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Growing pains for separate school board budget

BY GIANNI COLAVECCHIA
Staff Writer

York Region Catholic trustees have approved a budget that provides for much-needed help in some areas but falls short in critical areas such as special education and English as a second language.

On Tuesday, the board approved a \$270-million operating budget, a healthy increase from last year's total of nearly \$249 million, including an item few school boards in Ontario can boast about: salary hikes for teachers.

But board officials note the budget does not provide enough cash for the growing number of students whose first language isn't English.

"ESL is still a problem and will remain a problem," chairperson Elizabeth Crowe said.

The budget does not provide for any increases in ESL staff. Funding for ESL now stands at \$2 million.

That's about \$100,000 more than what the board anticipated last spring, but likely not enough to make up for a significant cut in that area.

The board has spent \$2 million more than what provincial officials gave it for ESL programs.

It serves a population that has grown steadily in the past few years to about 2,700 students.

Funding for special education stands at nearly \$31 million — several hundred thousand dollars short of what the board intends to spend in the area.

At last count, the board expected it will be responsible for 5,300 special needs students next September — an increase of 150 from the 5,150 registered in September 1999.

Crowe noted the funding provides for three extra educational assistants who help students excelling at, or having difficulty with, regular studies.

"People say that's not enough but that's all we can afford right now," she

said.

Responding to a question from Markham Trustee Cathy McElroy, treasurer John Sabo noted there is almost no cash in the board's emergency reserves.

"That remains a concern," he said. "When you are using funds to balance your budget that's less money that you have later. We don't have the luxury of reserves to go to."

Board spokesperson Chris Cable noted the board is used to having few reserves and will prioritize items if needs arise suddenly.

Cable also talked about transportation, estimating the province is to give the board \$11.2 million.

But she says the provincial funding does not reward the board's innovation in reducing overall transportation costs.

"The problem with transportation (policy) is it reflects costs that were associated two years ago with the funding formula that came in," she added.

Cable noted officials are trying to get the province to free up more money for increased fuel costs but "won't believe it" until they see it.

The budget contains financial incentives for teachers, including an eventual hike of nearly 2 per cent to their salary grid.

Officials hope that will lend stability to a board rocked by an illegal province-wide teacher strike three years ago and a month-long legal strike the following year.

The board expects to add about 150 people to its payroll next year, including the equivalent of 4.5 much-needed librarians at nine high schools.

The additions represent a 5-per-cent increase in a board where student enrolment has grown by about 4 per cent over the past year.

Board officials say the budget does not cover all aspects of growth but Oak Ridges MPP Frank Klees has said provincial funding for schools is adequate.

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