

# RC board chair has mixed feelings over new deal

By KIM ARNOTT  
Special to The Champion

The Halton Roman Catholic School Board chair feels his system may get a fairer financial shake, following this week's provincial reform of the education system.

But despite that, board Chair Don Schrenk admits to mixed feelings about the new plan.

Mr. Schrenk, who was in Toronto Monday to hear firsthand the details of the plan, applauds the financial restructuring of the system. But he also fears the loss of local control.

"I think, quite frankly, the government is to be commended for tackling the issue of education finance reform," said Mr. Schrenk. "I think that's long overdue."

Beginning in 1998, provincial government grants will replace the property tax payments which have been used to fund the education system, Education Minister John Snobelen announced.

And although details haven't yet been revealed, hints of a "fair funding model" lead Mr. Schrenk to believe the province intends to reduce the traditional inequities which have existed between Catholic and public school boards.

"I have a sense that the government will move to making the playing field more level," he said.

But while the new system may mean more money for Catholic students, it will also mean fewer trustees and less local control over education.

The Halton separate board will likely shrink from 15 to five English-language trustees, as a result of the plan. The board's three French-language trustees will be merged into one of 11 French-language boards across the province.

Next year's trustees will also see their paycheques cut severely.

The new provincial regulations will limit trustee honorariums to \$5,000 a year. Halton's separate school board trustees currently earn just under \$12,000 yearly, while the board chair receives almost \$18,000.

Taxpayers will not only have less representation, they will have a harder time determining where their education tax dollars are going under the new system, Mr. Schrenk predicts. "The system is going to be a lot less transparent," he says. "And that has to be a concern."

"The trustee is the local taxpayer's repre-

## Welfare on local taxes

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The net result will be to transfer much of the \$6 billion provincial welfare cost from the province to municipalities.

But with Monday's announcement that the province will take over funding of education, Ms Ecker said property taxpayers will be able to shoulder the responsibility.

"We feel quite confident that municipalities will be able to bear the cost of these programs," she said.

Ms Ecker also announced the creation of the Municipal Social Assistance Reserve fund, to safeguard against unforeseen local economic circumstances.

With an initial provincial contribution of \$700 million, the fund will act as "a sort of insurance fund," Ms Ecker added.

In addition to funding 50 per cent of social assistance costs, the provincial government will continue to set welfare rates and mandate provincial standards.

"We are not walking away from the welfare system," said Ms Ecker.

sentative and touchstone, and there is concern that the local control of education is passing to a provincial authority," he added.

Mr. Schrenk also expressed reservations over the lack of detail the province has provided for guiding the transition to a new system.

"I think there's a lot of unanswered questions," he said. "It almost makes me feel like we're going to fly by the seat of our pants while they wait for this commission or that commission."

"I would like to have a few more particulars."

But one detail has already been made clear: The outspoken board chair will be

out of a job following this November's municipal elections.

Under new provincial guidelines, school board employees and their spouses will not be allowed to serve as trustees.

Mr. Schrenk, whose wife is a teacher, questions the need for the restriction.

"I don't think (his relationship) has ever, ever prevented me from doing a proper job," he said. "I think you rule out a number of potentially good, responsible, civic-minded people."

"I think, generally speaking, most trustees are there for the general well-being of the students and the community at large. I don't think they're motivated by greed or self-interest."



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DON SCHRENK

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