



A Brief History of Waterloo Region's Catholic Schools

What we've come to know as the Waterloo Catholic District School Board began humbly in 1836 in the shape of two one-room schoolhouses: one in Maryhill, the other in St. Agatha.

A third school, located in St. Clements, opened in 1840 – followed by a school in Preston (now Cambridge) in 1847 and the new St. Mary's elementary school in downtown Berlin (now Kitchener) in 1858. The legendary St. Jerome's High School was founded in St. Agatha in 1864 and moved to Berlin in 1866...joined in 1907 by the Catholic girl's convent school that would become St. Mary's High School.

While it may be said the School Acts of 1841, 1843 and 1850 were the key ingredients in allowing Catholic education to take firm root in the area, it was passage of the British North America Act in 1867 that guaranteed it would flourish -- by granting Roman Catholics in Ontario the right to their own Catholic schools. With the seeds of Catholic education already sown by the pioneering local schools, it was only a matter of time until Catholic schools blossomed everywhere in Waterloo County. For many years, the teaching staffs came from among the Religious – particularly Religious Sisters. Today the laity carries out the teaching and support roles in our system.

By 1968, there were independent Catholic School Boards operating in **Kitchener, Waterloo, Galt, Preston, Hespeler, Bridgeport, New Hamburg, Maryhill, St. Agatha, Linwood, Elmira** and **St. Clements**. These independent Boards all ceased to exist on January 1, 1969, when the Ontario Legislature amalgamated them into one Board – the Waterloo County Separate School Board. **The Hon. John Sweeney**, who would go on to represent Waterloo Region in the Ontario Parliament and as a member of the Provincial Cabinet, was appointed the first Director of Education. As Sweeney later recalled:

“The merger involved the provision of common services to all those students who previously did not have them. Libraries and gyms had to be built onto several schools. Consultants for music, art, physical education and religious education had to be provided for some schools for the first time. Extensive transportation routes had to be developed. Science equipment, library books, musical instruments and physical education equipment had to be upgraded in many schools. But, most important of all, almost 800 teachers had to learn to work together for the benefit of their students...This obviously could not be done overnight. The years 1969, 1970 and 1971 were times of challenge, frustration, compromise and growth. When I left in 1975, I knew it had all been worth it. We had one of the best Catholic school systems in Ontario. We had interested Trustees; we had dedicated and competent teachers; we had supportive parents; and we had well educated, Christian students. I would say that is a pretty good record.”

This legacy has been carefully upheld by the Directors of Education who followed Sweeney (**Frank Clifford**, 1975-1985; **Jack Chiarelli**, 1985; **George Flynn**, 1985-1992; **Tony Truscello**, 1992; **Dr. Bill Brown**, 1992-1997; and **Roger Lawler**, 1997-present).

From those first beginnings in 1836, the Waterloo Catholic District School Board has grown to become the eighth-largest Catholic Board in Ontario, with 46 elementary schools, five high schools, five adult education facilities, a Newcomer Reception Centre, 3,500 full and part-time staff, 40,000 students and an annual budget approaching a quarter billion dollars.