

Progress and Pitfalls



A Review of Community Use of Schools and Access to Municipal Spaces



PROGRESS AND PITFALLS: A Review of Community Use of Schools and Access to Municipal Spaces

June 2009

ISBN: 978-1-894199-21-6

Published by **Social Planning Toronto**, 2 Carlton St., Suite 1001, Toronto, ON, M5B 1J3
www.socialplanningtoronto.org

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Research Support

Social Planning Toronto would like to acknowledge the following individuals and groups for their support and contribution to this project:

SPACE Research Advisory Committee

- Ann Fitzpatrick, Children's Aid Society of Toronto
- Susan Fletcher, Applegrove Community Complex
- Lynn Manning, Girl Guides of Canada – Ontario Council
- Robyn Peterson
- Gay Stephenson, People for Education
- John Plumadore, Scouts Canada, Greater Toronto Council

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- ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now)
- Applegrove Community Complex
- Basketball Ontario
- Council of Agencies Serving South Asians
- Children's Aid Society of Toronto
- Colour of Poverty Campaign
- Erin Hoops – (Upper Grand District)
- Family Service Toronto
- Girl Guides of Canada – Ontario Council
- Middle Childhood Matters Coalition
- Neighbourhood Basketball Association
- People for Education
- Scouts Canada, Greater Toronto Council
- Social Planning Toronto
- Sport 4 Ontario Provincial Sport Organization Council
- Toronto Sport Council
- United Way Toronto

We also wish to extend our gratitude to United Way Toronto, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and the City of Toronto for their continued funding and ongoing support of Social Planning Toronto.



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A Review of Community Use of Schools and Access to Municipal Spaces

Executive Summary

Prior to the provincial Community Use of Schools Policy and funding (CUS), fees for community use of schools had risen sharply across Ontario, resulting in closures of programs and steep declines in use. The CUS program was launched in July 2004 with a \$20 million investment, followed by a further enhancement in February 2008, with a province-wide plan to increase funding from \$20 million to \$66 million by 2012.

In March and April of 2009, SPACE (Saving Public Access to Community Space Everywhere), a provincial coalition, and Social Planning Toronto (SPT), a nonprofit community organization, conducted a follow-up survey to our 2005 and 2007 evaluations of the provincial CUS policy, program and funding (SPACE/CSPC-T, 2005; SPACE/CSPC-T, 2007). We received 358 survey responses from organizations across Ontario. This year we also investigated community access to municipal facilities.¹

The survey aimed to:

1. determine the changing levels of access in public schools, and monitor the impact of provincial CUS funding;
2. determine levels of access to municipal facilities;
3. identify trends, gaps and recommendations to improve equitable and affordable access to school and municipal spaces.

The SPACE Coalition believes that community use of public space, including schools and municipal facilities, is a cornerstone of healthy neighbourhoods and communities, promoting affordable and equitable access for all residents. The Ontario government's Policy Statement on CUS also promotes the principles of affordable, fair and equitable community access to our schools. We hope the results of this survey will help to increase access and decrease barriers to community use of space within the provincial and municipal government and boards of education.

Key Findings²

Areas of Improvement

As a result of provincial CUS investments, community use of schools is now more stable and predictable compared to conditions in the early 2000s when usage levels had dropped dramatically.

- A range of community organizations using school and municipal space provide services to many age groups.
- 77% of respondents reported fees to permit schools had not changed over the past year.
- 7% of respondents reported their school access fees were reduced.
- 32% of organizations reported an increase in their use of school space in 2008-09.
- 58% reported that municipal permit fees remained stable, and 1% reported a decrease in fees.

1. Municipal space includes recreation centres, libraries, pools, parks, playing fields, municipal buildings, etc.

2. All findings compare September 2007 - August 2008 to September 2008 - August 2009 for the school board fiscal year, unless otherwise noted.

Continuing Barriers

- 16% of organizations holding school permits reported an increase in permit fees.
- 26% of school permit holders stated they had to reduce or cancel programs because of high permit fees or the lack of available space and facilities.
- Barriers to community use of schools continue to include high fees, a complicated permit process and use restrictions.
- There are widely varying fee rates and rules across the province despite use of CUS funds by Ontario school boards.
- 55% of organizations using school space report that permit rules and regulations are unclear.
- 22% of organizations reported a decrease in use of school space in 2008-2009.
- 41% of respondents holding municipal permits reported fee increases in 2008-09.
- Most of the respondents accessing community space are established community groups and nonprofit organizations that have been in existence for an average of 46 years
- Older, more established agencies are statistically more likely to hold school permits than newer agencies.

