

Families fight for full day kindergarten at St. Joseph

By Brock Weir

A decision by the York Catholic School Board to eliminate full day kindergarten at St. Joseph Catholic Elementary School by 2017 will provide significant hardships to local families, according to parents urging the Board to give alternatives a second look.

Local families say they were left 'angry' and 'frustrated' following the last meeting of the Board (YCDSB) where their efforts to get the Board to look at other options apparently fell on deaf ears.

In 2014, the Province allowed school boards to exclude full day kindergarten from single track French Immersion schools, which St. Joseph intends to become by the start of the 2017-2018 school year.

Until that time, full day kindergarten will be offered in the school through June of 2017 but, after that, families will have to look for kindergarten alternatives at other schools, which could create split families, they say.

Students who complete Junior Kindergarten at St. Joseph in the 2016-2017 school term will have to register for senior kindergarten elsewhere, which could lead to siblings being split and putting parents in the position of shuttling to different schools on the morning and afternoon runs.

'The children will be separated from their siblings,' says Charlene Sant-Wells of Families for Kindergarten on behalf of the local families.

While Ms. Sant-Wells is not an impacted mother herself, she is working with the group after waging a successful Full Day Kindergarten campaign in the area in 2014.

'[When this goes ahead] you have parent engagement decreased because they are going to be managing multiple schools and drop-offs are going to be very difficult to manage,' she says. 'One of those children is going to be perpetually late because the recommended default school, Light of Christ, has the same start times.'

'[The Board] is concerned about enrolment rates, but I believe there will be several parents who will decide to remove their children from the York Catholic District School Board and enrol them in either the private or Public system to minimize disruption and keep siblings together.'

Stability for the kids, she says, is important and so too is the cost of maintaining full day kindergarten at schools like St. Joseph.

Financial 'transparency' and 'accountability' appears to be a particular bone of contention between the parents and the Board. Families for Kindergarten rejects the view of the YCDSB that this route is cost effective, arguing if they keep Kindergarten as is, it would put the Board in a 'more advantageous' position than it is now through several grants available to them.

'The biggest frustration at this point is our model being more financially advantageous than the model the Board is presenting and they said it is not,' says Ms. Sant-Wells. 'They have not provided any evidence to back up that statement. Me, not being impacted from a family perspective, I am really questioning their ability to manage a budget and their ability to be transparent. It is their responsibility to their constituents to be transparent in the way they manage the funds and our taxpayer dollars, and we can't get an answer out of them.'

On the part of the Board, they say the elimination of all-day kindergarten at St. Joseph is not a new decision.

'The decision was made in 2014 and it is part of the phase out of the English track at the school as it transitions to single track French Immersion (FI) school,' says May Moore, Communications Director for the YCDSB. 'The Board's single track FI schools are from Grade 1 to Grade 8 only. They do not offer JK and SK. As a school transitions from dual track to single FI track, JK and

SK are eventually phased out as the FI program grows.

?The original decision taken by the Board wasn't an easy one and the Board understands the concerns it has heard from parents on the issue. The trustees listened to [their] presentation, which was very straightforward.?

Parents at St. Joseph received a letter this past January informing them of the situation, and a further letter dated March 3 in response to their delegation.

?Your attention to detail and the high level of research and preparation that went into your proposal was very evident and made for an informative and thorough presentation,? wrote Carol Cotton, Chair of the YCDSB. ?Until FI is fully implemented at the secondary level for all of our current FI students, the Board is not in a position to expand and introduce the program beginning in Senior Kindergarten. At this time, implementing a pilot at one school would result in increased pressure and expectation to expand it to the other 14 FI elementary schools, a recommendation that our curriculum, Human Resources, and Planning Staff do not currently support given the current budgetary climate.?

Nevertheless, concerned parents are still hoping to receive a more detailed response to their delegations to the Board.

?I think they owe it to explain [the financial situation] to us. It is our money,? says Ms. Sant-Wells. ?Right now, we are pausing to see what our next course of action is. My heart goes out to these parents right now because I don't know that there is anything we can do from a legal standpoint. I don't feel the Board is extremely compassionate about the turmoil they are going to cause these families. It would be extremely nice for the families in the YCDSB to feel there is a level of compassion and concern for their wellbeing and the family's wellbeing from the trustees and that is not the message they are sending.?