
A Triple Threat to Equity

Changing Priorities for Toronto Schools

A Policy Brief on Learning Opportunities and ESL Funding in the Toronto District School Board



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Lesley Johnston, Sharma Queiser and David Clandfield

With many thanks to our supportive team

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Social Planning Toronto

2 Carlton Street, Suite 1001

Toronto, Ontario M5B 1J3

info@socialplanningtoronto.org

www.socialplanningtoronto.org

Social Planning Toronto (SPT) is a non-profit community organization committed to building a civic society in which diversity, equity, social and economic justice, interdependence and active civic participation are central. SPT works with diverse communities, promotes civic engagement, engages in community-based research and conducts policy analysis with an aim of improving the quality of life of all Toronto residents.

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Executive Summary

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is the largest school board in Canada and has a total operating budget of approximately \$2.8 billion. The Ministry of Education provides funding based on student enrolment and the unique needs of each school board.

Students from economically and socially marginalized conditions experience greater challenges in their educational opportunities, health and social relationships and are at higher risk of academic difficulties. In recognition of this, the Ministry has been providing the Learning Opportunity Grant (LOG) since 1998 in addition to regular funds to improve the chances of success for these students. The Demographic Allocation of the grant, now recognized as part of the Province's *Poverty Reduction Strategy* since 2009, is intended to finance programs such as breakfast programs, homework clubs, reading recovery and one-on-one support within the classroom, all of which help to level the playing field for marginalized students.

Similarly, the diversity of Ontario's population means that some students require extra support to develop the English language skills needed to succeed academically. The Ministry of Education provides additional funding to support these students through the English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development (ESL/ELD) Allocation within its Language Grant to school boards.

Given the LOG and ESL/ELD funds, it would seem our most marginalized students are protected; however, deep-rooted problems in the Province's funding formula leave the TDSB struggling to stretch the total Ministry allocated funds to cover all of its costs. To address this issue the TDSB is currently diverting approximately 2/3 of the LOG and 1/4 of the ESL grant to general expenditures. This trend is continuing in the 2013-2014 budget cycle. The LOG and ESL grant are being redistributed across the system when they should be concentrated to support students from low-income, racialized and marginalized neighbourhoods.

Since 2000, the Toronto District School Board has been claiming that all students will be "provided with equitable opportunities to be successful in our system; that institutional barriers to such success are identified and removed; and that all learners are provided with supports and rewards to develop their abilities and achieve their aspirations". A school board that so publicly celebrates its equitable and inclusive mission should use the funds it has been given by the Province as they were meant to be used – to support its students with the greatest need. Yet once again the TDSB is balancing its budget on the backs of its most marginalized students.

Recommendations

That the Toronto District School Board designate the entire envelope of the 'English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development Allocation' it receives from the provincial government to meet the needs of ESL learners;

That the TDSB designate the entire 'Learning Opportunities Grant' envelope of funding it receives from the provincial government to support the education of students living in poverty to direct supports for those students;

That the transition to full designation of these envelopes take place in a phased manner consistent with the Board's direction to align its spending with the Ministry's funding envelopes, and over a period of time not to exceed five years;

Further,

That the provincial government provide adequate funding for education in the city of Toronto to reduce the pressure on Toronto's School Boards to underfund the supports for ESL and students living in poverty.

That Social Planning Toronto re-affirms its position that the Ministry of Education should 'sweater' the English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development Allocation and the Learning Opportunities Grant to ensure that they are spent by Boards of Education for the purposes for which they are provided.

Introduction

In its Technical Paper describing Ontario's Grants for Student Needs, the Ministry of Education allows school boards some latitude in deciding how to allocate grants for the education of students living in poverty (the "Learning Opportunities Grant") and for students who study English as a Second Language (the "English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development (ESL/ELD) Allocation"). These programs serve Toronto's most marginalized students. One might assume that this would leave the board deciding how much to spend on extra reading teachers or educational field trips or free breakfasts or homework clubs or smaller classes in Inner City schools. In reality, ever since these Ontario-wide grants were established in 1998, the Toronto District School Board has consistently allocated a large portion of these grant dollars to general expenditures for the system as a whole. It is true that the TDSB is required by the Province to produce a balanced budget, and that the funding the Province provides is insufficient to meet the real educational needs of Toronto's students. However, the TDSB has been balancing its books on the backs of Toronto's most underserved students, denying them the supports they need while many schools are insulated from this reality due to their greater fundraising capacity.

