

TDSB gets millions in funding for low-income students, but isn't spending it on them: report

Board says it needs money earmarked for vulnerable schools, students to pay for other needs

By Trevor Dunn, CBC News Posted: Jan 12, 2017 4:14 PM ET Last Updated: Jan 12, 2017 4:52 PM ET



Regent Park's Dundas Public School feeds 80 students a hot lunch daily. (Oliver Walters/CBC News)

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Tens of millions of dollars in education funding for some of Toronto's most vulnerable students isn't being spent on them, according to a new report.

The community non-profit organization Social Planning Toronto has found the Toronto District School Board is diverting nearly half of a special fund away from low-income students to fill other budget gaps.

"We really think that money should be getting to those kids," Sean Meagher, executive director of Social Planning Toronto, said in an interview.

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The report looked at what's known as the Demographic Allocation of the Ministry of Education's Learning Opportunity Grant, which is intended for low-income TDSB students.

The money pays for things like breakfast programs, reading clubs, one-on-one tutoring and parent engagement at schools in some of Toronto's most impoverished neighbourhoods.



Social Planning Toronto executive director Sean Meagher says millions of dollars in funding for low-income TDSB students isn't getting to them. (CBC/Martin Trainor)

But of the \$127 million given to the school board, the report says only about \$66 million was spent on those programs.

The rest – approximately \$61 million – was used to pay for other items in the TDSB budget.

"It's still going to classrooms; it's still going to teaching staff," said Neethan Shan, the TDSB trustee for Scarborough Rouge River, on CBC Radio's *Metro Morning* Thursday.

'Unfortunate situation'

Shan called the diverted funding an "unfortunate situation" due to the TDSB's "chronic underfunding".

"We are stuck," Shan said.

In a written statement emailed to CBC Toronto, TDSB spokesman Ryan Bird defended the board's record in supporting low-income students.

"The Board is showing leadership in addressing the marginalization and inequities that result from poverty through the Inner City Task Force, which was re-established last year to carry out a comprehensive audit of all current TDSB initiatives and programs intended to improve outcomes for marginalized and under-served students," the statement reads.

"At the same time, we acknowledge that we face gaps between the Ministry and the Board (the money we spend vs. the money we receive from the Ministry), while at the same trying our very best to enhance programming we believe is making a difference," Bird wrote.

Thursday's report echoes the comments from both Shan and Bird.

"Provincial funding is insufficient to meet the real educational needs of Toronto's students," it says.

Underfunding 'root of the problem'

Meagher says the underfunding is the "root of the problem", but the TDSB has the wrong solution.

"The school board can't be solving that problem on the backs of low-income kids."

The funding in question is provided to the TDSB "unsweated," meaning the board has some flexibility as to how it's spent.

Along with returning the money to programs for low-income students, Social Planning Toronto recommends that the province "sweater" the Demographic Allocation of the Learning Opportunities Grant so that it can't be spent elsewhere.

Another recommendation calls for the Ministry of Education to provide "adequate funding" for education in Toronto.

"The province needs to give the school boards enough money to deliver the programs kids need," Meagher said.

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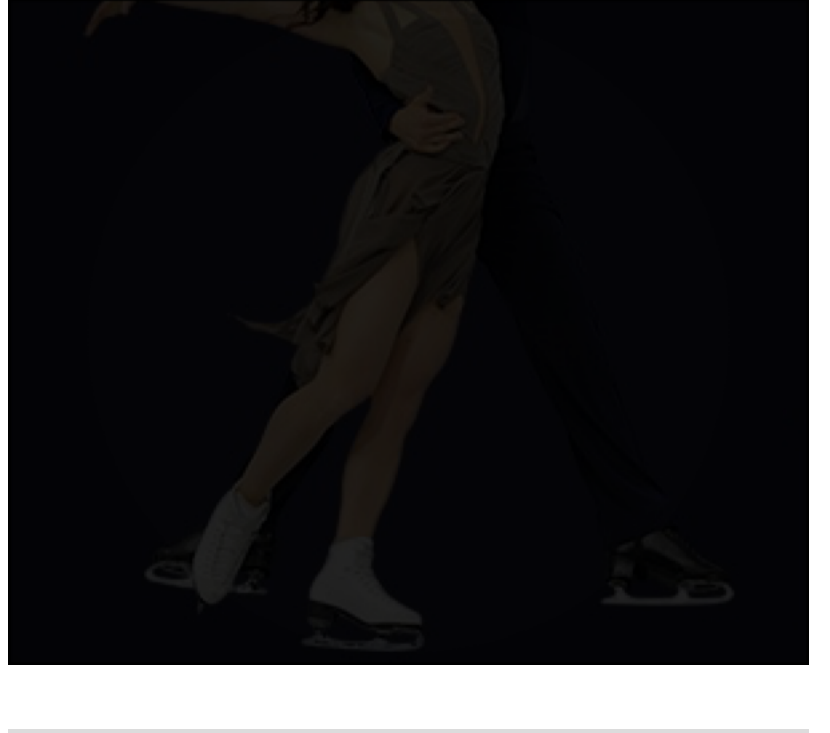
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