

Board needs more cash, task force told

BY MITCHELL BROWN
Staff Writer

Balanced books do not necessarily mean a balanced education.

That's the message the York Region District School Board sent the Education Equality Task Force Friday when chairperson Bill Crothers and vice-chairperson Susan Plamondon appeared before the five-member panel in Barrie.

The task force, headed by University of Guelph president Mordechai Rozanski, is travelling across Ontario to gather public input on how the province's education funding formula, introduced in 1998, has affected the quality of public education.

During three days of hearings in Toronto last week, the task force heard from practically every public and separate school board in the GTA, all of whom argued the funding formula didn't take into account the needs of rapidly growing suburban school boards.

"The board agrees strongly with the principle of funding that is based on per pupil allocation," Ms. Plamondon told the panel.

"Per pupil funding ensures resource decisions are focused on the needs of students. It also recognizes the importance of equality of opportunity for all students to access quality educational programs and services."

However, she said, the government's current focus on per-pupil funding "doesn't contain sufficient funding to adequately address many of its stated priorities."

Among the board's areas of concerns:

- Teacher salaries: Because the Ministry of Education's formula hasn't provided for staff salary increases, the board says it will have to make a "significant allocation of funds" from other areas to give its teachers a raise.

- English as a second language: Although almost 8,500 elementary students in York's public schools come from non-English households, only 2,700 students meet the province's funding criteria for ESL services. As a result, the region has had to cut the number of ESL teachers here in half since 1998 and fewer students are getting the help they need.

"We are concerned about this as a potential human rights issue," Ms. Plamondon said.

- Special education: The board, Ms. Plamondon said, has received the same Intensive Support Amount (ISA) funding from the province for the past four years, a figure that has not kept up with the growing number of students with special needs.

- School administration: The board's rapid growth has led to a scramble for principals and vice-principals, especially at the elementary level, Ms. Plamondon told the task force. The current funding formula, with its focus on classroom spending, "has had an extremely adverse effect on leadership capacity within our schools."

Guidance services for elementary students "have all but disappeared in our schools," she continued, as well as school library services and library staff.

The Catholic board, which made its presentation in Toronto last week, touched on several of these issues, as well, with chairperson Elizabeth Crowe saying "it has taken every creative bone in our bodies" to meet their obligations with ever-diminishing resources.

The full day of presentations was the task force's final day of public consultations.

Dr. Rozanski is expected to have his final report ready for the government in November.

"We are concerned about (cuts to English as a second language programs) as a potential human rights issue."

—Susan Plamondon, vice-chairperson of the York Region District School Board

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