We applaud the government's strong policy statement that envisions schools as hubs of communities, with a focus on access and equity, and believe this should direct reforms to the CUS program and guide the creation of municipal policy on the community use of public space. There are still areas for improvement where action is required. Barriers to accessing schools remain despite CUS funding. Permit fees continue to be set at the discretion of each school board, resulting in a patchwork of fees and usage rates. Even established organizations are hindered by unclear permit policies and rules, and barriers such as fee rates. Unclear policies could be a deterrent to newer

and less established organizations, consequently they may be less likely to access public spaces. Transparency around the spending of provincial funds and the monitoring of program implementation to ensure its compatibility with policy objectives continues to be a concern. Greater accountability from boards of education and the Province is needed to guarantee that funding is achieving public policy goals and meeting community access needs in a fair and equitable manner.

Summary Recommendations

The SPACE Coalition and Social Planning Toronto recommend that:

- 1. The Government of Ontario implement the 2008-2012 CUS funding commitment and increase levels of CUS funding, ensuring school boards lower fees further and increase space available throughout the year at more times including summer weekends, evenings, and after school.**
- 2. School boards across Ontario improve the permit application process so it is straightforward, user-friendly, transparent, accessible and accountable, with input from stakeholders.**
- 3. The Province and school boards should work with community stakeholders to improve accountability by strengthening the CUS program evaluation process.**
- 4. The Province should work with municipalities and community stakeholders to improve access to municipal public space.**

The following bulletin elaborates on each of these points and suggests practical steps that the Ontario government and school boards can implement to move forward on each recommendation.

Context and History

The Community Use of Schools (CUS) program is approaching its fifth anniversary of sustained and enhanced provincial investments to lower fees and help increase access to schools as ‘hubs’ of community activity and support. The CUS program was launched in July 2004 with a \$20 million investment, and a public commitment was made in 2008 to raise this funding to an annual level of \$66 million by 2012 (Government of Ontario: Ministry of Tourism, 2004; Government of Ontario, 2008). In 2008 alone the funding for increasing access to schools by lowering fees was increased to \$33 million across Ontario, a 65% increase over 2007. Further demonstrating its commitment to this program, when the Province launched the Focus on Youth program in 2007 it included free access to schools in high-need areas in Toronto as a core program component.

The Government of Ontario provides funding to all 72 boards of education to support the CUS policy and program principles. The Province also sets out some restrictions on how CUS funding is used. In exchange, the Ministry of Education expects annual reports from each board of education on their expenditures, community groups’ facilities fee rates, and statistics regarding access to schools after-school, during evenings, on weekends and in the summer. However, since CUS’s inception, there has been no publicly distributed provincial analysis of this policy and program. Furthermore, there is no provincial mechanism to recommend improvements to this program from a community perspective. The 2009 community use survey is the third conducted by SPACE and Social Planning Toronto to fill that void by collecting and disseminating information on community access to public schools in Ontario.

There is a similar vacuum of public information on community use of municipal facilities. Parks and Recreation Ontario (PRO) and the Ontario Task Force

“Learning and growing doesn’t stop when the school bell rings or when you reach a certain age, so we want our schools to be hubs of the community during the school day and after school hours.”

Premier Dalton McGuinty, February 5, 2008, (Government of Ontario, 2008)

on Access to Recreation for Low-income Families are recommending the Province fund and support a model similar to CUS to stimulate more affordable access to public space, such as recreation centres (2009). In addition, the Roots of Youth Violence Secretariat has called for community spaces, that may include municipal centres, to be available for young people. Beyond these two groups, we are unaware of any other organizations drawing attention to the need for a province-wide approach to community use of municipal spaces.

Methodology & Distribution of the 2009 Survey

358 surveys were received and analysed from a broad range of nonprofit, community and sport organizations from numerous school boards and municipalities across urban and rural Ontario. Follow-up conversations were held with seven survey respondents affiliated with various service providers in urban and rural Ontario.

