

Friday, January 18, 2019

Dear Minister Thompson:

Toronto District School Board staff was notified last week of a change to the Community Use of Schools - Priority Schools Initiative EPO. The grant subsidizes school boards to offer free permitting for use of schools in 77 schools that make-up the Priority List (low socio-economic) attached to this letter. The announced change was a reduction of the grant from \$2.6 million to \$1.6 million, net change of \$1 million. Due to the mid-year funding announcement the reduction of funding will have an impact on the overall financial position of the board as staffing levels have already been established for the year for both caretaking and maintenance and are therefore fixed for the balance of the fiscal year. The provincial funding reduction makes it more difficult for the TDSB and other school boards to help create a level playing field for low income neighborhoods and provide extra supports for students from families facing socio-economic challenges.

Permits for the school year, excluding March Break, have already been released to permit holders. The reduction in funding represents approximately the value of those permits that would normally be released during the March Break and summer. Operating practice would be to release the March Break permits by the end of January 2019. Summer permits are typically released in May 2019.

Given the importance of this grant to the city's priority neighborhoods, the Board will now need to consider whether it will proceed with no cost permits for schools serving these communities without a subsidy from the province.

The Community Use of Schools grant reduction follows on the heels of grant cancellations to a number of programs specifically geared to serve at-risk communities and at-risk young people. The Ministry has announced the cancellations and reductions of grants that included, but is not limited to the following:

- Focus on Youth after school program, which provides employment and opportunities for youth in the city's priority neighbourhoods;
- Re-engagement 12 & 12+ program that encourages students that have left school to return to complete diploma graduation requirements;
- Tutors in the Classroom program, which paid university and college students to help tutor students struggling in school; and
- Community Use of Schools – Outreach Coordinators.

When the Community Use of Schools grant reduction of \$1 million is added to the list of grant cancellations and reductions that directly impact our students in Priority Neighbourhoods, the TDSB will experience a \$1.7 million cut in funding for programs, most of which would benefit our poorest and most disadvantaged communities and young people.

In addition, the Ministry has made no decision as to the continued funding for the significant Summer Focus on Youth Program. Last year, funding for this program allowed the TDSB to hire and train more than 600 youth to work alongside community agencies that serve some of the city's most at-risk and vulnerable young people. Last year over 11,000 young people took part in these programs. Typically by this time in the year, the TDSB would already have started the recruitment process for this program. To date there is no decision from the Ministry on whether this program will receive funds.

Minister, my concern is that these grants support programs that are aimed at our most vulnerable communities and our most vulnerable young people. Each program aims to help level the playing field for these youth.

As I mentioned to you when we met just a few days ago, the Summer Focus on Youth Program, which remains in limbo, has provided documented evidence of filling the gap for children living in Toronto's marginalized communities. Since its inception, the Summer Focus on Youth Program has sought to respond to the higher rates of youth violence, linked to poverty and a general lack of opportunities for many youth.

Surely, young people would get more out of programs that encourage and promote physical fitness, help develop critical life-skills, and provide safe spaces for youngsters to be active and engaged than the cover provided from youth gangs. Surely, our youth are better served playing sports and games after school in our school gyms than they are in the streets. Surely, if we can reintroduce high school to students who have dropped out and help them get their final credits to earn their diploma, we know the significant difference that would make to their future.

I ask you to take a second look at the benefits and outcomes of these programs and I ask you to reinstate funding for programs where funding was cut and to confirm the province's investment in the Summer Focus on Youth Program as soon as possible.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robin Pilkey', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Robin Pilkey, CPA, CA
Chair
Toronto District School Board