



## **2006 SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS IT'S YOUR MONEY – YOUR COMMUNITY – YOUR KIDS**

### **November 13, 2006 – Elections Matter**

For the past ten years, Ontario district school boards have been a critical and often last line of defence of Ontario's elementary and secondary school system. Yet voter turnout for school board elections is typically rather low – about 30%.<sup>1</sup> This needs to change. All Ontario voters should care about our education system, ensuring all children become active citizens in our democracy.

The Ontario government is currently boasting a \$300 million budget surplus. We need to elect school board trustees who will tell Dalton McGuinty and the Ontario Liberals to fix the funding formula, stop privatization and do away with the Mike Harris-era legacy of cuts and closures.

### **The Mike Harris Years**

During the Mike Harris years, the Conservative government implemented significant changes to Ontario's education system. These changes drastically disempowered both school boards and school board trustees.

### **Disarming the Opposition**

When the number of school boards was reduced from 129 to 72 there was a sharp reduction in the number of school board trustees – the very people who are elected to stand up for Ontario's school system. Harris capped the "salaries" of school board trustees at \$5,000 per year, ensuring that few of the remaining trustees would be able to advocate for Ontario's kids on a full-time basis.

The Harris Tories went even further by adopting legislation that would dismiss (and disqualify from holding office for five years) any school board trustee who failed to implement an edict of the provincial government, regardless of the views of local students, teachers, staff and parents. Under the new regime, school board trustees choosing to run a deficit, rather than close schools, cut programming or close swimming pools, could also be held personally liable for a school board budget deficit.

<sup>1</sup> OSSTF *Update*, Vol. 3, No. 10, May 3, 2006

## **Creating a Crisis**

Shortly after taking office, then-Education Minister John Snobelen mused that in order to bring about change one first had to “create a crisis.” Almost overnight, \$637 million was slashed from education funding and a new funding formula for Ontario schools was imposed. The effect was drastic: school boards were forced to slash the numbers of staff, teacher-librarians, and guidance counselors. Further programs cuts saw the elimination of shop, English as a second language, adult education and a plethora of other education programs.

Many schools began charging user fees for everything from athletics, lab materials and art supplies, to the use of school facilities for community groups. Building maintenance and services were contracted out to private companies as a means of reducing short-term costs. School boards increasingly turned to private fundraising and exclusive contracts where schools are paid to market products like Coca Cola and Pepsi to children.<sup>2</sup>

## **Resistance Wins**

In 2002, the president of the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association announced that at least \$2.1 billion of additional funding would be required to sustain already reduced services and begin repairing and rebuilding Ontario’s education infrastructure. Then-Education Minister Janet Ecker acknowledged that Ontario schools faced a deferred maintenance backlog totalling \$6.8 billion.

Dozens of school boards throughout Ontario stated publicly that decisions to balance local school board budgets had been made under duress and three school boards – Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, and Toronto District School Board – refused to implement further cuts that would gut Ontario schools.

The courage of these local school board trustees helped crystallize the crisis in Ontario’s school system. The Harris government commissioned the Rosanski Report that ultimately called for an immediate injection of public funding and for an annual review of the funding formula.

## **Dalton McGuinty – A new era?**

When Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty was elected Premier, in October 2003, many thought the Mike Harris era was over. Education funding did increase, but most of the new funds were earmarked for specific government goals. Local school boards are not at liberty to allocate resources in accordance with local priorities. And despite the much-touted funding increase, many school boards are still short funding.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, *Commercialization in Canadian Schools: Who’s Calling the Shots?* May 2006.

<sup>3</sup> People for Education: *Back to School update on School Board finances for 28 of the Province’s 72 Boards*, August 27, 2006

Currently, many of the worst elements of the Mike Harris funding formula remain:

- The benchmark in the formula for teachers does not reflect the actual costs, so boards employ fewer teachers than contemplated by the funding formula.<sup>4</sup>
- The funding formula never adequately provided for the costs of operating and maintaining buildings.<sup>5</sup>
- There is no funding line for educational assistants, so boards must find money for their salaries from other budget areas.
- The funding formula has not been adequately modified to take into account the different costs associated with maintaining buildings of vastly different ages, sizes, and architectural design.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Challenges Continue**

These flaws explain why many school boards are still facing the spectre of closing schools and cutting programmes as a means of balancing budgets. Although much has been made of declining school enrolment at a time of increased funding, few have pointed out the fact that there are certain fixed costs associated with running a school, regardless of the number of students. Utility costs don't decrease just because there are fewer students in the building.

Ontario's elementary and secondary schools are still under funded. As long as this continues, there will be constant pressure on school boards to cut programmes and services, and further entrench privatization. More than ever, we need active, fighting school board trustees who demand that Ontario children not be short-changed.

### **2006 School Board Elections – Get Active**

Next year, many trustees will earn more – the first increase since the salaries were cut during Mike Harris's first term. As such, it is hoped that school board trustees elected in 2006 will have more time to devote to school advocacy – we need to make sure they're advocating for students, teachers and staff.

For more information on labour endorsed school board trustee candidates please contact your local labour council.

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<sup>4</sup> Ontario Alternative Budget 2006-07 pp 33-35.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid