

No plans to close schools: Minister

“I tried to close these schools, but I believe we’ve kept them off the chopping block one more time.”

The fate of the Ontario Street school for students with severe dyslexia has been in question since the year began. The Province then held consultations addressing the future of Trillium and four other deaf and demonstration schools — a process that left many fearing the facilities will close for good in the name of budget savings. Monday’s announcement is the result of the consultations.

“The consultation gave us valuable insight and feedback about how to best meet students’ needs so they can reach their full potential in school, and in life,” said Hunter. “It is important for us to listen to parents and to respond to their advice and insights. I want to thank them for their passion and perspective.” Hunter met with representatives from the affected schools on Monday evening in Milton. Bourachot said the Province requested the meeting, not the parents, to discuss the findings of the consultations and next steps.

While the school council chair was initially skeptical and believed the session would be used to begin laying the groundwork to ultimately close the schools, she said Hunter was very genuine and clarified that there are no plans to close the schools now or in the future.

She said parents also pushed Hunter for details on the pilot program the Province intends to launch in select school boards — an intensive reading intervention project designed to increase the availability and responsiveness of supports for students with severe learning disabilities.

While specifics on the program aren’t yet available, parents who’ve formed an advocacy group representing the province’s three English demonstration schools — including Bourachot — are lauding the initiative.

“The advocacy group feels this is a good first step to increase awareness of severe learning disabilities at the school board level and introduce more children to the Empower (reading) program,” a press release from the group states. “Keeping provincial demonstration schools open during the research and implementation process is not a just a victory for the group, but a victory for future students with learning disabilities across the province.”

A reference group will be set up to provide guidance and input as the pilot project moves for-

ward. Bourachot said parents who attended the meeting with Hunter have offered to be part of the ongoing process.

The Liberals released a report on Friday (August 5) prepared by market research firm The Strategic Counsel that contains an extensive summary of comments received during the consultations.

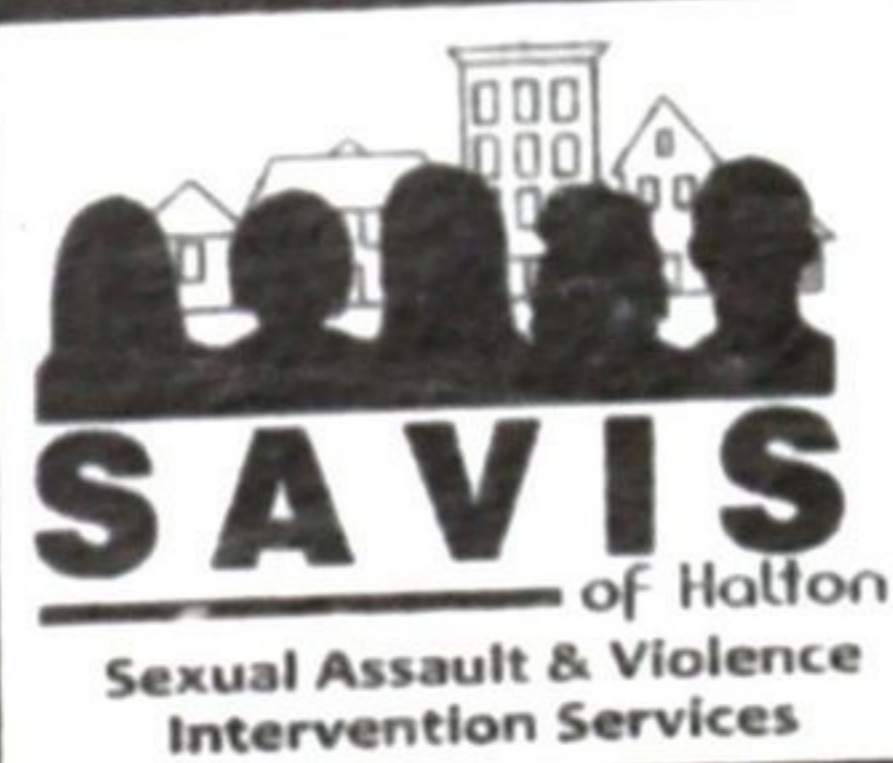
It highlights the many successes students have had as a result of the intensive learning at the demonstration schools — something parents said their children wouldn’t have received in the traditional education system. “Current students and their parents reported significant progress in students’ reading and social skills,” says the report. “Within a few months, students jumped several grade levels in their reading skills. This view was supported by teachers who also observed significant student progress based on ongoing evaluation.” The document also highlights the achievements of former demonstration school students who attended the consultations.

“Virtually all of them reported success in their post-demonstration school experience, both socially and academically,” notes the report. “Some of them reported that they had graduated from university. This success, they said, was a result of their experience at the demonstration school. This is noteworthy given their previous challenges at their regular school prior to attending the demonstration school. Even when students had setbacks, they reported using the learning tools and strategies they developed at demonstration schools.”

The report goes on to detail input received from school boards, which indicated that further supports are needed to help students with severe learning disabilities.

“Many school board staff indicated that capacity building is needed to best support students with severe learning disabilities and that they rely on one of the demonstration schools,” states the report. “There were also a number of comments by board educators that the issue was compounded where teachers, principals, and school board leadership teams need to develop a better understanding of the complexities surrounding teaching and supporting students with severe learning disabilities.”

Besides Trillium, the consultation process included Sagonaska Demonstration School in Belleville, Amethyst Demonstration School in London, Robarts School for the Deaf in London and Centre Jules-Leger in Ottawa, which serves French students who are deaf, deaf-blind and/or have severe learning disabilities. The three English demonstration schools across the province provide educational programs for approximately 120 students, who come to the programs significantly under-achieving in some or all academic areas, and with immature social skills, states the Ministry of Education’s website. The students reside at the school for one to two years and return home on weekends.



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