Surveys were distributed:

- Through the SPACE Coalition, which has an email list of over 200 organizations covering several areas of the province, and through our provincial partners including Sport 4 Ontario, Basketball Ontario, Scouts Canada and Girl Guides.

- Through the Social Planning Network of Ontario
- To Social Planning Toronto's agency list
- To organizations listed in the electronic Toronto Blue Book
- To organizations that had participated in the 2005 and 2007 survey
- Through networks including Colour of Poverty, arts organizations, housing groups, youth networks.

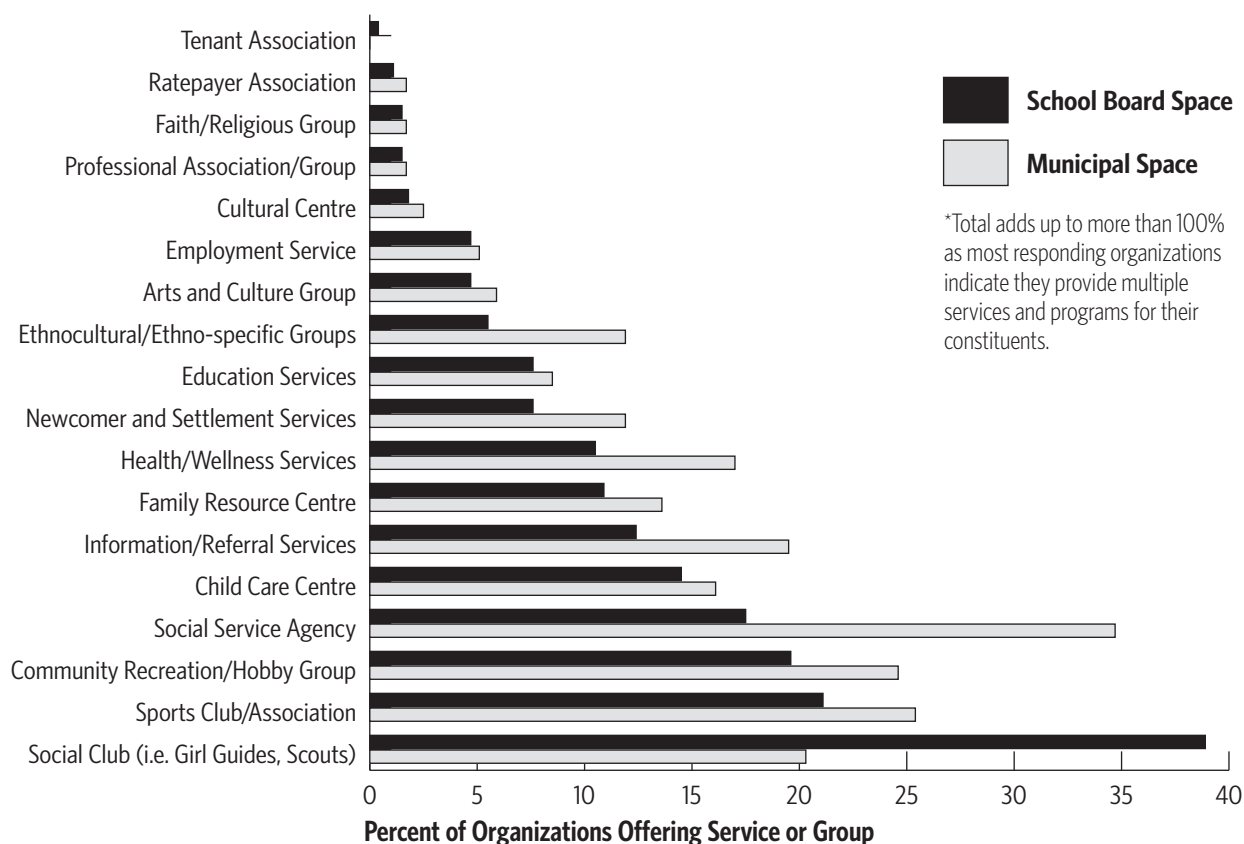
Research Results

Survey respondents represented a diversity of organizations across the province, most offering several programs through their agencies to a range of age groups.

