

## **Rhetoric heats up on school cuts**

*Minister's remarks latest volley*

*Trustees cast in 'unfair' light: Chair*

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**Toronto Star**

Toronto public school board chair Sheila Ward says she's tried to keep a lid on the angry rhetoric surrounding the school system's \$84.5 million budget deficit.

But yesterday, Ward said she's increasingly frustrated by what she sees as ill-informed public attacks on the board by Ontario's education minister.

Ward was responding to a CBC radio interview by Sandra Papatello yesterday in which the minister said the Toronto District School Board had only managed to get 11 per cent of its primary classes down to the government cap of 20 students, while the rest of the province had 48 per cent of its classes under the target.

In fact, the government's own website shows 30 per cent of Toronto public primary classes are meeting the cap, and that is expected to rise to 57 per cent this school year, said Ward.

"This certainly is not fair to the TDSB and casts (trustees) in a very unfair and untrue light," she said of the minister's remarks.

It's the latest volley in an increasingly acrimonious dispute around school board budgets between the province — which has staked its political reputation on fixing Ontario's school funding — and boards, which say new money has gone into Liberal initiatives such as class size caps rather than paying for items like utility bills.

Tomorrow, a special assistance team, appointed by Papatello, will begin investigating the Toronto public board's proposed budget plan, which would dramatically reduce items such as swimming pools, parenting centres and outdoor education.

Yesterday, four public trustees vowed they wouldn't look at making those cuts without consulting parents, a process that could take until December, according to Trustee Chris Bolton.

**'Money's an issue? You bet it's an issue. It will always be an issue'**

***Premier Dalton McGuinty***

They were joined by Toronto Catholic District School Board trustees Catherine LeBlanc-Miller and Maria Rizzo, whose board faces a proportionally larger deficit of \$34 million.

They say they expect the minister will send an investigator their way soon.

Provincial parent group People for Education also released a report yesterday showing that even among the boards who have balanced their budgets, there have been cuts to classroom supplies, staff, special education, vice-principals and school secretaries.

"What's happening in Toronto right now is a symptom. But when you look at what's happening around the province, you have to start looking at the cause," said the group's executive director Annie Kidder.

"The government has to come out and start talking about what they believe should be in schools. It's not enough to say social services should be delivering these programs," she said of some threatened cuts. But Premier Dalton McGuinty warned against overstating the funding problems.

"Clearly, it is adequate," McGuinty said of the funding levels.

"Money's an issue? You bet it's an issue. It will always be an issue. The conversation, if I can put it in perspective, regarding funding will be perpetual," the Premier said yesterday while visiting a school in London, Ont.

"Four out of 72 school boards have failed to this point in time to achieve a balanced (budget). Let's understand what we're talking about. That means 68 out of 72, I'm very confident in saying, will be able to achieve a balanced budget this year," said McGuinty.

He boasted his administration has turned around a public education system that endured cuts under previous governments.

"Funding per student on average has gone up over 22 per cent. We've invested an additional \$2 billion plus in publicly funded education. We think, given the various options before us, that any reasonably objective observer would conclude that we've made public education a very high priority for Ontarians," the Premier said.