



COMMUNITY  
SOCIAL  
PLANNING  
COUNCIL  
OF TORONTO

# Breaking Down Barriers: Opening up Ontario's Schools for Expanded Community Use



## 2007 Community Use of Schools Survey Results and Recommendations

In 2005 the SPACE Coalition, in conjunction with the CSPC-T, undertook an Ontario-wide survey of community users of school space to assess their awareness of the provincially funded CUS program (Community Use of Schools). CUS was designed to reverse the loss of affordable access to schools by community groups, resulting from changes to the education funding formula in the late 1990s. (See <http://www.socialplanningtoronto.org/CSPC-T%20Reports/Opening%20the%20Doors%20to%20Ontario%20School%20-%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>) This year's survey sought to assess the changes to community groups' ability to access schools, resulting from the \$20 million annual provincial investment in CUS.

According to the survey results, it appears there has been some progress in improving access to school space for some communities as a result of this infusion of funding. However, it is clear that many community groups continue to be excluded from this benefit, including groups working with children, youth, newcomers and seniors.

The survey's findings identify the key barriers to increasing the community use of schools, including:

- Increasing fees in some jurisdictions despite CUS funding
- A patchwork of fee structures and application processes, and some Boards with very high fees.
- Insufficient availability of space in schools after school, on weekends, and during the summer.
- Inconsistent approvals of applications and restrictions to access at local school and Board levels.

Inadequate monitoring and public accountability for the CUS funds at a Board and Provincial level to inform areas for improvement and ensure the program fulfills the provincial policy statement on CUS. The SPACE Coalition and the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto recommend that the Ministry of Education and the Government of Ontario:

- 1. Increase the funding for the Community Use of Schools so that school boards can lower fees further and have more space available throughout the year at more times including: summer, weekends, evenings, after-school.**
- 2. Improve the permit application process so it is straightforward, user-friendly, transparent, accessible and accountable.**
- 3. Improve accountability and the evaluation process**

The following bulletin elaborates on each of these points and suggests practical steps that the Ministry of Education can implement to move forward on each recommendation.

We applaud the Ministry's strong policy statement that envisions schools as the hubs of communities, with a focus on access and equity, and believe this should be the compass setting for all future reforms of this program.

## Research Purpose

In February 2007, the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto and SPACE, a provincial coalition, conducted a follow-up survey to their 2005 evaluation of the provincial Community Use of Schools (CUS) policy, program and funding. The 2005 survey investigated community groups' awareness of the \$20 million in annual provincial funding to Boards of Education to improve community use of school space (see SPACE Report: [www.socialplanningtoronto.org](http://www.socialplanningtoronto.org)). This follow-up 2007 survey examines the barriers to community groups in accessing school space and makes recommendations to the Province of Ontario to support their existing CUS policy and improve access.

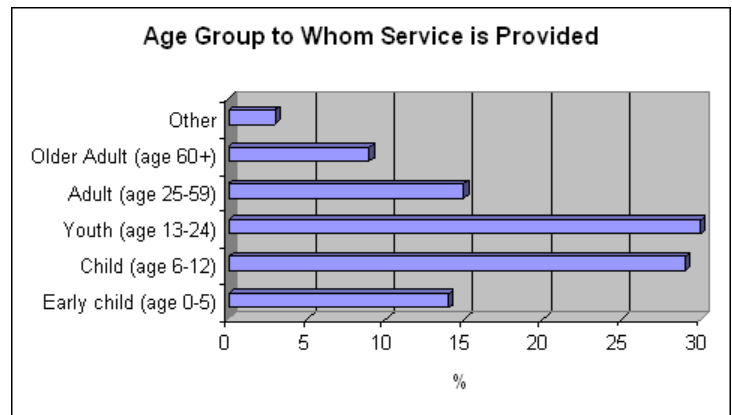
These community surveys are important because there has been a vacuum of public information on the impacts of the CUS program. The Government of Ontario provides funding to 72 Boards of Education to support community use of schools. In exchange, the Ministry of Education receives annual reports from the 72 Boards of Education on their expenditures and statistics regarding access to schools. However, there has been no publicly distributed provincial analysis and evaluation of this policy and program. Furthermore, there is no provincial mechanism to recommend improvements to this program from a community perspective.