- 358 organizations completed the survey;

- 83.5% of survey respondents are current users of municipal and/or school space;
- 76.8% of respondents permitted schools in 2008-09;
- Collectively, respondents commented from their experience on the permit practices of 67 of the province's 72 school boards ;
- 3 out of 10 responding organizations permitted municipal space;
- A variety of groups used school space but some groups were more likely to access school space, such as those defining themselves as social clubs (including Guides, Scouts);
- Most of the respondents accessing community space are established community groups and nonprofit organizations that have been in existence for an average of 46 years.

Programs and Services Offered by Organizations Using Public Space



“We are an older, well-known organization, with historic use of certain spaces, so we benefit from school boards’ commitment to permit space to traditional users. However, we recognize that this gives us increased access over newer groups struggling to get established. More available space or multiple users of the space would increase equitable access for all.”

Nonprofit Social Group

- Older, more established agencies are statistically more likely to hold school permits than newer agencies.

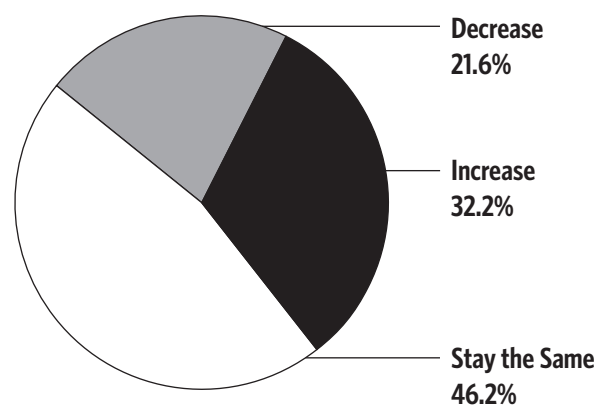
While some community organizations are benefiting from the CUS program, the gains do not seem to be felt universally, resulting in a patchwork of improvements for those who know the system best. Consultation is needed with emerging and less established groups including: youth-led organizations, newcomer or settlement organizations, parent-led groups, seniors groups, housing organizations, and arts/cultural groups to discover what prevents organizations from accessing space.

Changes in the Use of School Space

- 32% of organizations reported an increase in their use of school space in 2008-09, while 22% reported a decrease;
- For almost half of users (46%) usage levels did not change.

Compared to usage levels which had dropped dramatically in the early 2000s, the system of community use of schools is now more stable and predictable. However, the provincial government and boards across Ontario must review why use may be in decline for some organizations rather than increasing at a time when the Province has increased funding to this program.

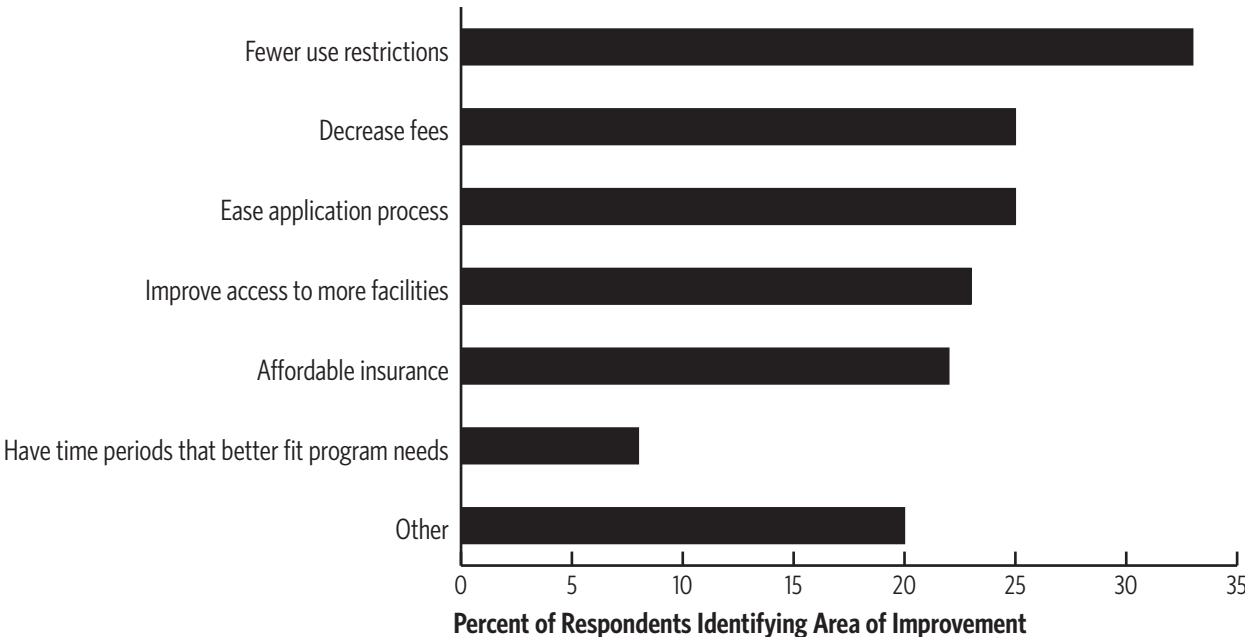
Changes in Organizations’ Reported Use of School Space from 2007/08 to 2008/09



