

PRESS RELEASE – JAN JOHNSTONE

PROGRESSIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL TRUSTEE NETWORK

QUEEN'S PARK – JUNE 22, 2007

I am Jan Johnstone, trustee with the Bluewater District School Board representing Grey-Bruce Counties, and representing the taxpayers in the Municipality of Kincardine and the Township of Huron-Kinloss. But most importantly, I represent the needs of students and their public education needs.

Like many other progressively minded English and French speaking trustees who have joined with the One School System Network, I am advocating for one publicly funded secular school board system in the province of Ontario for each of Canada's official languages.

My Board unanimously supports a one school system of governance.

Over recent years, there has been a growing concern amongst many Boards in the province over the division of resources in education. Currently in Ontario, education resources are shared amongst four publicly funded systems. We have English and French Public boards and English and French Catholic boards.

In direct relation to this public funding of these four systems, the United Nations Human Rights Committee has twice censured Canada for allowing discrimination on the basis of religion in the funding of schools in Ontario.

In an effort to maximize resources, for example, Bluewater District School Board and Bruce-Grey Catholic District School Board share many successful partnerships. This includes:

- Transportation, purchasing, various co-op programs, a WRAP program (Working To Reinforce All Partners), Speech and Language Services, Regional Skills, Student Success Initiatives, School to College to Work Initiatives, and Athletic Association.

We are the poster child for co-board partnerships! But it is not enough.

These partnerships are limited in their ability to address other issues that are currently affecting most school boards. Partnerships do not address province wide declining enrolment issues in the boards' shared geographical areas – nor – do they capitalize on cost efficiencies that are available but underused amongst boards.

Recently, our school board had to make – again – difficult cuts to administration, plant operation, secondary and elementary staffing, and to French immersion in our budget. Children with special education needs have been hit really hard with the cuts in

elementary resource teacher staffing. The cut back in provincial funding for special education and declining enrolment grants have pushed the board to cut back on many valuable programs. With a deficit of 3.2 million dollars, we are cutting back by over 5 million dollars. In a small rural board, this is unbelievable!

Our Catholic school partners are also in declining enrolment. Yet they are not in deficit nor are they cutting back programs or closing schools. In fact, they are going to be building new additions on a couple of schools. Recently they received 1 million dollars in grants for programs. This is on top of their allocated funding from the Ministry of Education. This is not equitable or fair!

If, however, these two English school boards were amalgamated, not only would we reduce capacity of 5,500 student surplus spaces, related to too many partially filled schools, redundant administration and services, we would have an annual savings of 3.3 million dollars. That's right – 3.3 million dollars. Plus, we would be able to eliminate 2 superintendent positions at 350,000 annually.

We could reinvest this money into student programs, capital repairs and maintenance. We would be able to provide better student supervision, more and better specialized programs, and eliminate many of the fees associated for some programs and for extra curricular activities. In fact, we could rebuild that school in Kincardine, one that is so desperately needed and wanted. And an ecoschool, one that is environmentally friendly.

If these are the costs savings in amalgamating these two boards who share the same geographical area, can you imagine the cost savings across the province? Imagine what we really could do in public education if all those dollars went into student programs, services, and classrooms! There is only one education funding pie – it is all how you cut it. This makes economic sense to me. We don't need more money in education; we need a one school system of governance.

I am the local elected political voice for the needs of children of all faiths in our community and for public education. Schools are social hubs of our communities. Parents and the community are very generous with their time, donations and fundraising activities. But all their hard work does not change the bottom line.

I see red when I see inequity of funding across the 4 boards of education. I also see too much red ink – a huge waste of money and resources to the inefficiencies of propping up 4 publicly funded educational systems. Enough is enough. Holding up all this redundant infrastructure and administrative service is a misuse of our tax dollars.

As one parent recently said to me: “I am unsure why there is such a resistance to slaughtering this sacred cow. I am sick of fundraising for every little log and swing seat - let alone an entire new piece of playground equipment!”

Indeed, let's literally share the same grass and become one publicly funded secular school system!

The intent of supporting the one school system is to maximize resources in the delivery of Ontario's education system and to see that all students in Ontario better served by a new English and French publicly funded secular school systems. The OSSN provides a stronger voice for the majority of Ontario's citizens who share this belief.

I say to all progressively minded public school trustees in all four systems, if not us - then who? Who will stand up and speak out for a one publicly funded secular school system? And if not now, when? This is an election year. It deserves to be raised as an important election issue.

The public needs to know there is a lot better alternative to – on the one hand – the status quo that is inequitable, inefficient, discriminatory. And – on the other hand – the way to costly election promise, “fund all religious schools publicly.” Not only is this divisive, but building more silos of separation will splinter and fracture our public education system even more.

Whereas – good public education policy – one school system: builds community – a better society.

As Howard Pawley – the Acting Director for the Centre for Studies in Social Justice at the University of Windsor, an author of the Constitution of Canada and the former premier of Manitoba said, “It only takes political will.” ONE SCHOOL SYSTEM.

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