A broad range of non-profit and community groups that use school space responded to this survey from School Board Districts across Ontario, in urban and rural areas to provide this snapshot of the state of community use of schools in our province.

## Key Findings

### 1) Community Use of Schools Policy shows some positive benefits

- A diversity of organizations currently use schools space, such sports clubs, sports organizations, recreational and arts groups, social service organizations and social clubs (e.g., Girl Guides and Scouts)
- 28% of the respondents increased their use of school space in 2005/2006
- 32% of the respondents increased their use of



school space in 2006/2007

- Close to 6 out of 10 of the respondents who use school space provide services and programs to school age children (age 6-12) and youth (age 13-24)

A suburban sports club sums their experience of using school space as follows: "We've had a truly fantastic experience with the school board and school; everyone, parents and volunteers, is very grateful."

### 2) However, barriers to accessing school space still exist

Respondents reported several barriers that limit their access to school space that fall under three main categories: Fees, Permit Application Process, and Accountability.

#### Fees

Fees to access schools continue to rise in spite of the provincial CUS funding.

- 16% of the respondents reported permit fees increases in 2005/2006 and in 2006/2007
- Whereas 27% of the respondents reported a decrease in permit fees in 2005/2006, only 11% reported a decrease in permit fees the following year
- 1 out of 4 of the respondents cited lower fees as necessary to improve their access to school space
- Both survey respondents and information on the various Board of Education web sites continue to show a

diverse patchwork of fee rates both between School Board Districts, and even between Catholic and Public School Boards in the same geographic area. There are some commonalities among Boards: some of the most expensive time periods for access are on weekends, or summers after 3:30 pm, or summer daytime due to caretakers' overtime costs.

- Some School Boards, especially those in some urban areas, have much higher rates.

### ***Cancelled programs***

- 16% of the respondents reported having to cancel their programs in 2005/2006
- Almost 20% of the respondents reported canceling programs in 2006/2007

A multi-service agency that provides programs to urban inner city youth notes that they had to significantly reduce their summer program because of permit fees: "Our summer program was scheduled to be 5 days/week for 6 weeks, but the permit fee was between \$8,000 to \$10,000, so we had to cut the program to four days a week and cut hours; even so our fee could only be reduced to \$5,000."

### ***Available space and times in schools fall short of community needs***

- 23% of the respondents want access to more space, and 18% want times that better fit their

A suburban sports club that offers basketball programs to young children (age 0-5) through to youth (age 13-24) in a public school had this to say about the lack of access to space, "Some schools consistently are unavailable to be permitted to community groups, yet through our contacts (teachers who are coaches) we know for a fact that their gym spaces are sitting empty."

program needs in order to improve their access to school space. Some organizations cannot permit space in summer months, or summer evenings because space is not available, and some cannot afford space on weekends since those rates are the highest.

### **Permit Application Process**

- Boards have different community access policies and permit application procedures across the Province. Some of these policies place particular community groups at a disadvantage, e.g. some Boards charge charities lower fees, which disadvantages sports organizations for children and youth, as these are not allowed to be registered charities

In other situations, there are more applications for space than available space. Boards tend to approve on a first come and first serve basis, with existing permit holders having the advantage. There were no reports of Boards having any access and equity policies on community use of schools. Some municipalities have these kinds of policies

In commenting on the lack of timeliness to permit application, one sports association that provides programs for children and youth states: "By the time the Board responded to our permit application, we had already turned down kids and cancelled the program."

