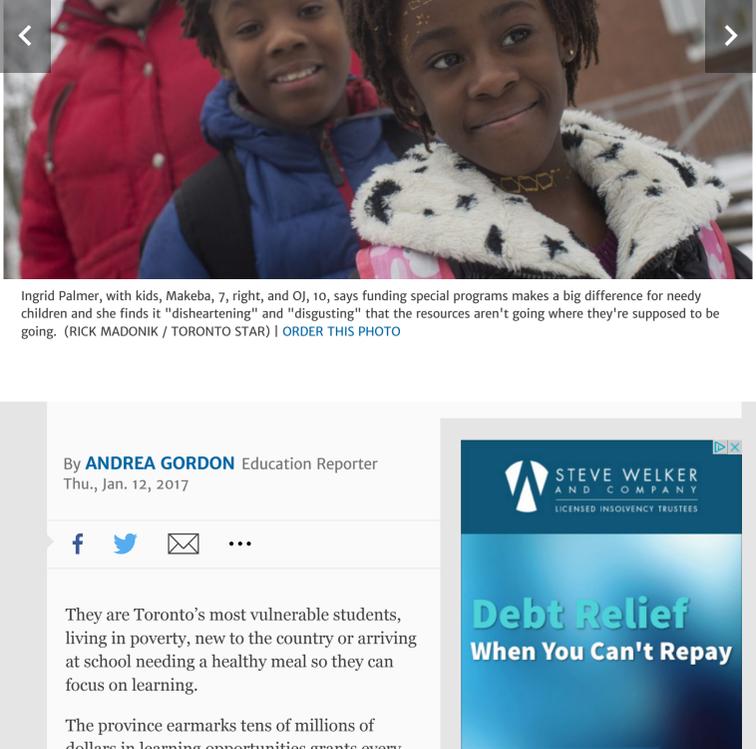


Millions in grants for needy students aren't getting to them, report says

Data shows cash-strapped TDSB diverts funds for disadvantaged schools to balance budget.



Ingrid Palmer, with kids, Makeba, 7, right, and OJ, 10, says funding special programs makes a big difference for needy children and she finds it "disheartening" and "disgusting" that the resources aren't going where they're supposed to be going. (RICK MADONIK / TORONTO STAR) | ORDER THIS PHOTO

By **ANDREA GORDON** Education Reporter
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They are Toronto's most vulnerable students, living in poverty, new to the country or arriving at school needing a healthy meal so they can focus on learning.

The province earmarks tens of millions of dollars in learning opportunities grants every year to help support marginalized students at the Toronto District School Board. But almost half that money isn't being spent on them and is instead diverted to cover other expenses as the cash-strapped board struggles to balance its budget, says a damning new report.

"This means that the students with the greatest need are failing to benefit from the resources that they are entitled to — about \$61 million worth of resources each year," says the report, to be released Thursday by Social Planning Toronto and based on data provided by the TDSB.

"We think it's important that people now see the facts," said Sean Meagher, executive director of the social policy research group.

"This is the first time we've had absolutely rock-solid numbers that no one can refute, because they are the TDSB's own numbers."

He acknowledged that Canada's largest school board is in a tough situation as a result of the province's inadequate and outdated funding formula that forces boards "to rob Peter to pay Paul," and says the same thing could also be happening in other Ontario boards.

But using funds for needy kids to make up the difference is "the wrong solution to a very real problem," Meagher said, particularly when evidence shows that investing in extra programs has a huge impact on their well-being, academic success and long-term opportunities.

Financial data from the 2014-15 school year shows the TDSB received \$144 million in learning opportunities grants to be used for such initiatives as breakfast programs, homework clubs, reading recovery, one-on-one help, after-school and summer activities and workshops to engage parents in the school community and their child's learning. Funds also support the board's \$8-million **Model Schools** for Inner Cities program, which provides extra money for 150 high-needs schools.

