

# Team to help public board balance books

## Ontario Education Ministry sends in special supervisor

BY MARIA KUBACKI

The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board and the Ontario education minister yesterday announced the appointment of the same Special Assistance Team that helped balance the books at the Toronto District School Board.

The team is expected to begin its work next week and to spend about six weeks examining the Ottawa board's budget management plan, which proposes making major cuts to teaching staff and special education programs to deal with an estimated \$277-million funding shortfall for the 2007-2008 school year.

Joan Green and Brian Cain helped the Toronto board minimize cuts to classroom staff and programs by saving \$84 million to balance the board's 2006-2007 budget by cutting administration and using \$40 million in capital renewal grants to pay for facilities maintenance.

Ms. Green and Mr. Cain, jointly chosen by the Ottawa board and Education Minister Kathleen Wynne, are "a natural choice" because of their experience with the Toronto board, said Ottawa-Carleton District School Board chairman Rob Campbell.

"They have a wealth of expertise doing exactly this kind of thing for a big, complex urban board and we're tickled pink that we've been able to secure them."

The founding CEO of Ontario's Education Quality and Accountability Office, Ms. Green also served as director of education for Toronto's board of education.

In 2005, she reviewed the Ottawa-Carleton board's closing of Laurentian High School and J.S. Woodsworth Secondary School, endorsing the board's decision to close the schools, although she criticized the decision-making process.

Mr. Cain has served as the director of finance at the Ontario Public School Boards Association and in senior financial positions at a number of Ontario boards, including the Toronto District School Board.

Mr. Campbell sees "nothing but an upside" to bringing in the team.

"If nothing else, maybe they simply validate our existing situation," said Mr. Campbell, referring to what the board maintains is chronic underfunding in areas such as teachers. "Through the eyes of the Special Assistance Team, the ministry will be able to walk a mile in our shoes."

The team's recommendations will not be binding, according to the Ministry of Education.

However, Elaine Morgan, chairwoman of the Ottawa-Carleton Assembly of School Councils, believes the province could send in a supervisor to take over if the board rejects the team's recommendations.

"That's the next logical step," said Ms. Morgan, pointing out that the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board was recently taken over by the province after rejecting cuts proposed by a government-appointed supervisor.

Ms. Wynne would neither confirm nor deny whether the province will go that route if the board rejects the team's recommendations.

In a telephone interview, Ms. Wynne said: "I don't think we need to be talking about that at this point." She said she expects the team will bring new ideas to the board and help resolve its "issues."

NDP education critic Rosario Marchese doesn't believe the team will solve the board's problems by doling out more money.

He said he believes Ms. Green and Mr. Cain are "there to make the government look as good as they possibly can as they make these cuts."

Mr. Marchese argued that the McGuinty government is not providing enough education funding and is forcing the Ottawa board to make cuts to areas such as special education programs, which serve the neediest children.

He said he would support trustees if they refused to make the cuts and forced the government to take responsibility for a flawed education funding formula. "It's what needs to happen in order for the public to realize that we've got a serious problem."

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Trustee Bronwyn Funicello said she determined that if the students currently in the Language Learning Disability classes were placed in the regular classroom, they would not be able to participate fully because of their learning needs. "Learning is not fully accessible to all students in a regular classroom," she said.

Trustee Jennifer McKenzie agreed.

"I have visited these classes," she said, "and I don't see how a regular teacher in a regular classroom could make accommodations for these students' needs."

Trustees decided to retain the two classes.

English as a Second Language teachers in the elementary and secondary panels can breathe a little easier today, as well. The motion to eliminate the equivalent of 8.5 ESL positions at the elementary level and one at the secondary level failed, although education director Lorne Rachlis said he believed doing so would bring the board more into line with funding realities.

The board voted to open one Primary Assistance Centre at Robert Bateman School. However, proposed amendments to increase the number of assistance centres failed.

Four elementary special support unit classes were given the axe. The programs at Roberta Bondar Public, Pinecrest Public, Trillium Elementary and Vincent Massey Public will be eliminated. In their place, two special support unit classes will be created, one at Henry

Munro Middle School, and one at Jockvale Elementary School.

Trustee Pam FitzGerald argued against closing 5.5 secondary-level special support unit classes. "The kids in these classes have not fared well in regular classes," said Ms. FitzGerald. "By returning them to a regular high school without SSU support, we're not only guaranteeing their failure, we're guaranteeing that their classmates will find their behaviour disruptive."

"If back in regular classes, these students will end up suspended, expelled and, one way or another, unable to graduate."

