

Toronto trustees set to defy deadline to balance budgets

Public, Catholic boards united in blasting funding formula

Zosia Bielski, National Post
Tuesday, August 29, 2006

Toronto public and Catholic board trustees came together to blast the provincial funding formula and defy an Aug. 31 deadline set for all boards to balance their budgets.

"Both boards are suffering from the same things," said public trustee Irene Atkinson, referring to her board's \$84-million deficit and the Catholic board's \$34.5-million debt.

Public board trustees were supposed to face a motion to make the \$84-million in cuts at a budget meeting tomorrow, but some refused yesterday and many have refused all summer. They argued the Aug. 31 deadline would force them to break a promise they made to parents with letters sent out in June, when trustees said the community would have a say in any drastic cuts.

The Catholic board has deferred its budget decision until Sept. 6, but trustees say it will be a month before they will meet with parents to discuss possible cuts.

"Trustees are, with the Minister, in a David and Goliath fight, and I'm feeling like David. We were elected to represent our communities, their needs and their aspirations and we are being opposed by an antiquated funding model which inhibits our doing exactly that," Ms. Atkinson said.

Unequivocally, they blamed provincial underfunding, complaining that the grant announcement, normally made in March, wasn't made until mid-June.

The province can penalize late boards financially and put them under supervision, depending on how badly they miss their deadlines.

"There isn't a single member of our board who will make drastic cuts to the budget that will eliminate teachers and support staff, reduce textbook spending and transportation and decrease the budget for repairs like boilers and windows and roofs in our crumbling schools," said Catholic board trustee Maria Rizzo, calling the current formula a "starvation diet."

Yesterday, she, her fellow trustees and a handful of education advocates called on the province to review its funding formula. They blamed chronic provincial underfunding for teacher salaries, special education, utilities and transportation. They also criticized the government for shifting money from special ed, inner city grants and capital investments for roofs, windows and boilers to fund other projects.

"Special education, we spend \$9-million more than grant, and transportation is \$3-million more than grant, and that's just this current year," said Catholic trustee Catherine LeBlanc-Miller.

She accused the province of pouring money into "their own initiatives," citing the 20-student cap size on primary classes to take effect this year. Irene Atkinson, trustee for the public board, called that measure an election bid.

"While many boards might be balancing their budgets, you might want to ask what kind of serious cuts are they making. Many ... are using the last of their reserves so where will that leave them next year?" Ms. LeBlanc-Miller said.

The Durham board approved a balanced budget but reportedly tapped \$5-million from special education grants to do so.

With a provincial funding increase of 7.7%, the Peel District School Board approved a \$1.14-billion balanced budget, despite a \$9.5-million shortfall in money for busing.

Facing a \$15.2-million deficit on its \$654-million operating budget, the Dufferin Peel Catholic District School Board is using a provincial advisor to balance the books, which extends its official deadline until Sept. 22.

School closures, as well as cuts to transportation and administration, are all possibilities, said Bruce Campbell, community relations manager.

Like other board officials, Mr. Campbell maintains underfunding is the core to Dufferin Peel's problems.

"We were the only ones on the plank calling underfunding [last year] but the ministry wouldn't for a long time even use the word," he said. "We look forward to the ministry addressing that component of the issue."

Trustees and officials at the York Catholic District School Board will hold their budget meeting tonight, and although they expect to get it balanced, this budget won't come without consequences.

"We're cutting in some cases, moving [money] around," said Chris Cable of the York Catholic board. "It has been a challenge.... The benchmarks are not reflective of actual costs."

The board has had trouble keeping up with York's expansion -- the area is the fastest-growing region in Ontario.

"We can't build schools fast enough to meet the demand," Ms. Cable said.

Meanwhile, York Region District School Board passed a balanced budget on July 4. "We feel very strongly that we are leading the way in demonstrating financial stewardship in public education in this board," said Ross Virgo, adding York would not be making any substantial cuts "largely because we're a growth board."

In Toronto, public schools face 60 schools closed over three years, 600 education assistants cut, 77 of 80 swimming pools closed, school breakfast and lunch programs terminated, major school repairs delayed and continuing education programs cut back. The ministry has appointed a "special assistance team" to hammer out a budget with the board.

At the city's Catholic board, cuts could affect 104 teachers, some principals and secretaries, as well as education assistants, counsellors and psychologists for special ed students. Funding for textbooks and transportation could be cut by 10%.

Education Minister Sandra Pupatello says, "What [boards] faced under this government is more revenue each year, but fewer students each year. That is a recipe for being able to manage a budget."

All but six of the province's 72 boards have seen a decline in student enrolment of 3%. The Toronto public board has 25,000 fewer students now than when the Liberals came into power.

But trustees argue that a class with several fewer students doesn't cost much less to run.

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