Unlike many other grants, the bulk of the learning opportunities grant — 88 per cent or \$127 million — is "unsweated." This means that while the ministry explicitly designates it for students at risk, the board has latitude in determining which local programs they invest in.

In 2014-15, \$61 million or 48 per cent of that unsweated grant money was not used for its intended purpose but instead "was diverted to budget line items," according to the report written by researcher and policy analyst Sharma Queiser.

About 52 per cent or \$66.4 million was actually used to help level the playing field for disadvantaged students, and "further analysis suggests that this figure may be significantly lower," it said.

Social Planning Toronto calls for the TDSB to start directing learning opportunities grants back to students, even if it takes a few years to make the full transition. The advocacy group also calls on the province to increase its base funding for Toronto schools and make it mandatory that the grants in question go to students for which they are intended.

TDSB trustee Marit Stiles called the study "an important report" that shows the stark reality of the tough decisions boards face in the perennial battle to balance the books. It should be presented directly to the Minister of Education, said Stiles, chair of the TDSB's finance, budget and enrolment committee.

"It's time people actually saw what's really happening out there," she said. "Where do you cut? Are we supposed to balance the budget on the backs of the most vulnerable?"

Trying to plug all the holes makes her feel "like we're playing whack-a-mole all the time," she added. The Toronto board has an annual operating budget of about \$3 billion.

Researchers have been raising concerns about how funds for low-income students are being spent for years. A 2013 study by Social Planning Toronto claimed two-thirds of learning opportunities grant money wasn't reaching its intended target, but was disputed by the board. That's what prompted the advocacy group to ask the board for financial statements.

The issue has also been a growing concern for trustees, who last June launched a task force that includes outside experts to examine the impact of money spent to offset the impact of poverty, race and class, what programs are effective and where additional resources are needed. A final report is expected in November.

But Stiles said rather than waiting, she's planning to present a motion to the finance committee later this month that will ask TDSB staff to come up with a plan on how to start shifting the grant money in question back to low-income schools.

"These are exactly the important issues we need to be talking about as a board," she said.

TDSB teacher Nigel Barriffe says the supports that learning opportunities grants are meant to cover make a huge difference, whether paying for field trips to the Ontario Science Centre, educational assistants in classrooms or child care during parent meetings to encourage family involvement in the school.

Barriffe, a special education teacher on parental leave from Greenholme Junior Middle School, says the loss of that money is significant.

"We know that it has a disproportionate affect on racialized communities," says Barriffe, who is also chair of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations.

Parents, teachers and communities "have to figure out how to encourage both their trustees and MPPs to revisit the funding formula to ensure we are properly funding all of our schools."

Ingrid Palmer, a mother of three, has experienced the positive impact of grants.

Her eldest child struggled in several subjects at a school that didn't have the resources to provide extra support, she says.

"It seemed like I fought all the way from elementary school to high school for her to get the help she needed."

Then a few years ago her son, now 10, needed a specialized class and ended up at George Webster Elementary School, one of the board's model schools, for three years.

It was like "night and day," thanks to funds that went towards teacher training and programs for students and families, says Palmer.

Staff promoted resiliency and knew how to deal with kids from different cultural backgrounds or who were living in stressful situations. Children were screened for vision, hearing and learning issues, and had access to after-school floor hockey and music classes. Workshops for parents covered everything from child development to helping children learn to read.

The extra resources meant the school became a key to the community, she said.

The fact so much of the grant money isn't reaching the children it's intended for is "really disheartening and disgusting to me," says Palmer.

"There should be a total outcry from the public," she said. "Imagine what could happen if all of it was put where it's supposed to be."

Meagher of Social Planning Toronto calls it a missed opportunity to ensure every child across the city has a chance at success and future opportunities.

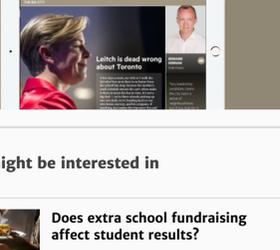
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