

Parents, unions protest plan to close dozens of schools ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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As the Toronto District School Board launches an unprecedented review of its unused space, a coalition of parents, community groups and unions called Campaign for Public Education is fighting back.

The TDSB argues it has more than 100 schools that are half-empty, and with 4,000 fewer students every year and a \$17 million deficit, it needs to close some and use the money saved to improve the rest. These community meetings are about how to surgically trim the board's excess space in a way each neighbourhood can live with, at least grudgingly.

Signs, flyers, Facebook groups, videos -- these are the tools of a new war being waged against Toronto's plan to close possibly dozens of schools in the coming years.

There are 10 of these public Accommodation Review Committee consultations going on across the city; some -- but not all -- in high-needs neighbourhoods and most aiming to shutter at least one school.

"We're absolutely not targeting this (Jane-Finch) community. We'll be reviewing every single community in the coming years and we're looking at other neighbourhoods right now," said Chris Spence, the board's education director, to the jeering crowd Thursday.

"CUPE is a big financial backer of the Campaign for Public Education because school closings would mean a loss of employment for our members," says Janet Bojti, an English as a Second Language instructor who is active with the union and the coalition.

"But it's about more than just jobs. Even in the Great Depression we didn't sell off public lands," said Bojti. "And it feels like we're on a runaway train with the board thinking of closing up to 15 schools this year."

While closing a school tears at the heart of any community, some TDSB trustees privately blame the Campaign for Public Education for causing unnecessary panic and trying to thwart the board's public consultations in a futile bid to pressure Queen's Park for more funding.

A Campaign for Public Education website primer on school closings urges parents to refuse to break into small groups for discussion and demand the process be shut down -- precisely what the Jane-Finch community did at a January meeting.

"We don't want any schools closed. We believe the province needs to fix the funding formula," said parent Sabrina Gopaul, one of the organizers of the Jane-Finch Save Our Schools campaign.

"And it's also short-sighted -- we're getting a subway up Jane St. and a revitalization project around Shoreham (one of the schools that could close). So declining enrolment -- are you kidding me?"

Gopaul says at least three grassroots Jane-Finch groups are driving the fight against closing schools there, but notes the unions have the money to print signs and leaflets.

"The unions definitely have resources many other groups don't -- but the voice that's speaking is the community."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: school system ^[3]

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