Continuing Barriers

- 26% of organizations permitting schools stated they had to reduce or cancel school based programs because of high permit fees or the lack of available spaces and facilities;
- Suggestions for how to improve access to school space also included: harmonizing the application process, giving priority to local groups, ensuring better school staff communications and improving the speed at which permits are issued, etc.

How Could Access to School Space be Improved?

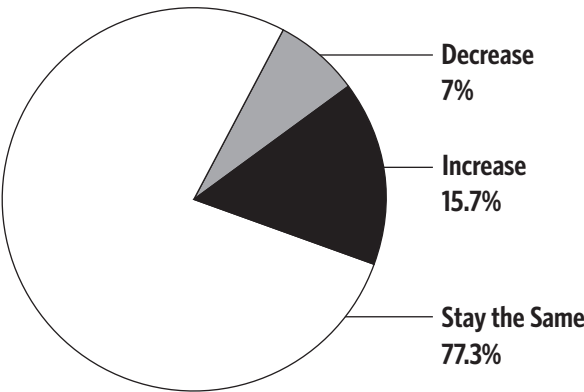


Changes in Permit Fees and Programming Impacts

- 16% noted an actual increase in school permit fees, while 7% of organizations experienced a decrease;
- 77% reported no change in fees (it is likely the provincial funding has played a significant role in this stabilization).

Responding organizations indicated that a decrease in permit fees would allow them to increase the number of people served, increase their use of school space, decrease participant fees, and increase diversity of programming, users, and groups served.

Changes in School Permit Fees Reported by Organizations between 2007/08 and 2008/09



“We were thrilled to discover that this year our permit fees had disappeared. Last year we paid \$360, this year the space was free so there were no increases in fees for our community members.”

Nonprofit Youth Sports Group

People for Education completed their first survey of school councils for 2008/2009. Responses were received from 525 elementary and secondary school councils across Ontario:

- 76% reported the community uses the school;
- 32% reported other outside programs or organizations operated in schools (e.g. Best Start programs, child care centres, Early Years programs, YMCA, public health, etc.);
- 63% reported user fees, indicating that 37% may be able to access for free in some areas.

People for Education, 2009

“We are working with Toronto District School Board (TDSB) schools to deliver a summer program for newcomer families. In the past we have been able to use school space for free, working with school principals committed to building relationships with community groups. This year we are having trouble accessing space for the program as there have been changes to the permitting process and we, as a nonprofit organization, cannot afford to pay the fees being levied.”

Nonprofit Family Resource Centre

The Permit Application Process for Schools and Municipal Spaces

It is important to note that only organizations that were successful in permitting school and municipal spaces responded to this portion of the survey. 65% of school permit holders and 75% of municipal permit holders gave some positive feedback on their permitting experience:

- Accessing information on location and types of available space is relatively easy;
- Staff are helpful and easy to contact in case of problems with permits or use;
- Instructions for the permit application process are generally clear;
- Hours of access to space had been improved, increasing accessibility outside of school hours and during the summer;

- 37% of school and 32% of municipal permit holders were able to access space for free.

However, problems exist within both the municipal and school board permitting systems:

- One in four groups experienced problems with the permitting process;
- More than 50% of organizations using school space were unclear on the permit rules and regulations;
- One in five groups experienced a dispute when applying for a permit from a school board;
- 21% of municipal and 32% of school permit holders indicated they are unaware of deadlines for applications.

