

RM Gr. 7/8s may go to FFHS

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By Sam Odrowski – FORT FRANCES TIMES

Grades 7 and 8 students from Robert Moore School could be moving into Fort Frances High School this September.

The Rainy River District School Board called a special meeting last Tuesday at the Education Centre, where it approved the initiation of an attendance zone review for Fort Frances High School's Grade 7/8 program.

The proposed recommendation is to extend the attendance boundary of FFHS to include Grade 7 and 8 students enrolled at Robert Moore.

This is meant to better utilize existing facilities while creating space at Robert Moore for the conversion of its kindergarten area into a daycare centre run by the local DSSAB.

A Grade 7/8 wing was created at FFHS in 2017 to address accommodation pressures at J.W School. At the time, the board indicated its next steps would be to move Grade 7 and 8 students from Robert Moore to the FFHS campus, as well.

"With small renovations to the primary area [at Robert Moore], we will be able to accommodate the kindergarten program," said Laura Mills, superintendent of business for the RRDSB.

"And then with some renovations in the kindergarten area, we will be able to accommodate the daycare [program], all in hopes for September of 2019," she added.

The board initially was prepared to build a separate daycare facility at Robert Moore School costing roughly \$2.4 million, and planned to have it built and fully operational for Sept. 1.

But plans for the daycare facility are "significantly over budget" and the board also has a "significant time crunch" to get it built for the 2019-20 school year, Mills noted.

The newly-incurred costs, due to market conditions that put the project over budget, could pose problems if the board were to seek further funding for the build, she added.

"The ministry hasn't been forthcoming with providing additional funding for projects already approved with a certain funding level," Mills explained.

Renovations to accommodate a daycare program at Robert Moore and moving the Grade 7/8 students to FFHS, instead of building a facility at the school, only would cost roughly \$1 million—saving the board about \$1.4 million.

In addition to reduced costs, Mills said some of the benefits of having more Grade 7/8 students at Fort High include more opportunities for reach ahead credits, specialized programming, and access to extra-curricular programs.

"Also, with more students in the facility for [Grades] 7-8, there is greater flexibility for scheduling and in the end, this will hopefully reduce the number of staffing as a result of more efficient scheduling," she noted.

“That certainly helps us with our programming and scheduling for Ojibwe and French language programming.”

The board also has seen that when students are moving from Grade 8 to Grade 9 within a Grade 7-12 program, there is a much smoother transition.

“The anxiety isn't quite as there because they're already in the building, they are aware of the culture of the building, and they'll be aware of the school's codes of conduct and their expectations of them,” Mills explained.

“Studies have found there is a positive effect on student achievement when we have a [Grade] 7-12 facility, as well as greater attendance rate and lower discipline/dropout rates,” she added.

“So in looking at the future, having more students there [at FFHS] helps with the programming,” Mills reiterated.

“And we're seeing that we can grow from about 100 students [in the Grade 7/8 program] now to about 163 or 180 students over the next couple of years.”

As well, FFHS is only at 65 percent capacity for its facility while Robert Moore is at 78 percent.

With Grade 7/8 students moving to FFHS from Robert Moore, it would bring the high school's overall utilization rate up to 72 percent while Robert Moore would remain at 78 percent due to the addition of the daycare.

As well, the RRDSB receives government dollars on a per student basis, meaning it only is funded for the number of students it actually has in a facility.

So if there is any empty space in a school, the board still has to pay to heat, clean, and light those areas—making higher capacities at the board's facilities more efficient for the it financially.

When looking at busing for the new students at FFHS, Mills said there shouldn't be any significant issues there.

“In respect to transportation, our preliminary review shows that we can accommodate the students in Grade 7 and 8 at Robert Moore getting to Fort High Elementary on existing routes at a very nominal cost,” she remarked.

The costs will not be significant because of the room on buses in existing routes and the ability to double route within the town, Mills added.

“What we might see is actually just a ride time increase a little bit,” she conceded.

Moving forward, there are several factors for the board to consider with respect to the proposed changes at FFHS and Robert Moore.

Since the scope of the daycare project has changed, it now will require ministry of education approval and licensing because it's a renovated space versus a new facility, Mills said.

If the board receives approval from the ministry, it then will look to establish a school attendance zone review committee.

The committee will communicate information between the community and school board.

It will consist of a principal/designate, school council/parent representatives, and community representatives from each school affected by the attendance zone review.

In accordance with board policy, there will be a minimum of one public consultation for the community no sooner than 30 days after the board's resolution to move forward.

“If it does move forward with the resolution to review this, we will look at coming back to the finance committee at the end of April, and then to the board in May with a final report and approval,” Mills noted.

The meeting at which the board might vote on the attendance zone review is slated for May 7 at 7 p.m. at Atikokan High School.