

Times of Change and Innovation

Update by Toronto District School Board Trustee Chris Bolton

In the last week you may have seen in the media the presentation of some new ideas for programming in the Toronto District School Board. These programming directions included consideration of boys' schools, girls' schools, choir schools and sports schools. Not everyone agrees with these innovations, but the board of trustees has agreed these ideas are worthy of discussion. A feasibility study will be presented on these concepts in August to the board of trustees.

In the last month the government has also announced the funding for schools for the next school year. There is no additional funding for existing programs and only selected programs such as all day kindergarten are to be allocated new funding. And the funding for Special Education programming is actually reduced by a further \$2 million. With these announcements the annual period of angst starts over what programs that communities and the board of trustees feel are worth the most money from diminishing pot and what cuts will be in place for the next school year. This year, one area of increasing concern is borrowing from maintenance accounts to pay for other things such as shortfalls in electricity and school office staff and professional salaries by the province.

And the third element of this is the completion of meetings in 8 areas of the city to decide whether to close schools. This is a big consideration for communities as they risk not only losing their local institution that is a hub for the community activities, but also a potential of reducing the amount of green space. It is feared that at least 5 schools may close out of this process.

All of these events might make one pause to consider what is the overall direction of the largest board of education in Canada is and what it sees as its direction in this time of change and innovation. Firstly, although we only have about 10% of the population who actively look outside the board for alternative education opportunities, it is becoming clear that more parents want something different to keep their attachment to the Toronto public schools. We need to consider whether we think we are dividing up school communities into little cliques and colonies by programs of choice, we want to expand to ensure we have been inclusive of community needs. We also do not want to deplete the existing community school populations by creating great numbers of small boutique schools and not having enough students to fill existing buildings. We want to attract others to the school board from far and wide because, as in the past, the board should have a reputation that makes it a destination for people because of its inclusiveness.

If the Toronto Board of Education builds something visionary people will come. But we need to remember that schools belong to the communities they serve and the programs need to reflect the needs of that community. We also have to remind ourselves that we need to be creative about how we move forward. Are we willing to embrace global education that encourages other cultures to come here to be part of our schools through visa student applications? Do we wish to embark on other funding proposals like the one last year for Future Shop where computers were donated in exchange for painting

a classroom in Future Shop colours and posting a plaque? We need your input on how we move forward. Suggestions are greatly appreciated at chris.bolton@tdsb.on.ca.