

Catholic board has nothing left to cut, trustees say

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Toronto Catholic school parents echoed their public school counterparts in a budget consultation meeting Tuesday evening, telling trustees that cuts to programs aren't acceptable.

While much of the media attention has been on the \$84 million deficit the Toronto District School Board is facing, the Toronto Catholic District School Board is wrestling with a proportionately larger deficit of \$34.6 million despite being one-third the size of the public school board.

The province has appointed special assistance teams to both boards to examine the budget plans and provide recommendations on how to best balance the books.

But parents say any recommendation to cut programs to pass a balanced budget will contribute to a low-quality publicly funded education.

"These cuts adversely affect our children," said Julie Giraldi, mother of a daughter in Grade 4 and a son in Grade 12. "I see it as a real slap in our children's face."

Instead, she suggested, the "flawed" provincial funding formula, which primarily determines the allocation of funds to boards on a per-pupil basis, must be re-examined to address the real needs of Catholic schools, especially in Toronto.

With declining enrolment in the Catholic board, critics of the funding formula argue that fewer dollars are given to boards while maintenance and utility fees to operate schools and teacher salaries continue to increase.

Giraldi, parent council chair at St. Charles Catholic School, called on the government to provide adequate funding instead of forcing boards across Ontario to make cuts to balance the budget.

"I have a problem that our children are pawns in this political game," she said. "I'm appalled it has come to this point."

The newly appointed education minister Kathleen Wynne (MPP, Don Valley West) recently told The Mirror/The Guardian that some of the issues surrounding the funding formula have already been addressed. For example, she explained each school, regardless of size, is given money for key staff such as the principal and secretary through the school foundation grant.

Funding the transportation needs of schools is also something the ministry is currently looking into, Wynne said. But she added that school boards should not expect a "blank cheque" to bail them out of their budget crisis.

Ward 5 Trustee Maria Rizzo (North York) countered that the provincial Liberals have a surplus and some of the money should be directed toward education.

Rizzo is now waiting for the report by the special assistance team to the education minister, but she didn't expect to find any major areas to cut.

"There is nothing left," said Rizzo, adding they have already listened to the province in previous years on how to balance the budget. "We have already complied. We were their little puppets."

The situation has changed this year, said Ward 7 Trustee John Del Grande (North York/Scarborough), since the board has spent any money they saved last year to prevent making major cuts.

"We have no more reserve money now," he said, saying last year it totalled \$8 million. "We used it all last year."

The Catholic board's current two-year budget plan consists of major reductions in teachers, special education, secretaries and supplies as well as operations repairs and student transportation.