Borden says government committed to inclusion in consultation

By Bob Borden
Chair, Upper Grand District School Board

In early 2009, the McGuinty government introduced Bill 177, an act to clarify and redefine the role of school boards and their accountability to the provincial government. In late June, they released a consultation paper on related regulations and asked school boards to respond by August 31 ... great timing!!

In general, the Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB) agrees with and supports the responsibilities in most of the bill. However, we do so with some very clear reservations and requests for modification.

First, we know that this government is strongly committed to including parents and the community-at-large in its consultations and decision making around schools. However, the Board wishes to make the point that this consultation process is very exclusive in terms of parents and community role.

Nowhere in this consultation process is there consideration given to what the community values; its goals and aspirations.

Additionally, the goals that Boards are being evaluated against are driven by decisions made at the government or ministry level and seldom, if ever reflect those of the immediate community.

Second, the clearly stated goal of Bill 177 is "to strengthen school board governance and to emphasize that school boards are responsible for the level of achievement of their students."

While we appreciate the first part of the statement, one must clearly understand that the ability to accomplish the second part is strongly dependent upon the having the resources to accomplish this goal.

However, as you are well aware, the Ministry of Education controls the finances and we are merely the recipients of their allocations, and in many cases Boards are directed to where and how to spend these funds.

We no longer have the ability to generate funds to support locally developed initiatives that support locally identified needs.

As a Board, we would very much appreciate the opportunity to develop long-term plans. We did so, in response to the ministry's request for capital planning, and would like, also to do so in the instructional arena.

However, the ability to develop realistic plans is heavily dependent upon having the resources available to accomplish them. While the last provincial budget contained multi-year increased commitments for our school board employees' salaries, there were also clear statements of future reductions.

If Bill 177 expects Boards to be responsible for long range planning (for which we will be held accountable), then this Board expects the McGuinty government to, likewise, commit to long range funding supports and commitments.

The Board wishes to comment that the latter part of the introduction to the consultation paper is presented in a rather negative tone.

While we completely understand the motivation of this piece of legislation, the Board would endorse a legislative approach that is not negative or punitive, but rather one that is supportive of the many good things happening in this provinces' schools and Boards.

One of the more telling approaches is the ministry's example of Student Well-being (page 3): "The Ministry may respond if a board:

(i) fails to reduce its rate of suspensions by 10% over a three year period."

As a Board, our preferred approach would be to measure the "successful return rate of students from Ministry-mandated expulsion/suspension programs"; a far better measure of success.

The ministry's example encourages school administrators and the Board to arbitrarily reduce suspensions and expulsions to match their targets, thereby making our schools unsafe. What is their actual goal?

(iii) Does not increase the levels of enrolment in specialized programs, such as co-op and dual credit programs, by 5% a year over a three-year period.

This presents serious problems for us, as a Board. As the Ministry well knows, our Board has been a leader in the development and implementation of Co-op Education and Specialist High Skills Major programs (SHSM). For a Board of our size, we have an impressive number of students enrolled and successfully engaged in these programs.

However, the ministry must realize that there is a ceiling to these programs. Only a certain percentage of our (and any Board's) students will opt for these types of programs.

Many students will still opt for college and university streams and will not engage in these types of programs.

In addition, we are in a declining enrolment scenario and will continue to lose students until well into the mid 2015's.

To judge our success/failure as a Board on this trigger would be false and unfair.

In addition, it should be noted that due to the current capital funding model not all secondary schools are created equal.

Many do not have the facilities necessary to support such SHSM programs as culinary arts or transportation, as an example. The SHSM programs available to students are largely dependent on where they live.

This governance proposal narrows the Trustee's role even further to a point where we will be focused on two areas only – a balanced budget and EQAO scores.

This role will not be attractive to knowledgeable, dedicated and supportive citizens, who support public education. We need these advocates at the Board table for a strong and vibrant education system. Our students deserve nothing less!

Note: Should you wish to read the entire submission to the government, it can be found on our website under the August 25th Board meeting.

Should you wish to contact Bob Borden, UGDSB Trustee for the Town of Orangeville and Chair of the Board, you can do so by phone (home office- 519-940-0279; Guelph office- 519-822-4420, ext. 735) or e-mail at bob.borden @ugdsb.on.ca. *Also, you can visit the Board's web site at* www.ugdsb.on.ca *and read the highlights of each Board meeting.*

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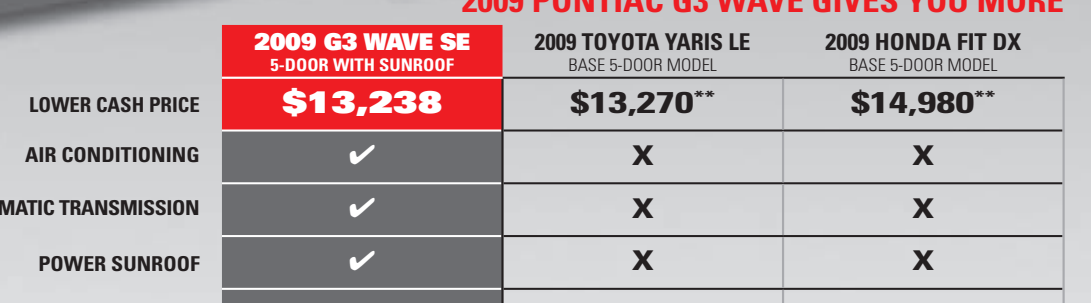

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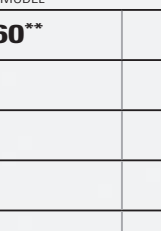

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