

September 2011

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board is committed to seeing all students reaching their full potential. Our strategic directions are driven by our concern for achievement, equity and engagement with students, parents and staff. We have 113 schools and serve students from diverse urban and rural communities through a wide range of progressive programs and pathways. We value our community partnerships.

More funding is required in some crucial areas

Special Education

As a board we have 18.86% of our students receiving special education programs and services compared to the provincial average of 14.39% (2011 figures). This places us in the top 11% of all boards in the Province. However, our funding for high-need special education students does not reflect this.

All boards receive SEPPA grants for special-education students, which are provided on a formula dependent on enrolment in any given board. The actual number of special-education students or their needs does not enter into the calculation. The High Needs Allocation (HNA) is meant to compensate boards for this. For the HNA we receive \$443 per student, compared to the Provincial average of \$525, and this places us in the bottom 26% in the Province.

Therefore, we are forced to augment our special-education funding with funds taken from other children's programs. We have to limit our support to children with Educational Assistants, among other services. Clearly we require more funding.

Maintenance of our Buildings

The average age of our buildings is 52 years, and we are among 9 boards in the Province struggling with old building stock. For every dollar we receive of funding, \$18 more are required for maintenance. Our students also need the tools for 21st century learning and work readiness in the global market such as updated science labs, technology pods, and graphic design centres. We are working hard to close schools where enrolment is low and that are past their prime, but our schools need renovating or replacing.

Building New Schools

Although there have been adjustments to the capital funding for new schools in the Provincial Funding Formula, the changes still do not match actual square-footage costs for construction. Although we have financed many of our new schools by the selling of our assets, when we do receive funding for a new school there is a shortfall that we must cover, which we do through the selling of any surplus school or land. This causes some tension with the municipality, as public green space is lost.

Improved Funding for English Language Learners (ELL)

HWDSB has a high proportion of ELL learners. In Grade 3, they comprise 22% of all students compared to 4% in the Catholic Board, and 10% in the Province. In Grade 6, 15% of students are ELL compared to 5% in the Catholic board, 6% in the Province. (2011 EQAO report).

Presently we receive 4 years of funding for ELL. However, research says that it takes 5 to 7 years for a student to become fluent in the English language. In addition, there are students who enter the school system after kindergarten with no prior or with interrupted schooling, and many have trauma from their experience in war-torn countries and lawless refugee camps. Their additional needs receive no extra funding. Recently there have been cuts to Federal support programs for these students. Where once we had 15 settlement workers in schools (SWIS), we now have 10.

All-Day Kindergarten

We support this initiative whole-heartedly as we know from our own experience that children will benefit strongly through developing creativity, stronger language skills, and early literacy, in a stimulating environment. This program is a powerful tool to

help level the playing field for all children, especially those coming from Code Red neighbourhoods. It links with all the positive work developed by Best Start in our community. However, we are not completely funded for this initiative, and hope that this will be addressed by the Government in the coming year.

Aboriginal Students

Hamilton is fifth in the Province in terms of the size of its aboriginal population. Provincial funding for First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children has been increasing, but we would like to do more to insure that this vulnerable group, who in the past have had poor high school completion rates, has the support to achieve and graduate from high school.

Supports Required for our Students and their Families

Because we serve many children living in poverty, many living in identified Code Red neighbourhoods, and see the effects this has on an impoverished social, physical and intellectual environment, it is important to us that any government continue to work to reduce the number of children living in poverty.

At-Risk Students

It is important that the funds for Student Success (students at risk of dropping out of school), and high-needs schools, continue. These funds have allowed us to improve attendance in school, support better relationships with students, engage students in areas that interest them, and provide a greater number of pathways for students through schools to adulthood.

In addition, funding that supports: the community use of schools, Focus on Youth for at-risk kids in the summer, Parent and Family Literacy centres in schools, and mentoring of high-risk students, such as Pathways to Education, is valuable and should be sustained.

We require the support of other agencies for many students to be successful

- Services for children and their families are un-coordinated and fragmented, which reduces their effectiveness. Provincial and municipal strategies for integrated care are required, so that supports are effective and timely.
- The physical requirements of students with special needs are provided through the School Health Support Services (SHSS). However, there are long waiting lists for services, sometimes as much as two years. Different and more services are provided for pre-school children in early childhood education settings. Care for children with special needs from birth to adulthood should be seamless.
- There are inadequate supports for students with mental-health needs. Although the new funding is welcomed, it needs to be sustained and enhanced. One in five students have a mental health problem, and their needs, when unmet, often prevent them from succeeding in school.

Inclusion and Equity

The continued emphasis on equity and inclusion of all students, whatever their racial, sexual orientation, gender, disability or socio-economic status, is of great importance to us. It is building a culture of respect, and empathy in our schools, fitting attributes for the citizens of tomorrow.