“We’re an Afghan seniors group and we’ve been unable to permit space consistently and keep getting bumped out by other groups. Currently we’re renting commercial property for \$780/month, with each member required to pay out of pocket for the space.”

Nonprofit Seniors Group

“Girl Guides of Canada (GGC), Ontario Council has one staff person responsible for permitting schools for all Guiding Units across the province using these facilities. This individual is familiar with the diverse ways the provincial CUS policy is currently implemented in all schools boards thus is able to streamline the process for our leaders. This allows GGC volunteers to focus their time and talents on working directly with the girls.”

Girl Guides of Canada, Ontario Council

Monitoring and Implementing CUS

The monitoring of all program and policy initiatives is essential and the Community Use of Schools program requires this oversight. With the program budget increasing up to \$66 million annually by 2012 it is critical that the process of implementing it is transparent; that monitoring and evaluation is built into the process; and that accountability is maintained. Community Outreach Coordinators and advisory committees, with the involvement of community stakeholders, are two methods by which this program may be evaluated and improved.

Community Outreach Coordinators

In September 2008 the Province launched a new program with \$6.4 million of annualized funding to support local boards to hire Community Outreach Coordinators (COCs) to ensure school policies are harmonized across the province; to increase the effectiveness of the CUS; and to reduce access and equity barriers for community groups using school space. Despite this investment in 2008 there has been little information at a community level regarding the

implementation of this program and the hiring of the COCs. SPACE did learn that some boards hired COCs though SPACE has learned that at least one board spent the 2008 funds on budgetary items other than COCs.³ In the 2009-2010 fiscal year the Province will ‘sweater’ this funding to ensure it is spent on the intended staff positions.

“The hiring of COCs would create a much needed link between the community and administration. COCs could help with permitting, service access, talking to the administration on behalf of community groups, filling out forms (which are very complex to start with and an incredible struggle for those who don’t speak English as a first language). COCs could also reach out to vulnerable and marginalized groups, such as seniors from ethnic communities, and possibly conduct community development research to capture their experiences and look to remedying the barriers.”

Nonprofit Multi-Service Agency

“We’re a nonprofit York seniors’ centre, active in our community for 25 years, and we’ve experienced the benefits of permitting space from the City of York, and now the City of Toronto. In 1992 we built a large, new space, offering additional services including a fitness centre, gym and computer centre. Membership quadrupled. The City has also served the needs of our nonprofit agency by waiving or freezing permit fees. Over the past few years, however, we’ve begun to lose access to space we have been using for 25 years as the City has instead moved to permitting rooms to for-profit agencies able to pay the full fees.”

Nonprofit Multi-Service Seniors Agency

Advisory Committees

Community stakeholders should be involved in this process if the program is to attain its objective of increasing equitable access for all. To achieve this end since 2005 the SPACE Coalition has recommended that school boards establish Community Use of Schools Advisory Committees (CUSAC), and for the Province to implement a Community Use of Schools Advisory Committee with stakeholders from across the province.

- Respondents indicated their belief that 17 of the 72 district school boards in the province have a CUSAC.

*At this time SPACE has not been able to independently verify if this is in fact the case. Due to resource limitations we have only been able to confirm the CUSAC at the Toronto District School Board.

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3. As of May 2009 SPACE has been able to independently confirm the hiring of COCs in only 6 of the 72 boards: Waterloo Catholic District School Board, Upper Grand District School Board, Toronto Catholic District School Board, London District Catholic School Board, District School Board Ontario North East and Peel District School Board.

Community Access to Municipal Space

This year we added a component to our survey investigating community experience in permitting municipal space to operate programs or activities. Each municipality has its own fee structure. Some nonprofit organizations can access space for free, while other organizations can face fee increases with little advance notice:

- 41% of respondents using municipal space reported fee increases in 2008/2009 from the previous year.

Interestingly the increase of permit fees for municipal spaces did not lead to an increase in program cancellation from 2007-08 to 2008-09. More research is needed to assess the capacity of groups to sustain programming even when fees to use space are increased.

The SPACE Coalition and SPT will continue to monitor community access to municipal space, expanding on our investigation in future surveys.

The City of Ottawa increased its municipal fees by 37% in 2009.

