

Schools seek ways to offset funding shortfalls

Responsibility to supply basic class materials falls to schools: council

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Staff Writer

Bake sales, magazine fundraisers, silent auctions, raffles and more bake sales.

With a looming provincial budget cut and cash-strapped school boards forced to find additional savings, more schools are relying on fundraisers to purchase, what they feel, are basic classroom necessities.

Education critics say \$2.3 billion has been slashed from the system since the Tories came to power seven years ago. As a result, there has been a loss of specialized teachers and programs, an increase in class sizes and a lack of textbooks and learning materials, they argue.

In addition, field trips are being cut and French classes, music and library programs reduced or eliminated, critics say.

Those realities are a direct result of funding shortages and the province's controversial student-based funding formula, critics charge.

A telephone survey conducted last fall by Enterprise Canada Research revealed more than 63 per cent of parents feel the government is shortchanging school boards and should provide them with more money.

As a result of funding shortages and cutbacks, some high school students are paying up to \$150 a year in fees for art supplies, workbooks and school-related activities.

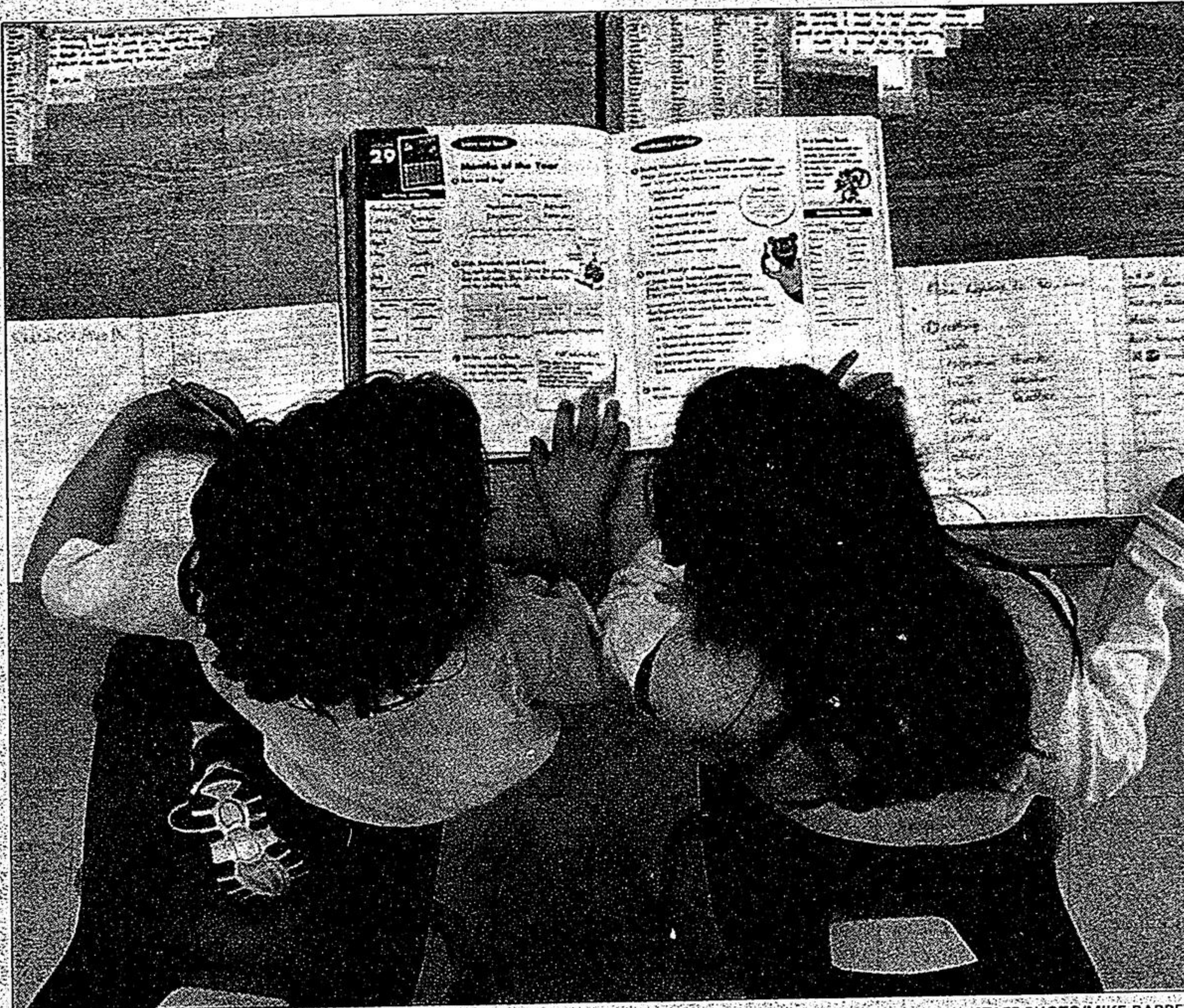
A recent survey of 130 schools conducted by a parent lobby group revealed 92 per cent of students are using worn or outdated books and about two-thirds share textbooks.

