

York Region's public elementary and high school teachers without contracts

Morale in schools 'taking a beating'

PATRICK MANGION
Staff Writer

Any school trustee candidate who campaigns around a York Region school is likely to notice the atmosphere isn't as upbeat as it once was.

"Anybody who denies that teachers in Ontario don't feel that their efforts are being appreciated would be denying the obvious," said Bill Crothers, chairperson of the public school board.

Teachers at both elementary and secondary schools in Crothers' board are without a contract and strikes are a possibility before Christmas. The elementary teachers voted 91 per cent in favour of a strike recently and high school teachers signed a no-board report in August, indicating they don't believe a negotiated settlement can be reached.

The contract talks are coloured by education reforms introduced by the province, which have angered teachers. In many cases, teachers have responded by withdrawing from extra-curricular activities, which has angered students.

When asked about morale at school, one teacher from Huron Heights Secondary School in Newmarket simply responded, "it's taking a beating."

Richmond Hill trustee candidate Dennis Chronopoulos said he noticed the same thing when meeting with school board administrators, students and parents.

"Everyone is really tired," he said. "When there's this much change, everyone's nerves are a little frazzled."

There's no strike threat at the Catholic school board, which reached a contract with its teachers in the spring, but provincial legislation increasing class time and the threat that teachers could be forced to supervise after-school activities are creating tension.



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Even though there's no strike in the Catholic board, students like Rob Curalo, left, and Mark Mitrowski of Sacred Heart Catholic High School still sense a dip in morale.

Peter Dajia, a physical education teacher and coach at Cardinal Carter High School in Aurora for the past six years, said the dip in school morale comes from rapid and significant changes to curriculum, along with a rapidly growing student population.

In both cases, it's difficult for teachers to keep up, he added.

"Morale is better than it has

been, but it's not where it has been in the past," Dajia said.

In 1997, Bill 160 prompted illegal teachers' strikes across the province. And now the recently passed Bill 74 allows Education Minister Janet Ecker to intervene in school board decisions, as tension between the two sides continues to escalate.

Either as a protest, or because

they no longer have extra time, teachers haven't been supervising sports at many York Region schools.

Leila Makhani, an OAC student at Langstaff Secondary in Richmond Hill, is prime minister of the York Region Presidents' Council, an organization that meets with government and school board officials to discuss issues affecting high school students.

She credited teachers at her school for going the extra mile to ensure some extra-curricular activities remain, but admitted it's still a far cry from years past.

"A lot of people want to go back to how it was a few years ago, when we had all our extra-curriculars and teachers were more available."

Katy Roveda, a Grade 12 student at Huron Heights, sympathized with the teachers' situation.

"Nobody is really happy with the lack of extra-curricular activities," Roveda said. "Teachers are going through just as bad a time, if not worse."

A recent survey indicated three high schools — Thornlea, Vaughan and Huron Heights — have no extra-curricular activities this year.

Only one York Region high school has the same number of activities as last year, while another 18 schools have fewer extra-curriculars.

But many students consider sports, band, drama and clubs vital parts of their education — just as important as classroom work.

"It's a difficult time for students, teachers and school board members," said Makhani. "We're all making the best of it."

But can a trustee affect the morale in schools?

Crothers, who was acclaimed as trustee in Markham's Area 3, says yes.

Of course, that starts with setting contracts with the teachers unions, something Crothers calls a delicate balancing act requiring both sides compromise in the interests of students.

"The way we get beyond this is by saying, 'Am I doing good things for kids?'" Crothers said.

Beyond that, he said the board can improve morale by making sure teachers and other board staff feel appreciated. "People need to feel good about their job, they need to feel they're being supported."

Future of troubled GTSB delayed until after election

BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

They're calling the Greater Toronto Services Board a toothless giant with no legislative authority, but York Region councillors opted to delay a formal decision on the fledgling organization.

Instead, politicians have left the task to a new regional council to be elected next month.

At a special workshop Thursday afternoon, councillors spent less

than an hour discussing the future role of the GTSB.

Newmarket Mayor Tom Taylor suggested the organization be disbanded and replaced with a provincial ministry while Markham Mayor Don Cousens prepared a report indicating restructuring of municipalities in the GTA must occur in conjunction with any GTSB reform.

However, Markham Regional Councillor Frank Scarpitti convinced his colleagues to withhold a

formal position until after the Nov. 13 municipal election.

"There are a number of issues here and I don't want them misinterpreted that we are supporting another level of government," stressed Scarpitti. "We are not."

"This is not clear enough and we have not gone through the issues. It hasn't worked for 2-1/2 years and it is not the end of the world if it doesn't get fixed in the next 3-1/2 months."

Whitchurch-Stouffville Mayor Wayne Emmerson added more time was needed than just an afternoon workshop.

"If we are going to get into this stuff now, fine and dandy, but I don't think we have the time right now. It is not going to work," he said.

Discussed since 1997, the provincial government established the GTSB in 1999 to co-ordinate GTA-wide policies for transportation, tourism, economic and social

development, growth management and the environment.

But without the ability to approve new legislation, it has effectively become a lobby group to the provincial and federal governments in search of capital.

GTSB members have been asked to submit a report to a consultant reviewing the services board, with recommendations sent to the municipal affairs department for discussion next spring.

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