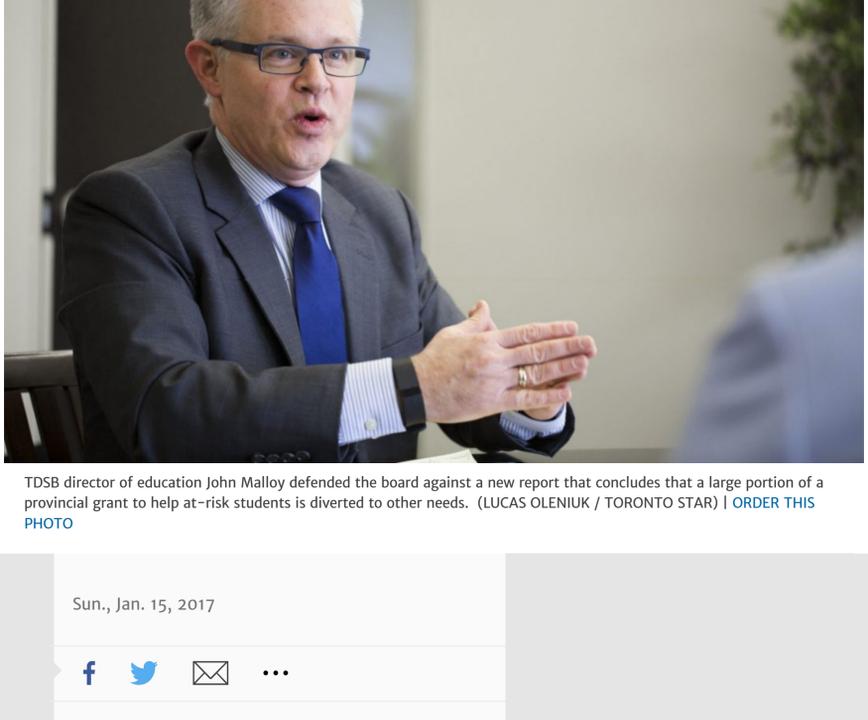


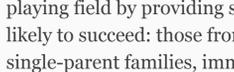
Grant for needy kids should be used as intended: Editorial

The Toronto District School Board should start using the grant for at-risk kids in the spirit in which it was given and the province should change the rules so there's no choice in the matter



TDSB director of education John Malloy defended the board against a new report that concludes that a large portion of a provincial grant to help at-risk students is diverted to other needs. (LUCAS OLENIUK / TORONTO STAR) | ORDER THIS PHOTO

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Last year, the Ontario government gave the Toronto District School Board about \$144 million in grants to help level the academic playing field by providing supports to kids least likely to succeed: those from low-income or single-parent families, immigrants and others at increased risk of not graduating.

This kind of investment has the potential to have an enduring impact. The evidence that demographic factors shape educational outcomes is overwhelming. If governments are going to even begin to break the cycle of poverty and ensure equality of opportunity, investments like Ontario's Learning Opportunities Grant, which is meant to fund breakfast programs, homework clubs and other educational interventions, are essential.

Assuming, that is, the money is used as intended. But a new report from Social Planning Toronto, a non-profit community organization, shows that in Toronto, that's no safe assumption.

A significant portion of the grant money, some \$61 million, was diverted away from at-risk TDSB students last year to other budgetary needs of the cash-strapped school board. As so often happens, in a time of scarcity, it's the most vulnerable who are being asked to wait.

The board can do this because of a loophole in the province's funding formula. Unlike most provincial allotments, the grant in question is "unsweatered," meaning boards can spend it however they like. According to the report, "as one of the few unprotected grants, [it] appears to be paying for a wide range of general programs and filling in gaps in provincial funding for mandatory core services."

This flexibility is a relic of the Mike Harris years, as is the total lack of accountability that allows it to be widely abused. The only reason we now know what we do about how much of the grant is being diverted is that Social Planning Toronto started asking the right questions.

Asked about the report, the head of the TDSB, John Malloy, said the money is used in ways that "support our students at risk, but (also) supports their classmates as well." He insists that "the grant is not used inappropriately based on what the regulation expects."

That may be, but as the new report suggests, the board should start using the money in the spirit in which it was given and the province should change the rules so there's no choice in the matter.

In Toronto, the child-poverty capital of Canada, schools have a special obligation to work to ensure that hunger and the other obstacles poverty poses do not determine educational performance and diminish life chances. This grant is one of the few tools to help kids break out of the constraints of poverty. The province should ensure that school boards don't fix other, legitimate funding problems on the backs of those most in need.

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