To compensate, many school councils are raising their own funds to pay for necessities.

Last year, school councils provincewide raised approximately \$33 million. Almost 30 per cent of that went toward purchasing textbooks, computers and classroom supplies.

Aurora's Light of Christ Catholic School council raised \$12,000 for textbooks this year.

Over the past few years, fundraising dollars have been used to purchase teacher and student resources, rather than materials to enhance the school library or computer lab, council



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Sharing textbooks may become more commonplace as funds decrease to purchase books for every student, some school officials charge.

chairperson Karen MacLeod said.

"The fundamentals of fundraising have changed in that we're required to carry on to our shoulders the responsibility to supply basic classroom materials," she said. "We feel we need to do more, but we feel we can't ask much more from the parents."

"We're lucky we live in an area where we can afford to fundraise, but some schools don't have that advantage," Mrs. MacLeod said.

Teachers collectively spend almost \$65 million a year on classroom materials and supplies, according to the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario.

"Before the funding model, there was adequate (teacher) prep time, teacher resources. All these things have disappeared," said York Region's public elementary teachers union president David Clegg, referring to the out-of-date funding model he says does not reflect the rate of inflation. "At the primary level, what's needed in the classrooms,

most teachers have to fund out of their own pockets.

"(Funding shortages) is a long-term problem that will not be alleviated as long as teachers have to continue to provide a Band-Aid solution by spending money out of their own pockets," he said.

It will be extremely difficult for us to balance the budget if the status quo remains the same.

The funding model was introduced by the government in 1998 to set aside more money in the classroom and ensure funding equity for all publicly funded school boards, Oak Ridges MPP Frank Klees said. Nonetheless, he welcomes a review of the model.

"No one said the funding model is perfect. It's a step in the right direction. We're prepared to look at it and we're open to sug-

gestions," he said.

He acknowledges school boards face financial challenges, but disagrees the model is creating funding shortages.

"Generally, when you introduce change and reform, there will be a period of time when you experience difficulty, especially when you introduce them all of a sudden," Mr. Klees said. "However, I am confident that when the reforms are fully integrated, all the problems will level out."

The Ontario Public School Board Association estimates the gap between school board revenues and expenditures exceeds \$1.1 billion. Although both York Region's school boards can expect an increase in provincial funding because of their substantial growth, school boards will not know how much they will receive from the province until next month, at least.

Despite funding challenges, York Region District School Board chairperson Bill Crothers believes students are receiving a better education today than they did several years ago.

"Do we have as much money as we'd like to spend? No. Do we have enough money to deliver programs we believe are important? Yes, we do," said Mr. Crothers, whose board is one of the wealthiest in the province and operates on a \$583.6-million budget.

"We're not (faced with cutbacks), but we are faced with looking at the different ways we're spending our money," he added, explaining the board spends about \$6,105 per student.

"The present dilemma for most school boards is determining what they're spending their money on and what is the most appropriate way to spend that money to provide adequate resources for our kids."

From 1988 to 1997, the York Catholic District School Board had a deficit that peaked at \$32.3 million.

Although she doesn't believe the board will face a deficit, board chairperson Elizabeth Crowe said it may be difficult for staff to present trustees with a balanced budget.

"It will be extremely difficult for us to balance the budget if the status quo remains the same," she said. "(The funding model) made things tighter financially, but I still think we're in a better position than other boards."

Several years ago, the separate school board planned to expand the provincial reading recovery program into every school but those plans were put on hold as a result of funding shortfalls.

"We haven't seen increased dollar amounts since the model came in. When (the model) was developed, (the government) said it was developed based on statistical information," said Mrs. Crowe, whose board operates on a \$281.3-million budget almost entirely funded by the province. "Those numbers have not been updated to reflect changes, like the cost of living."

Until that happens, boards and appointed associations such as the Ontario Catholic School Trustees Association will continue to lobby the government to restore funding, Mrs. Crowe said.

"From now until May we're in waiting mode and it's extremely frustrating. I don't know what we're going to do when the numbers come down," she said. "The model can produce efficiency. It's just not adequate. It could work if there are sufficient dollars, but right now, there aren't."

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