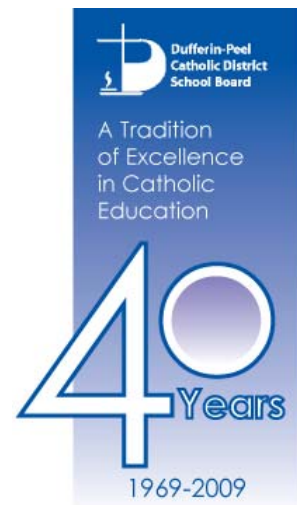


Briefing Memorandum
to Members of Provincial Parliament
from the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board

October 13, 2009



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Introduction

The purpose of this briefing document is to provide MPPs representing the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board's jurisdictional area, with an understanding of some of the issues and pressures facing the board, its students and families. Prior to presenting these points, we would like to frame the discussion from our perspective as a Catholic school board by providing some historical context.

Catholic education in Peel Region and Dufferin County dates back over 160 years. We, as trustees and staff of the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board are the current stewards of this wonderful educational system, one of four publicly funded education systems in Ontario. We are a board that has grown significantly in the 40 years since we were created through the amalgamation of eight small regional Catholic school boards. Today, we are the second largest Catholic school board in Ontario. We take pride in the fact that we have maintained a tradition of excellence in Catholic education that remains true to the original mission of our predecessors; to provide Catholic children with a Christ-centered holistic, character education in the Catholic tradition.

A basic requirement for admission to Catholic elementary schools is that children must be Catholic, or a parent of the child must be Catholic, and an MPAC-registered English Catholic School Supporter (full eligibility details are attached to this briefing paper). One of the primary components of the elementary-level Catholic education system is to prepare children to receive the sacraments of the Catholic Church.

At the secondary level, a condition for full funding, implemented in 1984, was that they be accessible to both Catholic and non-Catholic students. Our secondary schools remain primarily Catholic in terms of student composition and are overwhelmingly Catholic in terms of learning environment, atmosphere and mission. In 2008-09, we conducted a Strategic System Review, *Shaping our Future*, where we surveyed parents/guardians, school council members, senior students and recent graduates and other stakeholders. Satisfaction levels were very high, as was the indication of support for Catholic education and the Catholic nature of our schools.

This report highlights six priority items, as identified by the Board of Trustees. These items were extracted from a larger 16-item compilation of issues, which is attached to this priority list as Appendix A.

Priority Discussion Topics

1. Continued Support for Catholic Education

Our Catholic Education system, beyond its historical and constitutional rights to exist, is a system that is distinct because we offer a faith-based education and curriculum that supports the formation and development of the whole child; heart, mind, body and spirit. This is achieved by integrating Ontario Catholic school graduate expectations into the full Catholic curriculum. Many of the values in the Ontario Charter of Education program have continued to be the core values in our Virtues program that is offered in all Catholic education programs.

Public funding of Catholic schools in Ontario has been a cornerstone of Confederation. Catholic schools educate one-third of the population of Ontario, more than 600,000 students, and are supported by more than 2.4 million taxpayers. Catholic classrooms reflect the great cultural diversity within Ontario.

Recommendation

Catholic school boards and this board in particular, ask if you continue to support the legal and constitutional rights of Catholic education in Ontario.

2. Bill 177

The government's Bill 177, an act to amend the Education Act with respect to student achievement, school board governance, and certain other matters, raises a number of concerns among school boards. The Ontario Catholic School Trustees Association (OCSTA) has identified a number of issues for Catholic school boards. This is a position shared by the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board.

OCSTA supports the bill's focus on student achievement; one already shared by Catholic boards. Both Bill 177 and the Provincial Regulation Consultation Paper clearly point out that boards of trustees will now have the ultimate responsibility and accountability for student achievement. While this responsibility will now be legislated, Catholic school boards have always had student success and increased student performance as key priorities. The intrusive and punitive nature of provincial oversight is an unnecessary degree of micro-management and intrusion into the good work done by trustees and school board administrators.

The board also recognizes that the bill clarifies the role of trustees. But this board has concerns that it gives discretionary power to the government to make changes to trustees' roles and job descriptions at any time, without prior consultation. In some ways, the Bill undermines the legitimate governance role of school boards and holds school trustees to a higher standard than other elected officials.

Recommendation

That the Provincial Government give due consideration to the revisions recommended by various trustee associations and this board.

3. Special Education Funding Framework

The board supports a layered approach to Special Education Funding. The current practice of providing grants through the Foundation Grant and supplementing these with a separate and protected Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA) grant to assist in provision of services and programs for students with special needs must be maintained. It is necessary, however, that benchmarks within the SEPPA allocation be reviewed and updated to better reflect the real costs experienced by boards, particularly at the secondary level. Boards also require resources to refresh and replace the specialized equipment required by some students throughout their academic career. Costs for technology, specialized equipment and necessary technology infrastructure continue to exceed funding allocation. Although the gap between elementary and secondary SEPPA funding has now been narrowed, it has not been closed sufficiently to recognize the cost of on-going services that must be provided to very high-needs students throughout their academic career. In anticipation of the full-day Early Learning implementation, funding supports for students with diverse learning needs will need to be addressed.