The Toronto District School Board on Paper

Toronto is a diverse and multilingual immigrant-receiving centre that includes many non-status immigrant families and their children (OCASI, 2004). Many families, particularly newcomer and racialized ones, struggle with poverty, unemployment, underemployment and the lack of affordable housing (Wilson, 2009). One in four Torontonians live in poverty, with poverty becoming increasingly racialized. "Roughly one child in ten among European (white) groups; one child in five for East Asian groups; one child in four for Aboriginal, South Asian, Caribbean, South & Central American groups; one child in three for Arab and West Asian groups; and one in two for children of African heritage" live below the Low Income Cut Off (Children's Aid Society of Toronto, 2008, pg. 12). These realities shape the opportunities for children registered in the Toronto District School Board.

Students from economically and socially marginalized conditions experience greater challenges in their educational opportunities, health and social relation gaps and are at higher risk for academic difficulties, consequently they require more supports. In the face of these challenges the public education system can help to level the playing field, providing all students with better chances of successful outcomes, regardless of their parents' income or their first language spoken. In recognition of these challenges, in Toronto and across Ontario, the Ministry of Education created the Learning Opportunities Grant (LOG) and the English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development (ESL/ELD) Allocation.

The Demographic Allocation of the Learning Opportunities Grant is explicitly designated to provide extra funding and support for students whose socio-economic circumstances place them at increased risk for academic struggle due to low income, immigration, low parental education and lone parent status. The Ministry states that "the largest portion of LOG funding – \$346.4 million – is flowed through the Demographic Allocation ... [to] support boards in offering a wide range of programs to improve the educational achievement of these students. Examples of programs include breakfast programs,

homework clubs, reading recovery, and withdrawal for individualized support” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, pg. 57). Ontario’s *Poverty Reduction Strategy* also references the LOG as a tool to mitigate the impact poverty has on students’ academic achievement. “The **Learning Opportunities Grant** is used by school boards for a variety of programs, such as remedial reading, breakfast and lunch programs, tutors, mentoring, adapted curriculum, summer school, literacy and numeracy programs and homework clubs, to give that extra help that students sometimes need to achieve their potential.” (Government of Ontario, 2009, pg. 12).

The English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development (ESL/ELD) Allocation was created with the knowledge that “the cultural and linguistic diversity of Ontario’s population means that many students require extra help to develop proficiency in their language of instruction” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, pg. 39). This \$226.5 million Ontario-wide allocation is based on the sum of the Recent Immigrant¹ and Pupils in Canada² components (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).

Research has found that families who are new to Canada face a substantially higher incidence of poverty. The comorbidity of both poverty and immigration status means immigrant students face greater obstacles to academic success (People for Education, 2012). Recognizing these challenges the Ministry of Education outlined that “funding provided through the Learning Opportunities Grant (LOG) takes into account the needs of immigrant children and their families. The ESL/ELD allocation of the Language Grant and the LOG are both supplemental to the Pupil and School Foundation Grants, which are provided for all students” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, pg. 29). In other words, in recognition of their greater need, the LOG and the ESL/ELD Allocation are intended to support immigrant students, in addition to what they receive through the standard funding formula.

41% of TDSB students from kindergarten through grade six have as their mother tongue a language other than English (O’Reilly and Yau, 2009, pg. 8). While precise data is not available on their first language, the TDSB 2009 census revealed that “most immigrant students [grades 9 to 12] in the TDSB secondary schools originate from Asia - 10% from China, and another 10% from the Indian sub-continent (including India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh). The percentages coming from other regions are ... Europe (6%), Africa (3%), and the Caribbean (2%)” (O’Reilly and Yau, 2007, pg. 9). Early results from the TDSB’s 2012 census reveal that 49% of the JK-Grade 6 population come from lower income families (<\$50,000), with 28% of families earning less than \$30,000 per year (TDSB, 2013a).

