

Trustee raises concerns with YCDSB's back-to-school plan

Mandatory masks, teacher staffing issues raised by Aurora-King parents

As parents across Aurora and King make their final decision on whether or not to send their youngsters back to school for in-class learning this fall, the numbers in favour of that plan versus continuing distanced learning are being carefully eyed by the York Catholic District School Board.

On Wednesday, trustees representing parents and families within the York Catholic District School Board (YCDSB) met virtually for a nearly four-hour meeting to discuss their back-to-school plan, following the release of the Ministry of Education's plan for a safe return to schools.

As the meeting progressed, parents were in the midst of filling out registration forms detailing in which stream they intended to register their children.

Should parents change their minds in one way or the other, elementary school students will be able to switch between in-class and distanced learning options on October 13, while secondary school students will be able to do the same on November 16, following the end of their first trimester.

Aurora-King Trustee Elizabeth Crowe, however, questioned the financial impact a large influx of students in one direction or other would have on the Board.

"I have great concerns about setting up expectations for parents," said Ms. Crowe, adding this is a concern shared by many parents who had been in contact with her prior to the meeting. "We have a very large system and if 10 per cent of our elementary school parents decide to leave the classroom model and go to the online learning model, we would have to find approximately 128 teachers to do that. 10 per cent is a lot. In a class of 25, that is two to three kids that might decide to switch, yet we would need to find 128 teachers, which we do not have funding for.

"Even if we access our occasional teachers and put them into positions of teaching asynchronously or synchronously online, which they possibly aren't used to because they may not have been involved in the end of last year, it would still have a significant impact. I understand parents want flexibility, but I am really concerned about the October 13 and November 16 dates - how much notice would parents have to give us? It seems very easy on a school-by-school and class-by-class basis, but the size of our system is logistically impossible."

This is something Maria Battista, Interim Director of the YCDSB, said had been considered but conceded "it is difficult to see what will happen."

"We are relying on the data we will receive next week and, at that point, I think we can make a better decision," said Ms. Battista of numbers that are rolling in this week. "Even if we had the dates, perhaps October 13 isn't that far into the year where there can be some restructuring and we would have to see what the impact would be on the entire system."

Board staff confirmed the YCDSB will be establishing a timeline for parents to inform them, prior to the dates above, so future plans could be discussed "with all parties involved" including teachers and unions. These dates will be outlined in the future, they said.

This was just one of many questions raised by Ms. Crowe during last week's meeting, including whether secondary students would need to be cohorted in more hands-on but comparatively small classes like auto shop and hairstyling courses at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School.

Staff agreed that a closer look on enrolment in specialty courses was needed.

Ms. Crowe also emphasized the importance, in her view, of students having access to hard copies of textbooks and whether special provisions on mask-wearing were being considered for special needs students.

?There was a parent that I spoke to whose child is autistic and she felt her child would not be able to wear a mask the whole time; yet, she also felt that her child would stand out in the class by not wearing a mask,? she said, also questioning what will happen if a student between Grades 4 and 12 refuses to wear a mask and if that would be subject to ?progressive discipline.?

Classroom teachers, alongside the individual school's principals, would work together to address these concerns, staff replied, working in consultation with parents.

?I do appreciate that parents will immediately think that the solution would be an exemption, but there are lots of options that we would like people to be aware of before we necessarily go to one solution,? said Tina D'Acunto, Superintendent of Education (School Leadership). ?There is a whole range of options and in our department we're investigating all kinds of mask options that would allow better breathability, clear mask options anti-fog masks ? there is really quite a range. We would work with the parent to see what they would be most comfortable with and what the student would be most comfortable with.

?This is a teaching opportunity as well to develop a sense of tolerance where we can. We would work in partnership with the parent and their family physician to get some guidance as to what is the best accommodation we can provide. It is very individual and I think with everyone working together we can come up with a plan that will provide a range of options and trial which one works the best.?

By Brock Weir