

Issues & Answers

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE NEWS AND THE NEWSMAKERS

Schools squeezed by growth spurt

Boards struggle to balance the cost of new school construction with parent demand for fewer portables



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Julie Andrade wants her son, Charlie, to spend his school years in school, not one of the 800 portables dotting York Region.

BY JENNIFER BROWN
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STAFF WRITERS

Charlie Andrade is just four months old but already his mom, Julie, has surveyed the portables that line school yards across the region and wondered if her son will spend his school life in one of those bleak-looking buildings.

In Montreal, where Julie and her husband, Victor, attended school, portables are unknown. Quebec's diminishing population means schools, including the ones the Andrades attended, are closing.

It's a study in contrast compared to York Region, where a booming population has made portables a way of life for students for two decades. To date, there are more than 800 in the public and separate school systems combined.

Julie hopes that by the time Charlie reaches school age, the portables will be gone, but that is unlikely.

Even with the province's plan to help school boards build schools faster and reduce the number of portables by offering long-term financing, the region's projected growth of 24,000 new people each year means the problem will continue indefinitely.

The public board alone will see enrolment rise by 3,000 students per year, requiring funding for eight to 11 high schools by 2011 and eight elementary schools before 2002.

The separate board projects enrolment will rise by 11,000 students in the next 10 years — 70 per cent of which will be elementary. That means 15 new Catholic elementary schools and three high schools before the end of the decade.

The public board hasn't purchased a portable in five years but

superintendent of corporate affairs Ralph Benson said they will always be a reality. The idea now is to reduce the number used as classrooms.

"(The new formula) will reduce our reliance on portables. A lower percentage of students will be in portables, but we will always have them," he said. "We will never, ever, ever get rid of them because enrolment is always a variable. No one gave us the money to wipe out the backlog; they just gave us money to make sure it won't get worse."

With school buildings aging and more families moving into the region, the pressures on York Region's education system for improved facilities and resources will continue for years.

Public board director Bill Hogarth said the board still doesn't have the capital funding to build everything it needs. "But we get excited by the possibilities growth always brings. I think it renews education — new schools bring in new resources — the latest in technology in our schools and young, energetic teachers. Growth always brings a new dynamic that generates excellence, but it always brings problems, too."

Throughout the region's growth spurt, school boards have tried to keep up with the planning process, even though they had no say over where and when subdivisions were built.

To keep up with the demands of new students, the two boards introduced education development charges in the late 1980s. When the province declared a moratorium on new schools in the early '90s, they still had shovels in the ground, financing their own projects.

"I hesitate to think where we would be without the five new schools we opened last year,"

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

The second in a series of articles examining York Region's growth and how it affects the people who live here.

Hogarth said.

And even though Julie and other parents don't like the idea of children being taught in portables, she recognizes building schools that won't be needed in the long term isn't the answer either.

"I have a huge concern that we would put our children in portables," Julie said. "But on the other hand, we don't want to build all these schools and then have a demographic shift and be left with too many buildings."

But new schools are in demand by parents like Julie and Victor and the Byres, a Richmond Hill couple who say their children deserve the best learning environments possible.

Rochelle Byres started Grade 5 in a new school this year — Father Henri J. M. Nouwen Catholic Elementary School, opened last January. But this is the 10-year-old's third year in a portable classroom, one of 360 currently in use in the separate board.

And even with the province's new plan to build schools at a rate that will supposedly keep up with growth, the Byres wonder if crowding will continue. "I'm concerned about the amount of people coming into the school system and the board's ability to accommodate everyone," Bill Byres said.

The Byres jumped at the chance to switch to the new Father Henri school from the 40-year-old Our Lady Help of Christians, where they went last year. But in York Region, even a new school opens with portable classrooms.

"It's a beautiful school, but Grades 3 to 6 are in portables," said mom, Rita Byres, who is willing to drive Rochelle and four-year-old sister Marlena the extra distance each day. "It offers after-school

See DAYCARE, page 12.



MARLENA BYRES

Mom drives the four-year-old to a new school

NEED FOR SCHOOLS IS REGIONWIDE

areas in greatest need of new schools in the short term include Markham, Vaughan and Newmarket/East Gwillimbury. The separate school board will open four new elementary schools next year in Markham, Richmond Hill, Maple and Newmarket. There is also a need for at least another six elementary schools in the near future.

the public board will open seven schools next year — in Aurora Grove, two in Richmond Hill (Coons Road and Frank Endean road), Worth Boulevard in Vaughan, and in the Metrus development in Georgina.

high schools on Biscayne Boulevard in Georgina and Yorkland Avenue in Richmond Hill will also proceed with space for 1,300 students each.

construction will be complete on three of the schools in 1999 with the balance finished in 2000.

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