

# Trustee takes aim at ad campaign

Education

**JUSTIN SKINNER**

Jan. 7, 2005

North York Mirror



## **Ward 5 trustee Maria Rizzo says money better spent on schools.**

A local Catholic School Board trustee is speaking out against an advertising campaign designed to promote the school board to families with young children.

With enrolment in Catholic schools declining steadily over the past several years, the Toronto Catholic School Board gave the go-ahead to a \$750,000 ad campaign to try to boost awareness of Catholic education among newcomers to the city. Ward 5 trustee Maria Rizzo opposed the campaign, suggesting the money would better be spent on the schools themselves.

"I don't see why you would spend that much money advertising schools that are falling apart," she said. "How about spending it on educating the children and then allowing them to advertise the board themselves? As soon as you create a good product, people will want it."

Rizzo said that many of the schools in the Catholic board are in poor condition, adding that educational supplies are in short supply across the board. She said the money could purchase more than 52,000 textbooks or 5.3 million pencils. She also noted that there are more than 2,400 outstanding work orders to improve the maintenance and condition of the schools in the board.

"That three-quarters of a million dollars could buy textbooks when kids don't have them," she said. "The libraries don't have the books they need and parents who went to some of the schools have told me that the buildings have the same curtains and carpeting that they had when they went to school there."

Rizzo also accused board chair Oliver Carroll (Ward 8) of a conflict of interest, saying that one of the heads of Navigator, the firm that won the advertising contract, was a friend of Carroll's wife.

Carroll responded by saying that such accusations were a stretch, adding he had offered to withdraw from the selection process if the board felt there was indeed a conflict of interest.

He said that the decision to spend the money on advertising was meant to stop the attrition of students enrolled in the Catholic system.

"Over the last two years, we've lost 3,200 students, and we've lost about 10,000 over the past seven years, which doesn't augur well for the system," he said. "One of the schools in Maria Rizzo's ward, D'Arcy McGee, is operating at less than 50 per cent capacity. We've lost seven schools in the same boat as D'Arcy McGee over the past few years."

Carroll said he hoped that the ad campaign would help bring more students to kindergarten and Grade 1 classes throughout the board. The campaign will consist of signs and billboards in subways and on major transit routes, telemarketing, open houses and direct mailing.

"Very seldom will parents move a child out of a school board once they're in unless the family moves or there are serious problems," Carroll said. "We want to let parents know that the Catholic board is still an option and raise awareness."

With the board receiving grants of roughly \$7,000 to pay for a student's education, the 3,200 students lost over the past two years have cost the board more than \$21 million.

"There's a direct correlation between the number of students we serve and the grants we get," he said. "If we got those students back or even stopped the trend, it would mean a lot more money to address the issues (Rizzo) has raised."

While Carroll acknowledged that many Catholic school buildings were in need of repair, he said something had to be done to bring in new families, or else the board might have to close more schools and reorganize its system more intensively. He noted that the advertising campaign would not be implemented in Rizzo's ward, given her opposition to it.

"We were going to do some work in North York, but once she expressed that she wanted nothing to do with it, it was easy enough to change that plan," he said.

The board's ad campaign will be launched in late January, with most of the ads focused on appealing to Catholic newcomers in the downtown core.