As a result the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has committed to providing all students “with equitable opportunities to be successful in our system;” and to seeing “that institutional barriers to such success are identified and removed; and that all learners are provided with supports and rewards to develop their abilities and achieve their aspirations” (TDSB, 2000). In line with these direction, research from the Toronto District School Board’s 2010 *Model Schools for Inner Cities: Three Year Research*

¹ The Recent Immigrant component provides a total of \$9,989.20 per eligible pupil over four years and is based on the number of recent immigrant pupils born in countries other than Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.(MOE, 2013 pg. 40)

² The Pupils in Canada component is based on the 2006 Census data on the number of children whose language spoken most often at home is neither English nor French. This data is used as a proxy measure for the relative ESL/ELD need among boards for pupils not covered by the Recent Immigrant component (MOE, 2013 pg. 41).

Highlights Report demonstrates that when the LOG and ESL Allocation are used to fund tools that combat inequities, such as remedial reading, breakfast and lunch programs, tutors, mentoring, summer school, literacy and numeracy programs and homework clubs, both the opportunity and achievement gap can be and has been narrowed (Yau, 2010).

Where the Wheels Fall off the Bus

Given the terms of the LOG and ESL/ELD funds it looks as if the needs of the Province's most marginalized students are protected. The reality in Toronto schools, however, is much different. As the Toronto District School Board endeavours to provide an education that will prepare students for the 21st century on increasingly tight budgets, the board has taken to balancing its budgets using the 'unsweated' (unprotected) LOG and ESL/ELD grants – money intended to support Toronto's most marginalized students. This leaves teachers and schools without the needed resources to provide equitable learning opportunities for their students with the greatest need.

The TDSB, and many other boards in the GTA, find themselves in this situation due to declining budgets and flaws inherent in the Province's education funding formula, which, despite promises, has not been renewed since its creation 16 years ago. In 1997 the Province undertook a massive restructuring of the educational system, which introduced the funding formula, saw the amalgamation of a number of boards and at the same time, removed the ability of local boards to issue taxation levies to compensate for the Provincial funding gaps. Ever since amalgamation, the TDSB has experienced massive budgetary shortfalls and faces a growing structural deficit.

"The funding formula does not provide sufficient funding for the basics of the system – the payment of teachers and administrators as well as the operation and maintenance of school facilities" (Mackenzie, 2009, p. 3). The TDSB reports that over 85% of its budget is used to pay for operating line items such as salaries and benefits (TDSB, 2011). The board faces an additional challenge as a result of fluctuations in enrolment. Enrolment declines have had a negative impact on the amount of funding it receives annually, as funds are tied to each student (TDSB, 2012a; TDSB, 2013b). Additional funding challenges have arisen with the rollout of the Province's Full Day Kindergarten program. The most conservative estimates find that the Province is annually underfunding the board by approximately \$338 per child for this program, contributing in large part to the TDSB's structural deficit (TDSB, 2013b).

Additionally, the TDSB experiences shortfalls amounting to tens of millions of dollars in funding for special education, learning opportunities and English as a Second Language (TDSB, 2012a). These problems are felt across Ontario, but are especially detrimental in urban boards where poverty, unemployment and immigration rates are higher (Mackenzie, 2009).³

³ "The two Toronto [public and Catholic] boards together account for 17% of Ontario's elementary and secondary school population. They qualify for 49% of the demographic portion of the [Learning Opportunities Grant] LOG. Substantial underfunding of the LOG relative to estimated need has a particularly heavy impact on students in Ontario's largest city and in the suburbs immediately around it" (Mackenzie, 2009, pg. 23.)

Yet even the inadequate funds the TDSB receives from the Ministry of Education for learning opportunities and English language learners are not spent on their intended purpose. The Province requires all 72 school boards to deliver a balanced budget each year. The TDSB does this by using dollars that are intended for programming for the board's most marginalized students. With regard to the Learning Opportunities Grant Demographic Allocation in 2011-12 research found that only approximately \$40 million of the total \$128 million grant was spent in schools in ways that reflect the intended purpose of the grant. "Less than a third of the amount generated for students from low-income, racialized and marginalised neighbourhoods is actually being spent on programs for them" (TDSB, 2012b; Clandfield, 2013, pg. 5).

