

Education Director outlines plan for new school year



By Brock Weir

Digital learning and harnessing students' passions will be some of the top priorities on the bill as the York Region District School Board gears up for the 2013-2014 school year.

Ken Thurston, Director of the York Region District School Board (YRDSB), shared his goals and objectives for the year to come with *The Auroran*, ahead with meetings with trustees and leaders within the school network next week.

His plan builds on the goals and objectives of last year, building on student achievement and success, but also focusing on their wellbeing. "Student Achievement and Wellbeing" is priority number one for this school term.

"The YRDSB is a very high performing board," says Mr. Thurston. "We need to continue to dig deeper and make sure we have identified those students who can achieve at even higher levels and, for those who are still struggling, find innovative ways to support their continued enhanced achievement."

Last year's five priorities, he says, have been taken apart, dissected, and now it is time to "put them back together" to find and enhance "engaging programs" for students in all schools across the board. It is particularly important to make these programs "meaningful" to students and tailored both to their interests and learning styles.

"It is about being hands-on," he says. "For many students, it is about ensuring use of digital literacy and digital means of learning. That's the way of the world our kids are living with. [It's about] bringing the environment into the classroom, but also taking the kids out into the environment, as well as things like social justice.

"Today's youth are so animated and turned on by doing 'good' for those around them and around the world. We so often find you can use that kind of engaging activity to motivate them to learn just about anything."

As the board focuses on student interests to help them achieve their full potential, they are also focusing on their "wellbeing." That, he says, has been a significant shift over the past few years with the Board in that they not only want students to read, for example, but also want to read.

It is all part of a "renewal" of their mission, vision and values, which is priority number two for the 2013-2014 year. The objectives of the school board were drafted in 1998 and implemented in 1999 and, since then, Mr. Thurston says the school board and the extensive community in which it serves have both become very different.

The revised 'mission, vision, and value statement' will have 'widespread' public input from students, parents, and staff and that will be drafted and honed over the next 12 months. They will also focus on making sure these new visions are actually implemented across the board.

'When I take a look at the words of our mission statement, it has served us very well,' says Mr. Thurston. 'Words around equity and engagement of everyone within our system ' that didn't get as much attention in 1998 as it does now. Driving around York Region, communities, our families and are schools are quite different than they were 13 or 14 years ago. It is [about] capturing the essence of what the public can count on in the York Region District School Board.'

The third priority is to re-engage the community. It is a third priority identified at least in part by the troubles that plagued the education system across Ontario last year with labour battles between teachers' unions and the Province of Ontario.

For Mr. Thurston, it is about building relationships with staff, parents, and communities. The fact the ultimate say in the labour dispute rested between the unions and the province was something which wasn't always 'interpreted' as such within the York Region Community, but compared to other jurisdictions, York Region was relatively unscathed. Tensions grew, he said, when extracurricular activities were axed, and those concerns were uppermost in the minds of students and parents.

'We came through last year, relative to many other boards, very well in terms of the labour stresses in particular and the stresses that created for our parents and our families,' he says. 'Aside from one day we were able to keep our schools open and our programs running and maintaining pretty positive relations, relatively speaking with our employee groups.'

'However, we want to build on that. We want to make sure that we rebuild any of those strained relationships and also reach out and make sure we rebuild any concerns and any weaknesses that developed with our communities and parents. We're building on an asset here.'