

Separate Schools – The Cost: Part II - Why Abolishing Public Funding for Separate Schools Would Save Money

- ◆ People sometimes say abolishing public funding of separate schools would not save money; we would still need teachers, school supplies, etc.
- ◆ They also say that having a separate school system costs Ontario overall no more than if we had one public non-denominational (two-language) school system. The Ontario government does give separate schools more per student than public schools (see Costs- Part I), but they say that is only because public schools raise more in residential property taxes. Overall, they claim the current system costs no more per student than one public non-denominational system would cost.
- ◆ Neither of these claims are true.
- ◆ A study by the Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods of Ontario estimated over 1 billion dollars would be saved yearly if we had one public non-denominational school system.¹ We would still need teachers, but savings would be in administrative expenses such as trustees, supervisors, busing, etc., and it is these expenses that would be significantly reduced. These are sometimes referred to as “economies of scale”.
- ◆ Unlike previous amalgamations where the board area was expanded, the elimination of the separate schools would mean students in the same geographical area were under one school system. As people have said, think how inefficient it would be if we had two fire systems covering the same area each with their own administration instead of homes being served from the closest fire station.
- ◆ Separate schools receive more money per student from general provincial revenues not just because separate schools raise less in residential property taxes but because they spend more per student. From 2015-16 to 2017-8, separate English-language schools had total revenues (including capital revenues) **every year** of, on average, **\$270 more per student** compared to public schools. If all schools are compared, the difference is about \$600 per student.² This document uses recent figures, but OPEN members have been tracking this information since 2002-03 and consistently, every year, separate schools receive, and cost, more per student than public schools.³
- ◆ Why this difference? We studied thirty-two coterminous English school boards (16 public; 16 separate).
- ◆ Coterminous school boards are public and separate school boards with exactly the same boundaries and the same language. We are comparing apples with apples.
- ◆ Ever year, every separate school board received more in provincial funding grants **per student** than its coterminous public school boards. The difference ranged from

¹ Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods of Ontario, Ontario Public and Catholic School Merger Study, March 2012.

² Freedom of Information Request (FOI) EDU-180020, August 2018 (2015-16 to 2017-18).

³ FOI EDU-120041. May, 2012 (2002-03 to 2010-11); FOI EDU-160070, Feb. 2017 (2011-12 to 2014-15)

\$177 for Windsor-Essex Catholic DSB to \$2,170 for Catholic DSB of Eastern Ontario (2016-17). Overall, over 2015-16 to 2018-19, the separate school boards received on average **\$1,360 more per student yearly** than their coterminous public school boards.⁴

- ◆ But was the extra provincial funding just to make up for separate schools raising so much less per student in residential property taxes (as we discussed in Part I)?
- ◆ The Ontario government publishes yearly reports that give the projected Grants for Student Needs (GSN) for each school board for the next year as well as the actuals for the last thirteen years. The government is somewhat secretive about what is included in these totals but it appears to be the total GSN for each board which consists of the Ontario GSN provincial grant **combined** with the board's local taxes (that is residential property taxes and business property taxes). Basically, the government adds the necessary provincial funding to the residential and business property taxes so each board receives what the government thinks is needed.
- ◆ [Unlike the FOI reports that OPEN members obtain, these GSN reports don't include some sources of income like capital grants, federal grants, school fund-raising, non-GSN grants, etc. and they don't separate out local taxes from provincial grants, so they are not as complete, but they can be useful.]
- ◆ Overall, every year from 2015-16 to 2018-19, according to these GSN reports, the government decided the 16 separate school boards should receive about **\$250 more per student** than their coterminous public school boards.⁵ For those who think \$250 more per student yearly is nothing, the difference amounted to \$50 to \$60 million per year when we estimated what the separate school board would receive if it received only the same per student as its coterminous public school board. There are 37 separate school boards.
- ◆ To understand why separate school boards cost so much more, it is useful to look at the breakdown of the government Grants for Student Needs reports. The GSN have about 18 to 19 categories. One of the categories, the Pupil Foundation Grant, is based solely on the number of students. All boards receive approximately the same grant per student.
- ◆ But the rest of the categories are not based only on the number of pupils. For some of them, the fewer pupils you have, the more money per pupil you receive. For example, in the Geographic Circumstances Grant, Avon Maitland received \$43 per student in 2015-16. By contrast, its coterminous separate school board, Huron Perth CDSB, received \$334 per student. The Geographic Circumstances Grant was intended to help remote boards with few students but because separate school boards have fewer students over the same area, they end up receiving more in the Geographic Circumstances grant than their coterminous school board.

⁴ FOI EDU-180023, August 2018 (2015-16 to 2018-19). Consistent with EDU-160072, Dec. 2016 (2012-13 to 2014-15).

⁵ *Projected Grants for Student Needs for the 2017-18 School Year* (using 2016 actuals), Ministry of Education (Fall 2017) downloaded from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1718/2017_18_gsn_school_board_projections_en.pdf.

- ◆ Similarly, separately school boards often received significantly more in such categories as Student Transportation and School Board Administration and Governance than their corresponding coterminous public school board.
- ◆ However, every year, there were about 4 public school boards who according to the GSN report received slightly more in funding per student than their coterminous separate school boards (though overall, as stated above, the separate school boards received more.) These are generally areas such as Toronto, where the separate school boards are also large and the efficiencies of scale are not as clear.
- ◆ But even in these areas one would expect that the public school boards should receive much more per student than they do. For example, York received \$284 in the Language category per student compared to \$200 per student for York CDSB. But York DSB has a much higher percentage of English language learners (23% to 31%) compared to York CDSB (2%), and a much higher percent of students whose first language is not English (45% to 50% compared to 17% to 19%).⁶ Their language grant per student should be at least **300%** as much as York CDSB's, not only 30% more.
- ◆ But it is not only that separate school boards in general cost more to run per student than public school boards. Bigger public boards, such as Hamilton, require less funding per student on trustees, etc. than smaller public boards. Especially in smaller, more remote boards, the combined non-denominational public school board would have even more efficiencies of scale than the current public board. For example, public boards also are forced to spend money on unnecessary busing. We know one family whose children were bused for about 40 minutes each way to a public high school when a publicly-supported separate school was within walking distance.
- ◆ People have told us schools are being closed in their town that could remain open if all students in the town went to one school. Comparing the separate school costs to the public school costs gives a partial picture of what could be saved, but it does not indicate all the costs because some are hidden.
- ◆ There would also be savings because under-utilized separate schools near under-utilized public schools could be combined to provide fully utilized schools which could offer greater resources to all its students.
- ◆ Under one public non-denominational system, It is true we would still need teachers though elementary school teachers in separate schools would no longer spend about 10% of their time teaching the Catholic faith, and secondary school teachers would no longer spend about 13% of their time teaching Catholicism as a credit course⁷. These teachers could then spend this time helping all students with math, science, etc., rather than teaching a particular faith at the public expense.
- ◆ We can only estimate what the savings would be because so many of the costs are hidden. But we do know they would be considerable.

⁶ York Region DSB (66095) and York CDSB (67059) School Board reports.

⁷ Freedom of Information (FOI) Request #2014-04 and 2014-07.