

Enrolment at public school board dips amid pandemic ^[1]

Meanwhile, some local private schools have more students than ever

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EXCERPT

Enrolment in the local public school board has dipped during the pandemic, with about 500 fewer full and part-time students registered in the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) compared to the same time last year.

Meanwhile, some local private schools say their enrolment numbers are stronger than ever.

According to numbers released to CBC News through a freedom of information request, there were 65,046 unique students registered in the WRDSB as of Dec. 1, 2020.

On the same date in 2019, there were 65,583 unique students registered in the board.

"We can appreciate that the pandemic has created a situation whereby our enrolment has decreased," said Matthew Gerard, superintendent of business services with the board.

The board's own official enrolment count looks slightly different.

Gerard said the board monitors full-time enrolment twice a year, once in March and once in October. As of last October, Gerard said the board had 64,213 full-time students, which is about 800 fewer students than the board had expected based on its past projections.

The board said the difference between the October count and the numbers released to CBC News can be attributed, in part, to the fact that some students — especially those at the kindergarten level — attend school part-time.

Most of the drop in enrolment this year came from elementary students, while there was a slight increase in the number of secondary students, Gerard said.

"Looking at some of the reasons why, especially the elementary panel, we can appreciate that [kindergarten] registrations are down because it's not a requirement," said Gerard.

"Ultimately, parents are perhaps choosing to keep ... their school-age children home in order to explore other options."

Gerard said that some parents have also opted to home-school rather than use one of the modes of learning offered by the board.

Growth 'skyrocketing' at local private school

Meanwhile, officials at two local private schools say their enrolment levels have been on the rise during the pandemic.

"The growth rate has just skyrocketed," said Fred Gore, director of education at the Scholars' Hall school in Kitchener.

"I mean, this is the first time that we've actually had a wait list."

Gore said the school has enrolled just over 50 new students this year and has a wait list of about 80 families.

Cheryl Boughton, head of St. John's-Kilmarnock School in Breslau, said it's a similar situation at her school. She said they've enrolled about 20 new students this school year, but have had to turn away some interested families in order to keep class sizes small.

Both Gore and Boughton say their schools cap classes at 15 students, which was likely part of the draw for parents. Gore said this was always the case at his school while Boughton said St. John's-Kilmarnock brought in the 15-student limit as a new feature this year.

"I think coming out of this, we're still going to continue to focus on small class sizes, although it's possible they may be a little bit bigger next year if that's permissible," Boughton said.

Fewer students, less cash

Because the public school board's funding is tied in part to enrolment, Gerard said the difference in registration has affected the WRDSB's finances.

"We find ourselves reporting revenues that are ... about \$11 million lower than what the budget would have offered to trustees back in August," said Gerard.

A more comprehensive financial update is expected at a board meeting this week, he added.

Looking ahead

Although Gerard said it's difficult to know what the rest of 2021 will bring, he expects that once the pandemic ends, public school registration will bounce back. Up until this year, registration at the board has been steadily increasing, according to a report that went before trustees last November.

"I think it's reasonable, again, that parents in the kindergarten cohort are selecting not to register at this time, it seems reasonable that folks may be selecting home school," said Gerard.

"Once the factors that have led parents to make these decisions are no longer present, it's reasonable to assume that we will return to what our projection typically is."

As for Gore and Boughton, they expect parents' interest in their schools will last beyond COVID-19.

Gore said his school is even planning to build a new addition that will increase its population by about 30 per cent.

"And then that will be the largest that we want the school to grow to," said Gore.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: school system ^[4]

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