobelen's announcement, the OPSBA president was pleased to see the Mike Harris Conservatives slowing down the speed of educational reforms.

"We welcome the funding freeze because, for the first time, it signals to us that the provincial government is starting to understand the damaging impact of its funding cuts to education," she said.

In a press release, Halton Centre MPP Terence Young, parliamentary assistant to Mr. Snobelen, indicated capital funding for new schools, which had been suspended, will be announced some time in 1997.

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