

Parents will be consulted before TDSB makes budget cuts

Balanced-budget deadline passes without penalty

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As expected, the deadline to pass a balanced budget came and went as Toronto public school board trustees were still nowhere close to reducing the \$84-million deficit they currently face.

They voted at the regular board meeting Wednesday night to first consult with parents and listen to their concerns about the budget before deciding to make any cuts.

With the provincial deadline of Aug. 31 to submit balanced budgets having passed without any resolution, the Ontario government, by law under the Education Act, could cut funding to both the Toronto public and Catholic school boards.

But Education Minister Sandra Pupatello said that funds will continue to flow as she allowed the deadline to pass without penalty.

A special assistance team, however, was appointed by the province to work alongside the Toronto District School Board and examine the feasibility of the board's proposed two-year budget plan.

It consisted of closing 77 of 80 school swimming pools, shutting down at least 10 under-utilized schools, eliminating 600 educational assistants and 492 lunch room supervisor positions and cancelling a summer camp program for special-needs students.

"We're looking at the level of expense and how it's linked to the programming," Pupatello said. "It's not just an accounting exercise here."

The review of the budget plan with possible alternatives suggested by the government-appointed fact finding team is expected to be completed by the end of September.

Meanwhile, parents and several trustees have demanded that no program cuts or school closures should be made, but rather more money be allocated to fund programs and services.

"There's not enough money going to meet the needs of our students," said Marjolein Winterink, concerned parent and chair of the Davenport Ward Council.

She blamed the "flawed" provincial funding formula for many of the financial woes that boards have found themselves in.

The current formula allocates funds to boards on a per-pupil basis. With declining enrolment - 4,000 fewer students board-wide than last year - the TDSB has been receiving less education grants in recent years.

Trustees have argued the funding formula doesn't take into account the cost of school maintenance and electricity bills, which doesn't decrease along with the number of students.

Pupatello responded that boards asking for more money isn't the way to go about fixing the financial difficulties they are experiencing.

"They have had more money every year despite the fact they've had fewer students to deal with," Pupatello said. "None of us have enough money to do everything we want so we have to be selective and we have to be careful."

She added that parts of the funding formula have already changed at the request of school boards since the provincial Liberals took over, which includes moving a portion of the funding from being enrolment-based to being school-based.

In this way, she explained, it guarantees a certain amount of funding based on individual school needs.

Toronto Catholic District School Board (TDCSB) Trustee Maria Rizzo didn't buy Pupatello's reasoning.

"These 'how to cut, when to cut and where to cut' discussions have gone on far too long," she said. "It's time to take an honest look at the funding formula and what education needs to look like in 21st century Toronto."

The TDCSB is currently facing a \$34 million deficit.

Critics also countered that most of the new money invested into education by the Liberals have only gone to funding provincially mandated programs such as the capping of primary grade classes and initiatives to increase literacy and numeracy rates.