

Grants announcement not good news for Dufferin-Peel Board

Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board Chair Mario Pascucci is not impressed with the recent announcement of school board funding for 2014-15.

He said the announcement is no good news, as far as the Board is concerned.

'The overall announced 3.1 per cent funding increase across the province is largely a smoke-and-mirrors accounting maneuver,' he said. 'The inclusion, this year, of full-day kindergarten funding in the Grants for Student Needs (GSN), as well as an increase to fund the Ministry/Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario's Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) make up the bulk of this funding 'increase'.'

What is particularly galling for Pascucci is a reduction in funding for several large urban boards in the administration and governance line. For Dufferin-Peel, that will be approximately a nine per cent reduction with these funds being re-allocated to other boards. He said this is a cut of \$450,000 for Dufferin-Peel in 2014-15 and \$1.8 million overall; a cut that will impact students, as the positions funded through this line provide direct support to the classroom. It is, however, a wash for the Province as no overall funds are being cut, but rather, is a case where some boards suffer a loss while others will prosper from this loss. The Province has indicated that it will phase in the cut over four years.

Funding for benefits continue to decline with a 0.167 per cent decrease year-over-year due to the elimination of retirement gratuities. This has a direct impact on Dufferin-Peel's financial position, as the board has not had retirement gratuities since the late '70s, yet will bear the shared funding reduction with all other boards. Pascucci wondered if that's fair.

In addition, a change in the funding to the school operations grant, based on capacity, and an accelerated ARC process, could see the consolidation and closure of schools in an unprecedented manner. This will force ARC reviews on schools operating at less than capacity.

'This will be a tough pill for parents to swallow,' Pascucci observed. 'We have been through ARCs and subsequent closures in the past. They end up pitting community against community and, believe me, parents have no appetite for them.'

'We need to know from the Ministry what capacity threshold it is using to determine the correct size of a school,' he added. 'The Ministry has been silent on this important determining factor so far.'

The Ministry has committed to funding the terms and conditions of the existing collective agreements and MOUs (the terms and conditions of the MOU continue until a new collective agreement is reached).

As well, significant commitments have been made for capital programs. An increase to School Condition Improvement funding of \$1.25 billion has been announced over three years. \$250 million of this will be allocated in 2014-15.

An introduction of a new High Needs Amount (HNA) model for Special Education was announced. However, this is only one component of the Special Education Grant (SEG), and there was no commitment to review the remaining components. This will be a four-year phase-in.

'The true impact of the announcement will be better understood once staff has had an opportunity to review the Technical Paper and can affix specific dollar amounts,' Pascucci said. 'In the meantime, as far as we are concerned, this is no good news story for us.'