Separate funding is also provided to boards for students with high needs who require more intense special education services, including teachers, education assistants and other supports. The amount of this allocation varies from board to board based upon the historic incidence rate, enrolment and measure of variability. Previously, a very complex and time consuming administrative procedure had to be used to justify entitlement. Boards are pleased at the streamlining that the Ministry has implemented, but they are concerned that the current enrolment-based high needs amount is not structured to respond to changes in incidence. It cannot be assumed that a decline in overall enrolment means a similar decline in numbers of high needs students. It is essential that a review process be developed to monitor changes in incidence and adjust funding accordingly on a regular basis.

Ongoing staff development for all teachers and support staff is required to continue to address student success for diverse learners, including technology and program support. Funding gaps exist in this area.

Recommendations

That the Ministry of Education continue to allocate funds for Special Education through a layered process that includes the Foundation Grant, a separate and protected SEPPA grant funding and High Needs amount to recognize the incidence of diverse learners and the needs to support parents of students with special education needs

That the Ministry of Education develop a process to monitor changes, on a board-by-board basis, relative to the prevalence of students with high needs, in order to make informed decisions about funding.

That benchmarks within the SEPPA allocation be reviewed and updated to more closely reflect actual costs to boards, particularly at the secondary level and in response to implementation of full-day early learning program direction..

That funding for a multidisciplinary team approach to children's mental health be co-ordinated through the various Ministries and that funding for mental health services be holistic and child-centered.

That the Ministry of Education provide ongoing staff development funding to address gaps in this area.

4. Full-Day Implementation of Early Learning Program

A focus on preventative programs, early childhood supports and intervention programs continues to be a central direction taken by multiple ministries. The use of schools for early years programming, parent centres and multiple-partnered programming continues to need further exploration and development. Practical learning opportunities engagement for children in their formation years is critical to their success in elementary and secondary schools. School boards begin working with children and families well before kindergarten registration in many areas; best start programs and integration have been established for children to experience seamless learning while preparing children from a readiness point of view perspective for their entry into school. The government's commitment to full-day kindergarten or early childhood education programs is to be applauded. However, there are serious funding issues that must be dealt with.

Recommendations

Full-day learning that is identified by the Ministry will provide universal access and program equity for all young children. The funding, coordination and implementation strategy requires timely input to ensure that facilities, program and staffing are in place to support such an ambitious program. This board will request that the Ministry engage in broad consultation with school boards to ensure that an implementation plan that is funded, provides clear direction, and ensures that facilities are able to cope with these new programs. Implementation is coming very quickly and school boards still require additional information regarding this bold initiative.

That the Ministry of Education provide adequate and timely funding for the capital needs of school boards so that they can coterminously implement full day programs to JK and SK students.

5. Transportation

In the last few years, the Ministry has acknowledged transportation funding issues, and has attempted to improve the model and address the inequity that exists. Transportation Efficiency and Effectiveness Reviews have been instrumental in identifying the funding needs.

While the board has undergone a Transportation Efficiency and Effectiveness Review with the Peel District School Board, transportation funding levels for both boards remain disproportionate to the funding for comparable boards. However, boards still in deficit are consistently advised to overcome their deficit through reductions in service levels and altered route approaches, while boards with funding surpluses in transportation are not required to consider these measures and continue to enjoy funding surpluses in transportation.

Dufferin-Peel is one of the first boards in the province to create a joint transportation system with its coterminous board. Currently, the board's student walking distances are among the most stringent in the province. We have eliminated transportation to our regional secondary school, economized transportation each year, and have not paid an increase of any significance, over and above the nominal amount provided in 2008-09 to virtually all of our major transportation providers, for many years.

The board applauds the Ministry's bus study which resulted in additional funding to eligible boards and encourages further movement in the establishment of a funding model that provides equitable funding for all.

Recommendation

That the Ministry continue its efforts towards the original objective of establishing an equitable funding model for student transportation and that the Effectiveness and Efficiency review continue, as an effective tool, to recommend improvement in efficiency and effectiveness while acting as a mechanism toward funding. It is further recommended that more equitable methods be devised to deal with transportation deficit/surpluses until a new funding model is implemented.

6. Primary Class Cap

The Ministry of Education has brought about the reduction of primary numbers to the imposition of a hard cap for primary classes. While the cap does allow for boards to provide flexibility, it does cause, in the minds of many parents, challenges of why their particular child has been placed in a blended classroom. The primary cap has resulted in more combined classrooms in boards, such as Dufferin-Peel, which have a number of small schools. Those primary class caps are also impacted by low enrolment. In the past, school boards have asked for flexibility in the primary cap. While we recognize the importance of the primary class cap in achieving the standards established by the government for primary education, having greater flexibility in the elementary panel would assist school boards.

Recommendation

That greater flexibility be provided to school boards in dealing with issues related to a hard primary class cap.