

Hydro costs hit schools

By Sarah Sobanski

Hastings-Prince Edward MPP Todd Smith says local schools should be paying close attention to their hydro bills based on provincial school stats.

According to a release by Smith, electricity prices have not only been plaguing Ontario residents and businesses, but the province's schools as well. During question period, Smith suggested provincial schools are paying \$700,000 more per year on their electricity bills than they were in 2009, making not only just educational institutions but also other business operations that require high energy consumption, basically need to compare energy provider prices as frequently as they can, on sites like [Utility Bidder](#) so they're able to find the cheapest option available to them.

'The Centre Jules-Leger in downtown Ottawa and Sagonaska School in my riding have seen their hydro spike by 62 per cent,' said Smith.

Smith explained that many provincial schools serve special needs students. Programming for deaf, blind and students with severe learning disabilities can be impacted if schools are focusing on affording their hydro bills instead of innovative education.

Smith suggested bills at local schools are harder to measure because they are included in bulk transfers from the Ministry of Education to the individual school boards.

'The government's own document states 'the increase in estimates from 2015-'16 to 2016-'17 primarily reflects increases in operating costs, including utilities',' said Smith. 'That has to be millions and millions of dollars from our school system.'

The release states 'estimates provided by the Ministry of Education show a provincewide increase of over \$500 million for school board operating grants with no itemization to show how much the increase in electricity prices were consuming of those funds.' Hastings Prince Edward District School Board spent more than \$2.5 million on electricity over the 2015-'16 fiscal year, according to its Energy and Environmental Services Report. That's more than half of its total energy costs for the year at more than \$4.1 million. Since the 2011 year, electricity costs for elementary schools went from close to \$1.1 million to more than \$1.4 million. Secondary schools in the board saw a slight decrease in the 2012-'13 year, but saw rates increase from more than \$800,000 that year to more than \$1.1 million in the 2015-'16 year.

In the 2015-'16 year the board reported a deficit.

'The original budget plan forecast was for a balanced budget with neither a surplus nor a deficit. When the revised estimates for 2015-'16 were submitted to the Ministry of Education, a normal process, the forecast was for a deficit for compliance purposes of \$1.7 million,' said board communications officer Kerry Deonnell. '[This] was an acceptable deficit amount allowed by the Ministry of Education because a deficit amount for compliance purposes can be up to one per cent of a school board's budget. The deficit grew to approximately \$2.5 million. The board was instructed to develop a multi-year financial recovery plan.'

When asked if the costs for running schools come from the same dollars allocated for student programming, Deonnell told *Bancroft This Week* that Ontario school boards are mainly funded on a per-student basis through grants from the Ministry of Education.

'When funding decreases, all students in a board are affected because the cost of maintaining empty space is spread across all schools,' she said.

Algonquin and Lakeshore Catholic District School Board capital projects manager Bryan Bavief said that the Catholic board's schools have also seen an increase in hydro costs. He said, however, that the funding the board receives has increased accordingly for the increased costs.

'Parents should know how much of the money the government claims it has increased in spending on students is actually being spent to keep the lights on because they made a mess of the province's electricity system,' said Smith.