

Campaign has provided fresh perspective for Catholic trustee Crowe



By Brock Weir

Elizabeth Crowe has been a trustee for the York Catholic School Board for 20 years, so one might be forgiven for thinking this campaign is old hat to her ? but this campaign has brought a fresh challenge.

The challenge? A challenger.

For the past several elections, Ms. Crowe has been acclaimed as Aurora, King and Whitchurch-Stouffville's representative on the York Catholic District School Board (YCDSB). But facing an opponent for the first time in candidate Mark Sullivan, however, has enabled her to put a fresh focus on her priorities.

?It has helped me to refocus on my priorities, I have put together a website with the help of my daughter, and put together a flyer and it gave me some clarity,? she says.

These priorities for the upcoming term are threefold, she says, with a new religious education curriculum, which was recently approved by the Bishops of Ontario, topping the list with adequate funding.

?I would like to make sure there is enough money in our budget to implement it properly,? she says.

Another priority of Ms. Crowe's focuses on math, and being an advocate for teachers specializing in math to actually be able to teach math in senior grades of elementary school. There is no requirement for math teachers in grades other than Grades 11 or 12 to have any particular training in mathematics, and that is something she and the board would like to see changed, with some help from the Province.

?We can't just do it on the board level,? she says. ?It is a union issue, it is a bargaining issue, and it is also a financial issue. Somebody on staff might have a degree in math or qualifications in math. In a school with declining enrolment, the person with math qualifications could be bumped for seniority issues, so we're writing a letter to the Ministry to address this because we can't do it at the board level. It really has to come down through new provincial bargaining as a Ministry direction. We think it is a possible solution because Grade 7 and Grade 8 math is quite complex.?

While her third priority falls to the development of an IT strategy for local schools, the issue of low enrollment has been of particular concern in recent years as far as Aurora schools are concerned, she says, noting that as the biggest challenge currently facing the YCDSB in Aurora.

There is an imbalance in Aurora particularly with an east-west divide in enrollment. Schools on the west side of Aurora are on a downward slope, while schools on the east are having trouble keeping up with demand. Parents on the west side are becoming empty nesters with no desire to leave their homes, she adds, and this lack of turnover is having an impact on surrounding schools.

‘Schools like Our Lady of Grace and Light of Christ have really seen a steep decline,’ she says. ‘Making St. Joseph a single track French Immersion school and redirecting the English track to Light of Christ really helped Light of Christ a little bit, but it is still not enough because that whole community is in enrolment decline and we don't know when it will recycle. I would like to work with both of those school communities to see if we can develop localized programming initiatives that might attract students to schools on the west side of Town. If we can develop programming that some parents would then choose to voluntarily go to those schools we can balance the enrolments a little bit better.’

A practicing Catholic with her home parish based in Schomberg, Ms. Crowe says she has found being a Catholic trustee a huge part of her life. She finds particular satisfaction in helping families ‘steer through the bureaucracy of the system’ and being able to help them out. She also takes pride in being Chair of the Board in representing the area's interests on a wider scale.

There have been some challenges, including a board decision earlier this year asking the local teachers' union to, in turn, ask their own teachers not to participate in Pride events, an issue which she declines to elaborate on when asked why this was something important to the board, she sees her role as a balancing act.

‘It is a balancing act between representing the constituents you represent, as well as the global picture because it is a Regional board,’ she says. ‘Sometimes issues arise at a local level but you always have to look at what the implications are board-wide for that. That is a bit of a balancing act. It is a two-pronged approach. You have to help people out, represent your constituents, make sure they have a voice, that they are heard, that their concerns are addressed. For parents, their children are their most precious gift, and they have to be heard if they have concerns about their children. You get those phone calls on a daily basis and then at the board level you are setting strategic direction and policy. That really is the major role of a trustee to set policy and direction for staff to implement.’

Mr. Sullivan did not respond to requests for an interview.