School boards may have to cut programs

BILL CROTHERS: Funding restrictions put 'a big cloud over' public school board, chairperson says.

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able you'd be, but we don't appreciate it," he said.

The elementary teachers' contract with the public school board expires in August. During contract negotiations, Clegg said the union will once again bring to the board's attention the disparity of working conditions among elementary and secondary school teachers.

"It has the potential to be resolved during contract negotiations," he said, adding the union represents approximately 3,300 teachers. "If it does, we'll have to wait and see."

Like Clegg, York Region District School Board chairperson Bill Crothers and his Catholic counterpart Elizabeth Crowe are concerned what impact a planned 5-per-cent cut in education will have on boards.

"We're looking at restrictions on funding and not knowing what impact that will likely have on us," said Crothers, who oversees a $623.7 million operating budget. "Until we know, we have a big cloud hanging over all of us."

"I'd love to know so we can begin planning for next year," said Crothers, adding board initiatives slated to start next year may be cut or postponed if there's no funding.

Inadequate funding by the province raises grave concerns about the number of programs boards will continue to offer, Crowe said.

"It's hard to say what we're going to have to do. Even if we don't get an increase, balancing the budget will be difficult without making significant cuts in the system," she said, explaining one of the hardest hit areas when it comes to spending cuts is special education.

"We're losing funding for special education and there's not enough now. Special education is growing faster here than in any other area in the GTA."

"Even if we don't get an increase, balancing the budget will be difficult without making significant cuts in the system."

Combined, the separate and public school boards plan to open more than six elementary and high schools throughout the region.

Like the Catholic board, Crothers said the public board will also have to meet growth challenges effectively.

"The amount of growth we're experiencing requires tremendous human resources as well," he said.

"A major challenge for all of us, I think, is the disproportionate number of administrators coming up to retirement in the next few years."

Perhaps a more pressing matter to the separate board in coming years may be looking at ways to keep small schools open.

The board agreed to put a three-year moratorium on small school closures, Crowe said.

However, the moratorium expires near the end of the month.

"I'm not saying that's what we're going to do, but it's no longer something we can't consider," said Crowe, whose board's smallest schools have fewer than 200 students.

"The good news is that we're still being driven by average class sizes."

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