ESL/ELD Allocations are subject to the same sort of redistribution. In 2007 the Ontario Auditor General in his review of ESL programming reported that, "although the Ministry's Education Funding Technical Paper 2004-05 stipulates that ESL/ELD grants are provided to school boards so that they have 'resources to meet the needs of...students [who] require extra help to develop proficiency in the language of instruction,' *the Ministry does not require that these grants be spent on ESL/ELD programs. In fact, the Ministry advised us that it is aware that a portion of these grants is often reallocated to other programs.* Because the Ministry does not require that boards report spending by program, information on the extent of the reallocations was not available to us, although one board provided us with financial information that indicated that less than half of its grant was spent on ESL/ELD programs. The Ministry had not assessed the impact of such reallocations on the adequacy of services provided to ESL/ELD students" (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2005, pg. 164, emphasis added).

A follow up to the Auditor General's report in 2007 found the Ministry of Education had introduced "program reporting, which, when fully implemented, will require that school boards report how funding for ESL is being used. The Ministry indicated that this would allow it to determine how much ESL/ELD funding is being used for its intended purpose and in turn be in a position to relate this to student achievement" (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2007, pg. 383). The implementation of this reporting program, however, has not led to significant improvement in the terms of grant use, with both the LOG (at approximately 66%) and the ESL/ELD Allocation (at approximately 25%) being used to balance budget lines not related to the grants' intended purpose.

The LOG and ESL Allocation have been used by the TDSB to cover the costs of a wide range of general programs.⁴ These grants are not sufficiently directed to support programs that would specifically alleviate the effects of poverty and language difference, and are instead used to balance the funding formula-induced structural deficit. The TDSB feels free to reallocate these funds in this way as the Province has left ambiguous the extent to which Boards are held accountable for the funds intended to serve students who face the greatest disadvantage.

⁴ "The two Toronto [public and Catholic] boards together account for 17% of Ontario's elementary and secondary school population. They qualify for 49% of the demographic portion of the [Learning Opportunities Grant] LOG. Substantial underfunding of the LOG relative to estimated need has a particularly heavy impact on students in Ontario's largest city and in the suburbs immediately around it" (Mackenzie, 2009, pg. 23.)

Funding Absurdities – the Poor Subsidizing the System

The chronic underfunding of the education system was challenge enough when at least annual education budgets were growing, alleviating some of the pressures boards face with annual inflationary increases, as well as newly downloaded program costs such, such as Full Day Kindergarten. The situation has become increasingly dire over the past two years, however, when the Province’s austerity agenda dictated that budgets be cut despite inflation, program cost increases and a growing need arising from the 2008 recession.

In 2012 the TDSB cut \$97 million from its budget eliminating 430 Education Assistants, 200 high school teacher positions including 10 teacher-librarian positions, 134 school secretarial jobs, and 17 vice-principals. The programming budget reductions meant decreases to professional development for teachers, international language programs, continuing education, ESL (\$1.5 million), and additional staff, such as youth counsellors, instructional leaders, etc. Among the cuts were 30 of 92 Secondary School teachers designated for Learning Opportunities. These cuts left the whole system ever more fragile and less able to serve Toronto students, let alone those with the greatest needs.

In 2013 cuts have begun again in earnest with another approximately \$55 million deficit. The Human Resources budget adopted on March 6th, 2013 saw \$27.7 million in cuts to both elementary and secondary staff. Despite the fact that the elementary panel is growing, as is need, \$1.7 million from the Model School’s LOG-funded teaching staff budget of \$4.5 million was cut. The cut means the loss of 18 teaching staff (16 elementary and 2 secondary) dedicated to inner city student education.

It should be noted that due to full day kindergarten and growth in ESL need there was a net gain of 62.5 staff in the elementary panel, however, there was a considerable loss of staff who play a critical role in supporting student need:

Elementary Staffing Reductions:

- 25 Librarians
- 20 Guidance teachers
- 16 teachers – Inner City Schools
- 2 Profile teachers
- 21.5 Special Education teachers

The secondary panel witnessed Trustees voting to cut half (30 of 60) of the learning opportunities teachers. While some staffing cuts may be rationalized by declining enrollment in secondary schools, the cuts to Learning Opportunities teachers outpace any decline in need, meaning Trustees chose to disproportionately place the burden of the cuts on students with the greatest need. In view of the declared purposes of these MOE grants technical paper alone – these are cuts that should not have been made.

