

Director of education discusses school board's response to COVID-19

By Nate Smelle

Over the past year Ontario's education system has undergone several fundamental changes in an attempt to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of an ongoing series of articles focusing on how this public health crisis has impacted the teaching and learning environment in Ontario, The Bancroft Times provided the Hastings Prince Edward District School Board with a series of questions. The following are the responses from HPEDSB director of education Sean Monteith.

The Bancroft Times: How has the role of the HPEDSB changed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Monteith: When the Ministry of Education closed schools last March, it was truly an unprecedented decision. People were in disbelief and the mandated closures underscored the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on everyone. In fact, our all students first approach became even more significant. The closure decision was a turning point in K-12 education and certainly here at HPEDSB. It required us to pivot, and make decisions quickly and as efficiently as possible. Keeping students engaged in school was the first priority. Then, as the pandemic and school closures continued, our focus turned to supporting the mental health and well-being needs of students, families and employees.

The Bancroft Times: What have been the biggest challenges for the board during this public health crisis?

Monteith: Ordering and distributing technology for at-home learning was a challenge early on, although we have made a lot of progress since last year at this time. Over 3,000 Chromebooks have been distributed to students who required a device to use at home. Several hundred WiFi hotspots have also been provided to support students without Internet home access or spotty coverage.

The Bancroft Times: What is being done to ensure appropriate sanitization is taking place in schools? I understand the provincial government has increased funding to hire more custodians: how many custodians have been hired locally in HPE since the government announced this funding?

Monteith: Additional cleaning, including high touch surfaces, has been incorporated into the routine. Hand sanitizer use, periodic enhanced cleaning, and other protocols have been established. According to Public Health, there has been no case of COVID-19 transmission within HPEDSB schools. The equivalent of an additional six custodians have been hired using the provided COVID-19 funding.

The Bancroft Times: In light of the increasing number of cases of the more contagious variants of COVID-19 in Ontario, what is the board doing to ensure two-metre physical distancing is enforced in classrooms? Has there been a reduction in class sizes; and/or any other measures taken to protect students and staff?

Monteith: Visual cues are in place and reminders to physical distance are given every day. Schools have signs on exterior and internal doors and throughout the school, and floor markings are also visible. Classrooms are set up to provide more distance between student desks, where possible. Further, announcements are made every day at elementary and secondary schools to remind everyone to physical distance, and follow public health guidelines to wear masks and wash hands frequently. Schools also post these messages to their social media.

The Bancroft Times: Several teachers have expressed concerns regarding how when the students are eating lunch, they have to remove their masks. What air quality controls are there in schools to make sure students/teachers/education workers have a safe learning/teaching/work environment?

Monteith: All schools have environmental controls, including heating and ventilation, that are operated through a building automation system. The operation of this system is closely monitored by in-school staff and remotely by central staff. In addition,

portable or supplementary equipment is provided as needed.

The Bancroft Times: During last year's job action one of the issues of importance for teachers was the increasing amount of violence in the classroom. Since then, has the board put in place any policies or measures to address violence in the classroom?

Monteith: Ensuring the safety of students and employees is at the core of our work. Therapeutic Crisis Intervention is used to support student behaviours. Training is delivered throughout the year to frontline educational staff. The goal is to provide employees who work directly with students who have social-emotional and behaviour needs with the skills, knowledge and confidence to support students environmentally and emotionally, and to teach students better ways to cope with their stress. Ongoing assessment of student needs occurs throughout the school year and these needs are addressed in consultation with school personnel, community agencies/support services and our Student Services staff. In addition, voluntary online professional development activities, such as Registered Behaviour Technician training, School Mental Health Ontario modules and various Ministry of Education funded autism programs are completed by educational assistants, teachers, mental health support staff and school administrators.

The Bancroft Times: Is there anything else that the board would like to share with the public about its response to the pandemic; and/or how education is changing as a result of this crisis?

Monteith: The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that was officially declared over a year ago has impacted not just the operation of our schools and how staff deliver education to our students, it has impacted every aspect of our lives. Not all of these changes have been for the worse, as our ability to respond and make changes to support our families have been accomplished more quickly and responsively than we were accustomed to. Without question, the greatest concern we have at HPEDSB is the impact on the well-being and emotional health of our students, staff and families. I feel that HPEDSB has responded in a remarkably supportive way and we have much to be proud of, but we also have much work to do ahead.