

New funding can only be used to repair schools

By Sarah Sobanski

Hastings Prince Edward District School Board (HPEDSB) will receive over \$10 million in funding for school repairs.

The Government of Ontario is investing \$2.7 billion into schools across the province over the next two years. It released last week it is adding \$1.1 billion to its previously proposed \$1.6 billion investment. While exact dollars have not been released to the public yet, HPEDSB superintendent of business David Rutherford suggested the board would receive close to \$13 million.

"We just had a phone call from the ministry. We haven't received a formal notification yet. Comparing our current level of funding with what is proposed over the next two years it's more like \$13 million," said Rutherford. "We had no idea that this was coming. It was two years ago that the government introduced school conditioning and improvement funding, and it was increased in 2015-'16 and that [was] about \$6 million. That's what has been bumped up for us for the next two years. So everyone was pleasantly surprised."

The Ministry of Education said the funding would enable school boards to repair roofs, update HVAC units with the help of a company similar to can be found at npmheatingandcooling.com/ac-repairs-in-weldon-spring/ as well as modernize the electrical and plumbing systems. It will also focus on modernizing student classrooms by updating visible elements ? from floors to sports fields.

The funding comes at a time when the HPEDSB is considering the monstrous task of renovating many of the schools in its district. The board's Long-Term Capital and Accommodation Plan reviews its schools' efficiency and needs across the district across the board.

"With the long-term capital plan there is a number of factors involved. You have \$250 million in identified needs in all of our school buildings across the district. That's an amount that was arrived at through school visits by Ministry of Education personnel," said Rutherford. "It's a big issue, a big problem - \$12 million, or \$13 million over two years is good, but it's only a drop in the bucket."

He added, "So the [plan] is really going to be looking at rationalization of space within the district. We have excess space for the number of students enrolled in schools, so trying to reduce that space over time will then reduce the \$250 million requirement for infrastructure needs."

The government funding must be designated to repairs and renewals for Ontario schools. It cannot be put towards building additions onto existing schools, or for new construction.

"It must be to upgrade and ensure the safety of existing school buildings," said Rutherford. "So part of our process [with the plan] will be [to ask] what buildings are going to be kept over the next 50 years, because you don't want to invest millions of dollars into ones that aren't going to be around."

Rutherford suggested because the plan is still in its early stages, the board will not be able to begin spending the new funding as quickly as many would like. It doesn't want to end up renovating buildings at the expense of others if they won't be needed in the future.

The HPEDSB is still reviewing its future actions plan, where some other Ontario school boards have already approved their recommendation plans. It plans to make formal recommendations based on the review in the fall.

"We'll certainly spend some of it, but maybe some of it will be put on the backburner until we have our capital plan approved," said Rutherford.

The funding will be allocated based on need to school boards across Ontario. Rutherford noted the average age of schools in the

HPEDSB is over 50 years.

"Tweed, Stirling and Harmony were built new in the last three years, but the last new school that was built would have been Bayside Secondary School built in 1972," said Rutherford. "We're glad that the government has recognized the need is out there."