Secondary Staffing Reductions:

- 115.5 Regular Program teachers
- 25 ESL teachers
- 30 Learning Opportunities teachers
- 46.5 Librarians & Guidance teachers
- 22 Special Education teachers
- 2 Model Schools for Inner Cities teachers
- 2 Profile teachers
- 5 E-learning teachers

Even prior to this most recent cut of 25 ESL teachers from the secondary panel “in the GTA, 10% of schools with 10 or more English Language Learning students have no ESL/ELD teacher” (People for Education, 2012, pg. 12). The statistic becomes increasingly dire as the entire province’s underfunded ESL need is taken into account. Research finds that “it can take 5-7 years to acquire grade/age appropriate English academic and literacy skills (1-2 years to acquire conversational and day to day language proficiency, and 5-7 years for academic language proficiency) (ESL/ELD Resource Group of Ontario, 2011).

The Toronto District School Board claims “[that all students are] provided with equitable opportunities to be successful in our system; that institutional barriers to such success are identified and removed; and that all learners are provided with supports and rewards to develop their abilities and achieve their aspirations” (TDSB, 2000). A school board that so publicly celebrates its equitable and inclusive mission should provide the provincially outlined supports for its neediest students to level the playing field. Yet once again the TDSB is balancing its budget on the backs of the students with the greatest need. Another \$27 million in cuts still are still to come.

Robbing from the Poor to Pay for the Rich

Chronic underfunding from the Province has caused schools to seek alternative revenue streams. Faced with inadequate funding school and parent councils find themselves increasingly required to engage in fundraising activities to provide opportunities the system no longer does (People for Education, 2008; Mackenzie, 2009; Johnston, et al., 2011). In an era where art and music⁵; athletics and technology are unfunded or underfunded, it is the wealthy schools that are insulated from the cuts, as they are able to subsidize their school budgets with dollars gained through fundraising, while schools with less capacity must do without. (In many cases wealthy parents receive a tax benefit from this donation as many of these contributions are charitable and tax receiptable.)

While fundraising dollars are kept in the schools that raise the money, the majority of the money entering school boards through grants meant to assist vulnerable students, such as the LOG and the

⁵ 107 Itinerant music instructors are set to be laid off during the next round of cuts.

ESL/ELD Allocation, are spread across all schools to balance system-wide budget shortfalls. In other words – wealthy schools, in addition to standard, if inadequate, provincial funding, school and parent council fundraising and parent benefits from charitable tax receipts, also receive a portion of the LOG and ESL funds intended for Toronto’s most underserved students.

Recognizing that the entire system is underfunded and that all students are entitled to excellent education, regardless of income and language needs, the Province’s *Poverty Reduction Strategy* and the TDSB’s Equity Foundation Statement mandate that those with the greatest need should be given *additional* supports to succeed. Instead here “equity” means that the rich keep their enhancements and the poor lose theirs.

The Ministry needs to insist that the Learning Opportunities Grant and the English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development Allocation be spent as intended, and hold boards accountable to that; and for the TDSB to allocate more, not less, of the LOG and ESL/ELD Allocation to programs for the most vulnerable children in Toronto, beginning with the 2013-14 budget cycle.

Recommendations

That the Toronto District School Board designate the entire envelope of the ‘English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development Allocation’ it receives from the provincial government to meet the needs of ESL learners;

That the TDSB designate the entire ‘Learning Opportunities Grant’ envelope of funding it receives from the provincial government to support the education of students living in poverty to direct supports for those students;

That the transition to full designation of these envelopes take place in a phased manner consistent with the Board’s direction to align its spending with the Ministry’s funding envelopes, and over a period of time not to exceed five years;

Further,

That the provincial government provide adequate funding for education in the city of Toronto to reduce the pressure on Toronto’s School Boards to underfund the supports for ESL and students living in poverty.

That Social Planning Toronto re-affirms its position that the Ministry of Education should ‘sweater’ the English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development Allocation and the Learning Opportunities Grant to ensure that they are spent by Boards of Education for the purposes for which they are provided.

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