### **Accountability**

- The patchwork of fees and policies across Ontario are at odds with Provincial Policy statement on Community Use of Schools aiming for greater consistency and nominal fees

The decision of who gets access to school space, whether after school, weekends and summer, is reported increasingly to be at the discretion of the principals. While 37% of the respondents reported that the permit office approves permit requests, 36% of the respondents cited principals as the person who approves permits. There are some principals who do everything to "open the doors" to welcome community programs to their schools in order to support the development of children, youth, parents and build

capacity within the community. However, there are others who are not as supportive of community use of schools and who use their discretionary powers to block community access to school space

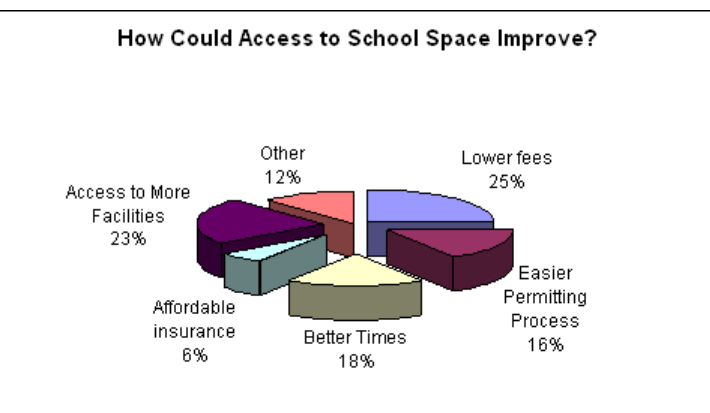
- The arbitrary discretion to deny permits or block book space to reduce time available for community use at a school level by principals and caretakers in some jurisdictions undermines the CUS policy at a Provincial level and a local Board level. This patchwork results in inequities of access to schools between individual schools in a District, and between School Districts. Other School Boards approve permits through a central access point (e.g., permit office) with no principal or caretaker “veto.”

### People for Education Annual Report – Community Use of Schools

The CSPC-T and SPACE findings support previous research by People for Education which has a historical perspective on this issue going back to 1999.

Their 2007 research found that even though all 72 school boards have signed Community Use of Schools (CUS) agreements with the province to reduce fees and increase access to schools for non profit community groups, elementary schools reported that the community use of their facilities is still 9% lower than in 1999. A key finding is:

“The areas of the province with the lowest percentage of schools charging fees have the highest percentage of schools reporting community use.” (People for Education Annual Report on Ontario’s Public Schools, 2007)



A respondent who uses three different school boards in an urban area to provide sporting activities to children (ages 0-5 & 6-12) and youth (age 13-24) expressed frustration with the inconsistent permitting policies as follows: “Access to school space through two of the School Boards is from the principal, which is a problem since a lot of them will grant permits to friends, acquaintances, and sports their sons are involved in, over other groups; compared to the one School Board where the permit decision is made by the permit office and not the individual schools; this system is fairer.”

Similarly, a community recreation group in a rural area that uses two School Boards notes that one School Board is easier to work with than the other: “One school Board is more flexible with regards to cancellations (no fees). Also, permit fees is on an hourly rate regardless of whether it is a weekday or weekend. The other Board is less flexible; a fee is charged anytime there is a cancellation. And there is an extra fee for weekend use.”

One urban respondent sums up her situation as follows, “After getting approval from the Board (permit office), two days before the summer program was to start the principal called to cancel our permit.”

A community group that provides programs for inner city youth notes the following: “It seems like the schools aren’t really opening their doors a lot. It’s hard for us to find schools that will take us. It also seems that it really depends on the principal. But I think that things need to change. I mean once we’re in the school everyone is very nice and friendly but it needs to be across the board, everyone needs to be the same. And the procedure for getting to use the space needs to be the same. Some principals are okay with us, some aren’t. It’s too hard trying to get space; they tell us to talk to all different people. Everyone should follow the same policies and procedures.”

## **Recommendations**

These recommendations are for the attention of the Ontario Ministry of Education

### **1. Increase the CUS funding so that school boards can lower fees further and have more space available throughout the year at more times including: summer weekends, evenings, and after-school.**

- School boards will be able to pay caretaker overtime or shift premiums
- Schools could pay for “site supervisors” when caretakers are not available
- Funds for additional school board insurance, so that uninsured groups can afford to access school space
- 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.

