

School cuts limiting opportunities for local students

By Nate Smelle

When the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation learned of the Hastings Prince Edward District School Board's decision to slash school budgets throughout the district by an average of 30 per cent in September, OSSTF president Scott Marshall says they immediately had concerns. Since taking effect at the start of the school year, the cuts have negatively affected students and teachers, he said.

In conversation with *Bancroft This Week*, HPESB communications officer Kerry Donnell indicated that North Hastings High School's budget had been cut by 29 per cent (nearly \$40,000).

According to Marshall, these cuts have imposed serious limitations on classroom learning, co-curricular learning and extra-curricular activities.

‘We question the decision by the board to cut these funds because they do directly impact students,’ Marshall said.

‘There were some new administrative positions hired at the board office, and we felt that money would’ve been much better spent kept in school budgets and not placed at the level of administration.’

Marshall said he does not understand why the board created three new positions for system principals ‘especially considering the fact they are facing a deficit.

The problem is twofold, he said, because the provincial funding formula also penalizes schools with low enrolment. Marshall said this only exacerbates the challenges faced by schools like NHHS.

‘If you’re running at only 60 per cent capacity there can be a penalty there,’ explained Marshall.

‘Part of the underlying pressure on this board is to look at school closures and strains to their finances. There is also the issue of how they manage the finances they do have. We strongly disagreed with the decision they made to cut these school budgets, when we didn’t see the same kind of cuts at the administrative level.’

Furthermore, because of the cuts, Marshall said the teachers are also coping with reductions to the funds they previously had available for professional development, also known as PD. Though there is still funding available through the OSSTF for teachers to take PD courses, Marshall said there is no longer any money allocated by the board to cover the cost of bringing in a substitute teacher if the PD initiative takes place during regular classroom hours. Therefore, teachers at NHHS are now prevented from participating in professional conferences where educators from across the province gather to discuss a specific subject and share innovative ideas. He sees this as a loss for both the teachers and the students.

‘Everyone in the building is still doing what they can to make it work with what they have of course,’ Marshall said.

‘Teachers in all of our schools here in Hastings and Prince Edward counties are troubled by this, because they knew it would have impacts like the things we’ve discussed here.’

Once the school year was underway, Marshall said the staff at NHHS drafted a list for him highlighting the negative repercussions these cuts are having at the school. This list revealed that regarding co-curricular activities such as field trips, the costs for students have gone up substantially. Whereas the costs associated with transportation for field trips would have previously been covered by the board, students are now responsible for footing the bill. Funding that supports upgrading and repairing technology for computer labs, classrooms and the school’s library was also cut; as was the funding for NHHS’s Practical Learning Program class for students with specific needs and the off-campus LOFT program.

Extra-curricular activities were hit hard by the cuts to NHHS’s budget as well. All together, six teams were cut, and several others were forced to raise fees for students to participate. The six teams lost due to the cuts include golf, mountain biking, cross-country, boys’ rugby, curling and boys’ hockey. The increased fees for students to get involved in extra-curriculars are making it difficult, and in some cases impossible for students from lower income families to join teams or clubs they previously would have been able to afford. For instance, it now costs members of the volleyball team more than \$200 each to play because they now must absorb the cost of transportation to their games and tournaments.

‘It’s almost an equity issue,’ says Marshall.

Teacher and former coach of the now-defunct golf program, Kendra Kilpatrick agrees. Since the cuts, she has seen first-hand how they have limited the opportunities available for students at NHHS.

‘Golf is a sport where students can compete as individuals, and many of the top golfers are offered scholarships all over the United States,’ says Kilpatrick. ‘The financial constrictions these cuts create limit the students’ potential to succeed beyond high school.’