

## Education Director to call it quits at the end of July



**By Brock Weir**

Ken Thurston describes himself as one of those 'rare birds who considered teaching a life goal from a very, very young age.'

It is a goal with which he followed through with gusto, first as an elementary and secondary school teacher, culminating for the last five years as Director of the York Region School Board. But, after 38 years in education, Mr. Thurston is now ready to hang up his mortar board.

The Director announced his retirement, effective July 31, at last week's meeting of the York Region District School Board. His decision considered professional and personal factors and the desire to reconnect with friends, family and other pursuits in York Region.

Early on in his career, Mr. Thurston says he was encouraged to take on both formal and informal leadership roles within his schools. Over the years, he found working with people in these capacities among the more rewarding aspects of his job. He wanted to bring people towards a consensus. When the opportunity to be Director of the YRDSB presented itself, it was yet another leap in his career he was encouraged to take.

Appointed to the board in 2009, he says he found himself at the helm of a board with a 'long-standing tradition of success', chock full of 'high performing schools' yet not content to rest on its laurels. This in itself, however, presented him with a challenge.

'It is one thing to take over an organization that needs a lot of major changes to get it on track,' he said. 'My challenge was what do you do with a board that is doing very, very well? How do you go from great to excellent, and how do you make sure you have built in sustainable excellence over time? All organizations, no matter how high performing, need to constantly think about how it can improve, how it can evolve, and how it can change to meet the changing demands of our world.'

Over the past five years, Mr. Thurston says he feels the board has done well in addressing a trend of very strong student achievement, but also addressing a more holistic form of schooling. The board has broadened its definition of success, he says, to not only include the marks on a term paper or report card, but a sense of 'wellbeing and how that ties into student achievement and staff performance.'

'It really was new territory,' he says of the shift towards wellbeing. 'We didn't have a lot of clear definitions of what success is and what the programs would be like. In a way, it was more about getting people to understand and build an understanding and appreciation for how wellbeing, with everything from mental to physical [health], to the state of the environment, ties into the overall performance of not only our schools but our organization as a whole.'

?It was more of a matter of unleashing creativity and engaging in some rich dialogue so that people could experience, innovate, and try new things.?

His tenure as director, however, was not simply building on the past successes of the previous years, but they were also years fraught with challenges. He joined the YRDSB as director while tempers among parents looking to find a coveted place for their child in French immersion programs was raging with too much demand for the Region's limited supply. Parents were lined up for hours to register their children, before this system was replaced by a complex lottery system which meant occasionally siblings in French immersion programs were given spots in different schools, some even beyond municipal borders. Tempers also flared with significant labour unrest between unions representing teachers and support staff with the Province, resulting in rolling walkouts throughout the school boards.

?There have been many challenges, but I think what is rewarding is looking back and reflecting on them saying, ?We managed to get through them,? he says. ?Not everyone got exactly what they wanted, but we found a compromise. We found a way of working with our communities, parents, students and staff to find the best we could do. If you can engage people in dialogue so they can understand all the factors and the context we are working in, then people are much more likely to be satisfied and to embrace it.?

Looking ahead to the remainder of his term, Mr. Thurston cautions that the YRDSB is not yet out of the woods with possible labour disruption. The last round of bargaining, he said, only led to two year agreements and the clock is ticking down before they expire in August. Getting in the way with gauging how these labour talks will take place is a looming provincial election which might disrupt legislation working its way through Queen's Park.

Although these agreements are due to expire in August, he says this did not influence his decision to take himself out of the game by July 31.

?If anything, that would be one of the areas I would say it would be great to bring to fruition,? he says. ?One never knows ? perhaps we will have agreements before I leave. We probably have the most progressive relations between our board and our various unionized and non-unionized staff in the province.

?I think that is one of the strengths and I feel personally, throughout my career, I have spent a great deal of time on labour relations and hope I am remembered as one who contributed to that positive relationship and, even more importantly, there are lots of really strong staff who have developed the skills of working with our employee groups and we are in great hands on that front.?