### **2. Improve the permit application process so it is straightforward, user-friendly, transparent, accessible and accountable. This should include:**

- Boards need to adopt best practices in order to move towards more consistency in the permit application process
- Ensure that principals and caretakers cannot block access of user groups
- Track permit refusals
- Implement 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.
- Design methods to better inform potential users about space availability
- Increase outreach to improve awareness of the steps to permit schools
- Develop access and equity access policies and procedures to balance the needs of existing long term groups using school space with new

and emerging community groups

### **3. Improve accountability and the evaluation process**

Table an annual report to the legislature showing how public dollars were used to improve public access to schools. Involve organizations such as the SPACE Coalition in the evaluation process and to develop indicators to be included in an annual report, such as:

- who used/was refused access to school space
- reasons for refusal of access
- how program outreach/recognition took place
- fee structures
- monitor areas of clear gaps between needs and access to service

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be prohibitive in cost in many communities.

## Context and History

In the late 1990s, the Provincial educational funding formula no longer funded community use of schools. This had two significant effects. One, fees for community groups to use school space skyrocketed. Two, as a direct result of one, there was a mass exodus of community groups from schools across the province; these groups' programs, which served all age groups, were discontinued. A survey by the City of Toronto and United Way of Greater Toronto in 2002 found that in Toronto alone 43% of community groups left schools.

In July 2004, the Provincial government launched a new voluntary Community Use of Schools (CUS) Policy and annualized funding program to Boards of Education (\$20 million annually). The provincial agreements with Boards in the first year of the CUS Program stated that fees would not increase to non profit groups and outlined reduced fee rates and access targets.

**“Schools in Ontario are recognized as hubs for community activity and will be affordable and accessible to communities in order to support the goals of a healthier Ontario, stronger communities and student success.” Provincial Vision statement, July 2004**

Most recently in June 2007, the Ministry of Education has provided one-time funding of \$4 million to two Boards in Toronto (Toronto District School Board and Toronto Catholic District School Board) to open 50 schools in July and August to allow non profits to run programs for children and youth, and to hire youth for leadership development/mentorship programs. This is a positive initiative, but it is not available across Ontario, or even in all school areas within Toronto. Free or affordable access to schools in the summer days and evenings and weekends is a best-practice and should be adopted province-wide in a number of schools depending on local community needs (with some input from local municipalities and community groups). Access to schools in summer months (days and evenings) and on weekends during the school year continues to

The Province has set out three policy goals for Community Use of Schools Policy:

- a) **Remove cost barriers** associated with community use of school facilities and increase participation in community programs located in schools
- b) **Achieve consistency** across the Province in terms of community access to schools at nominal rates

“I want to thank all of our community, education and government partners who are working with us to find solutions that will help students succeed during the school year and over the summer months. Together, we are creating a safe, fun, and supportive environment where students can develop into our next generation of community leaders.” The Honourable Kathleen Wynne Minister of Education, Media Release - June 6, 2007, “McGuinty Government Keeps Schools Open this Summer for Thousands of Youth (Toronto)”

- c) **Encourage cooperation** between District School Boards and municipalities regarding use of school space

The province also established policy principles to govern the Community Use of Schools Policy and program, which were updated in 2006:

- Schools as Hubs of the Community
- Support a Positive Climate for youth
- Fair and Equal Access
- Not for profit organizations to be charged nominal rates
- Respect for Roles and Responsibilities
- School Activities take Priority

## Distribution of the 2007 Survey

**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 Provincial Sport Organization Council and Basketball Ontario
- Through the Social Planning Network of Ontario
- To organizations listed in the electronic Blue Book
- To organizations that had participated in the 2005 survey

### **Profile of the 2007 Respondents**

- 90% of our survey respondents are current users of school space. Therefore our results do not capture the issues of those groups that do not access school space
- Most of the respondents are established community groups and non-profit organizations that have been in existence for an average of 20 years.
- A total of 230 respondents
- Respondents accessed permit space in 50 School Boards, which are located in both rural and urban districts

### **SPACE Coalition Members**

ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now)  
 Applegrove Community Complex  
 Basketball Ontario  
 Children's Aid Society of Toronto  
 Community Social Planning Council of Toronto  
 Erin Hoops – (Upper Grand District)  
 Family Services Association of Toronto  
 Girl Guides of Canada – Ontario Council  
 Metis Nation of Ontario  
 Middle Childhood Matters Coalition  
 People for Education  
 Provincial Sport Organization Council  
 Special Olympics Ontario  
 St. Christopher House  
 United Ways of Ontario