But Mr. Rachlis noted that most of the secondary special support unit's students are in regular classes for most of the day.

Cindy Alce, principal for special education, said staff believe a more focused intervention at the elementary level is needed. At the secondary level, they believe adequate support can be provided in the regular classroom.

As a test, trustees decided to shut two special support unit classes — at Earl of March and Sir Robert Borden schools — and students will be integrated into regular classrooms.

Trustees also voted to close one elementary developmental disabilities class at Charles H. Hulse Public School and to open a secondary semi-integrated developmental disability class at Earl of March Secondary School. They also voted to close a general learning program class at Sir Winston Churchill Public School.

# Board: Embrace change – with proviso

# Public board finds it tough to cut programs, staff

## Debate hot over special needs services

BY CINDY LONG

The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board appears to be

finding it difficult to cut spending for staff and special education, despite recognizing a need to save money.

Lengthy talks last night indicated trustees are divided over how best to serve students with special needs.

The board voted last night to keep the Junior Language Learning Disability classes at Cambridge Street Community and Hilson Avenue Public Schools.

Trustees Cathy Curry and Lynn Scott argued for meeting

students' needs at their home schools.

"I support whatever it takes to serve these students well in their community schools," said Ms. Curry.

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March 6, 2007



## Public board dices, slices, but doesn't chop all Province appoints advisors to help find budget cuts; more jobs lost

By MICHAEL HAMMOND, Special to Sun Media

Two provincial appointees stepped in to help the beleaguered Ottawa-Carleton District School Board's trustees find spending cuts last night amid growing anger over the province's education funding formula.

Still, trustees resisted cutting a number of special education programs and teaching positions, leaving the board with fewer options to find tens of millions of dollars in cuts. At last night's meeting, trustees found roughly \$700,000 in additional cuts, including nine more job cuts.

So far, trustees have found \$6.9 million in spending reductions, which will mean 83 lost jobs.

The province appointed veteran education executives Brian Cain and Joan Green to help the board balance its books as it struggles to find nearly \$28 million in savings over the next two years.

While some applaud the province's move, critics argue the appointments only illustrate the dire situation the school board faces to balance its books to comply with provincial law.

"We've cut to the bone," said Elaine Morgan, chairwoman of the Ottawa Carleton Assembly of School Councils. "Some of these cuts, like those to overlay teachers, are increasing class sizes."

More than 200 jobs remain on the chopping block, including 130 teaching positions, although trustees were reluctant to approve special education cuts last night. After several hours of debate, trustees were not much closer to achieving the overall reductions they need.

The rising tension was evident even before the meeting, when board chairman Rob Campbell warned trustees not to ask "theatrical questions" during the debates.

Trustees killed a proposal to eliminate 9.5 English as a Second Language teaching positions to begin the fourth night of budget debate.

"I can see kids that will be severely affected by these cuts," said trustee John Shea, who had originally supported the plan.

Trustee Alex Getty appeared frustrated by the stance of his colleagues. He urged the group to stop questioning every last detail of the proposed cuts suggested by school board staff.

"It bothers me that we're even dealing with these issues at the board level," he said. "I don't know how anyone at this table can profess to know more than the professionals."

Despite the urgent need to find savings, trustees still spoke against a number of proposed special education cuts that followed the ESL proposal, setting the tone for the meeting.

A motion to close two language disabilities classes was soundly defeated after lengthy debate. Following that plan, trustees finally agreed to find some savings when they voted to cut four special support unit classes, the full-time equivalent of two teachers and two education assistants. The group then axed two high school special support unit classes -- three fewer than recommended.

The board further approved the closure of a development delayed student class and two general learning program classes.

Board officials said about 100 teachers leave the board each year due to retirement or transfers to other boards.

It is hoped that many of the axed positions will be covered by this attrition.

NDP Education Critic Rosario Marchese panned the provincial intervention in the Ottawa board's struggles yesterday, saying the province will make needy students pay for its education funding formula.

"We're going to pay these two individuals to make cuts to special education," he said. "These are going to affect the neediest of students."

Marchese said it makes no sense to spend money on consultants when that money could fund the school board.

"This shows that the government and the premier don't have education close to their hearts," he said.

Morgan said the province needs to adjust its formula, which funds school boards according to student enrollment. In theory, this formula makes sense, Morgan said. However, she stressed that the public school board has seen only a gradual decline in enrollment recently. The funding cuts, she added, have been disproportionate.

"Since it's a gradual process, it doesn't suddenly translate into lost schools and principals," Morgan said.

Although the province appears willing to give the public school board an extra year to find all these cuts, the board has yet to receive written confirmation.