(Customer Service Booking Clerk, Parks, Recreation & Cultural Services Branch, City of Ottawa, personal communication, April 1, 2009).

Recommendations

SPACE and SPT commend the Ontario government for its efforts to increase community access to schools equitably, and for its vision of schools as community hubs. This report bears witness to some of these successes. Further reforms are still needed. Improvements to monitoring and public accountability at a board and provincial level are essential if the CUS program is to fulfill its mandate.

Building on our 2005 and 2007 survey results, the 2009 recommendations are for the attention of the Government of Ontario and other relevant stakeholders.

The SPACE Coalition and Social Planning Toronto recommend that:

1. The Government of Ontario implement the 2008-2012 CUS funding commitment and increase levels of CUS funding, ensuring school boards lower fees further and increase space available throughout the year at more times including summer weekends, evenings, and after school.

- Province to provide the direction and funding support to achieve their policy vision on CUS;
- Province to support a system that will lead to lower fees in expanded time periods and will result in a more consistent permit fee rate system both within school board districts, and across Ontario;
- Community Outreach Coordinators to be hired immediately, and their job description to include a responsibility to build awareness among marginalized populations of the CUS program and to assist them in accessing school space;
- School boards to work actively with the Province through Community Outreach Coordinators to ensure that appropriate guidelines are consistently applied throughout Ontario;
- Establish a more transparent monitoring and reporting process on the use of CUS funds;
- Regarding the policy direction and funding to open up free schools in high need areas across Ontario – to direct school boards to engage municipalities, community planning groups, and community stakeholders in this process of selecting schools;
- To ensure that programs such as CUS and Focus on Youth are announced in February of each year or annualized in core Ministry of Education budgets to facilitate the other resources and planning required to deliver a high quality, safe set of summer programs;
- Expand Focus on Youth to other areas of Ontario;
- The CUS policy should better reflect schools as a potential hub of the community, supporting not only children, youth and families but benefiting all members of the community, beyond those who have children in the school system;
- School boards to pay caretaker overtime or shift premiums;
- School boards to pay for “site supervisors” when caretakers are not available;
- Funds to be available for additional school board insurance, so that uninsured groups can afford to access school space.

2. School boards across Ontario improve the permit application process so it is straightforward, user-friendly, transparent, accessible and accountable, with input from stakeholders. This should include:

- Boards adopting appropriate guidelines in order to move towards more consistency in the permit application process;
- Designing methods to better inform potential users about space availability;
- Increasing outreach to improve awareness of the steps to permit schools. Implementing an accessible and effective dispute resolution process at both the local board and at the provincial level to ensure the CUS policy is upheld and that barriers to access are addressed;
- Developing access and equity policies and procedures to balance the needs of existing long-term groups using school space with new and emerging community groups, particularly those working with traditionally underserved communities;
- Ensuring that principals and caretakers cannot block access of user groups;
- Tracking permit refusals.

3. The Province and school boards should work with community stakeholders to improve accountability by strengthening the CUS program evaluation process.

- The Province, through the Ministry of Education, with input from school boards and Community Outreach Coordinators should be required to table an annual report to the legislature showing how public dollars were used to improve public access to schools, and how the policy principles were upheld;
- Involve stakeholders such as the SPACE Coalition in the evaluation process and to develop

indicators to be included in an annual report, such as:

1. Who used/was refused access to school space,
2. Reasons for refusal of access,
3. How program outreach/recognition took place,
4. Fee structures,
5. Monitor areas of clear gaps between need and access to service.

- All school boards should establish a Community Use of Schools Advisory Committee;
- The Province should establish a Community Use of Schools Advisory Committee for Ontario.

4. The Province should work with municipalities and community stakeholders to improve access to municipal public space.

- The Government of Ontario should work with municipalities to create an Inter-Ministerial and Municipal Work Group that includes community stakeholders to develop a framework and funding mechanism to improve equitable and affordable access to municipal spaces for community use, similar to the Community Use of Schools program policy and funding framework;
- Municipalities should develop a Community Use of Municipal Spaces Advisory Committee, with stakeholders including: school board and community-based organizations;
- The Province and municipalities should examine reciprocal agreements between school boards and municipal government regarding community use of facilities to harmonize them with CUS policy and ensure they uphold the principles of affordable and equitable community access to space for community benefit.

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