Provincial changes will have ?significant impact? on students, says School Board

By Brock Weir

Following sweeping changes proposed to the Province's education system, the York Region District School Board has sent the Ministry of Education a ?letter of concern? outlining significant ? often negative ? impacts they see coming down the pipe.

In a letter sent to Education Minister Lisa Thompson dated Thursday, Corrie McBain, Chair of the York Region District School Board, said the Board's ?preliminary analysis? on how proposed changes will impact students, their families and school communities, has resulted in ?some concerns that have significant implications for our students.?

Building on the Board's earlier estimate that an increase in class sizes could result in an estimated elimination of 300 teaching positions in YRDSB secondary schools, Ms. McBain said this change will have a direct impact on students and their ability to take courses required ?for their appropriate pathway.

?Under our current model to serve students, we already have college and university level courses at a maximum of 30 students,? she said. ?Moving forward, under the 28:1 average, we will have to increase many courses to over 30 students per class in order to maintain sustainable and safe environments in other classes, such as technology, auto mechanic shop, etc. For example, academic courses will rise to 36, college and university courses to 36, open courses to 32, physical education to 30, science to 32.

?The average secondary school in York Region District School Board has an enrolment of 1,400 students. Timetabling for students and staff allocation is currently underway, and under the 28:1 average ratio, as an example in a school this size, a full 625 students, or 45 per cent, will not have a full timetable to complete their secondary school education. Even more alarming, 78, or six per cent, of students will have no timetable. Under our previous class size model, this school offered a total of 482 classes across all grades, under the 28:1 average 379 classes will be offered, a loss of 103 classes. This means losing 17 teaching positions in one school alone. It is important to note that the cocurricular activities, coaching opportunities, and the caring relationships with students formed by these 17 teachers will be lost.?

Impacts, she said, will be felt greater in smaller schools.

Ms. McBain sites an example of a secondary school with 600 students. In this scenario, there would

only be one music class, eight applied courses, and two locally-developed courses available for the entire school. Electives will also be ?extremely limited? and, as teachers retire, the inability to replace them will result in a loss of specialized courses, particularly in the fields of STEM.

?Given how this affects larger schools, we can no longer use staffing from larger schools to accommodate smaller schools,? said Ms. McBain. ?This will significantly affect our students, their access to both mandatory and elective credits and, potentially their future. The proposed changes to secondary schools will disadvantage students looking to enter skilled trades the most.?

When secondary school students left classes in a Province-wide walkout on April 4, many of the teens said they were opposed to changes that would require them to take one high school credit online per year, citing different learning styles and the inability to ask questions of teachers in real time.

This too was a concern outlined by the Board, which said this will translate into students completing 13.3 per cent of their high school education online.

?This poses challenges logistically and may have a detrimental effect on graduation rates in York Region and across the Province,? said McBain. ?We are aware of some alarming statistics related to e-learning courses that raise concern for future mandatory e-learning. Last year, our Board saw an overall dropout rate of 25 per cent in our day school e-learning program. This is in sharp contrast to our dropout rate for in-class courses of six per cent.

?In addition, rural areas in our Board do not have access to widespread high speed bandwidth, and some students do not have access to technology at home to complete the courses. Given that staffing levels in secondary schools are being reduced, it will be difficult to provide appropriate supports to students who may require help or access. As with class sizes, this proposal will have a more detrimental effect in smaller schools and rural area.?

Ms. McBain's letter served as a refresher to a March 6 letter outlining concerns to funding changes to the Ontario Autism Program.

?To date, we have not received a response,? she said. ?While we recognize that the Minister of Children, Community & Social Services has delayed the implementation of the changes, some of our concerns have not yet been addressed. Our staff members have been working to determine how many students will be increasing their time at school and how many will be enrolling at school for the first time.

?Since the original

announcement, over 30 families have indicated they have a child who has never been to school and will now be attending as a result of the funding changes. Almost every one of these students has been described as having high needs related to their diagnosis of Autism. In addition, approximately 50 families have indicated their child will be increasing to full-time attendance at school. We have not yet heard back from the families of over 300 children currently receiving services from other agencies. The need to hire staff members to support these students as they arrive will result in an unknown additional financial pressure and a potential in-year deficit for our Board.

?As mentioned in our March 6 letter, we
appreciate the need to balance a high-quality public education system with financial sustainability. We ask that you reconsider some of the policies most detrimental to students and consult directly with school boards who can assist you in meeting our mutual goals of supporting students' achievement and wellbeing needs.?