

COLLECTIVE AGREEMENTS AND BUDGETS CREATED CHALLENGES FOR SCHOOL BOARD OFFICIALS IN 2000

Labour conflict dominated the year in education

BY GIANNI COLAVECCHIA
Staff Writer

Like any public official who taxpayers call on to make major decisions, Bill Crothers knows he can't spend too much time looking back over the year that was.

But the chairperson of York Region's public school board also knows it's hard to ignore 2000, which was not your average year in education.

Conflict dominated the year and nowhere was that more evident than in contract talks between teachers and the board.

Amid threats of a strike, negotiators took months to reach a collective agreement for high school teachers. The board is still looking to approve a deal for their elementary counterparts.

Crothers conceded the issue was a "negative" for the board and was unsure whether trustees would handle the situation differently if it came up again.

"That's a tough question to

answer because the differences we had this year with collective bargaining had nothing to do with conditions in York Region," he said. "We were victims or captives or however you want to phrase it."

Crothers was talking about a provincial government regulation that defines teaching time and excludes the hours instructors spend covering for absent colleagues.

Union and board officials say the initiative forced teachers to spend more than four hours a day in front of students and made it more difficult to negotiate collective agreements.

Fallout from provincial legislation wasn't the only headline maker in 2000.

Trustees, students and parents dealt with a range of issues that included:

- A \$583-million budget that fell short in covering the needs of various capital projects and groups of students;

- A growing number of students who did not have access to special education and English as

a second language programs, despite an extra \$13 million in funding.

- Funding shortfalls in educational field trips, transportation for students and upgrades to schools.

Crothers noted the year did include upbeat highlights such as student improvement on provincewide tests, a record number of awards for teaching staff and a successful transition to a tougher new curriculum in elementary and secondary schools.

Similar events and issues cropped up in York Region's Catholic school board.

Chairperson Elizabeth Crowe said her board's biggest achievement was reaching a collective agreement for elementary and secondary teachers early in the year — a feat few boards in Ontario had matched.

Board and union representatives left behind the troubles that led to an illegal provincewide strike three years ago and a month-long strike the following year by reaching a deal last May.



BILL CROTHERS: Public board chairperson said provincial legislation had a major impact in York.



ELIZABETH CROWE: Catholic chairperson said collective agreements were major achievements.

vide enough cash for the growing number of students whose first language isn't English. Funding for special education programs fell several hundred thousand dollars short of what the board was to spend in that area.

Crowe noted vital figures from the province came late and the board gave the public little opportunity to provide feedback on the budget.

The board had to contend with other issues, including a shortage of qualified applicants for teaching positions.

"We found enough teachers but it was a scramble," Crowe recalled. "We have had to resort to using unqualified people as supply people."

One-third of current supply teachers have a post-secondary education but no teaching degree.

Crowe said officials are trying to rectify that situation by visiting university faculties of education, where they promote the benefits of working for the board.

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