

Full-day kindergarten funding falls short for Toronto board, report says ^[1]

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For Margaret Wilson's report (pdf) ^[2]

EXCERPTS

The provincial government shortchanges the Toronto public school board by almost \$15 million a year for full-day kindergarten, says a report to be released Tuesday by economist Hugh Mackenzie that argues underfunding in several areas has led to many of the board's recent troubles.

The report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives looks at a number of budget items where funding levels are low and notes that while the Liberal government is spending more money on education, it is not providing enough to the Toronto District School Board for its signature program for the province's youngest learners.

Rollled out over five years and now fully implemented across Ontario, full-day kindergarten is taught by a teacher and early childhood educator. While the province provides \$1,669.96 per student for the program, it "actually costs the TDSB significantly more than that: 24 per cent more, or \$2,066.97, per student," says the report.

"At a difference of \$400 per full-day kindergarten student, and with a total of approximately 36,500 full-day kindergarten students in the Toronto system, the TDSB's funding shortfall for the provincial early learning program will be an estimated \$14.6 million in 2014-5" and will recur each year, the report goes on.

Mackenzie, a well-known economist and researcher, notes the problem is not exclusive to the Toronto board, and that boards "have been forced to make cuts elsewhere to make up the shortfall." He noted Margaret Wilson's stinging report on the state of the Toronto board, commissioned by the education ministry and released last month, from which Education Minister Liz Sandals issued 13 directives to be fulfilled by this Friday, "fails to take into account the broader problems at play ... (this report) details how Toronto's public school trustees in particular are dealing with a funding formula so flawed, they have little room to manoeuvre."

In particular, it criticizes how the government determines if a school is full - for including things like an art room or even a boiler room as unused space, and said the \$1 billion quoted by Sandals as being "wasted" on empty space in schools across the province "is bogus."

"I'm not going to sit here and say no schools should ever be closed," Mackenzie said in an interview. But "when the issues that give rise to that pressure are actually (products) of the funding formula is a problem.

"If somebody asked me, one suggestion I'd make on the schools front is slow down, and put a sensible funding approach in place."

Of the 131 schools in Toronto that, according to the provincial formula are under-enrolled, one-third provide specialized programming to needy children - programs for vulnerable youth or those with special education needs, or schools devoted to physically and developmentally delayed students, which require more space.

Toronto trustees are to approve a three-year capital plan at their meeting Tuesday night. It includes school reviews that lead to closings, as part of their response to Sandals' orders. As for full-day kindergarten, the Toronto board is not alone in finding the funding doesn't match the costs; the Peel public board has long complained of the same issue.

At issue is the pay for early childhood educators, whose job category existed in boards before full-day kindergarten and whose salary levels had already been set by collective agreement before full-day kindergarten was introduced.

"The problem is that this rate of pay bears no necessary relationship to what boards actually have to pay early childhood educators," Mackenzie said.

The province provides for a \$30,005 salary plus benefits, totalling \$38,019. In Toronto, costs are 24 per cent higher, with a base salary of \$31.92 an hour, plus benefits ending up at roughly \$40.50 per hour.

Mackenzie also said that funding for Ontario students is lower than several provinces, although he noted students here continue to

perform well on international testing.

"Ontario funding is not wildly out of step with funding in other provinces, but there is a gap and it does raise some questions about the adequacy of funding in Ontario relative to other places," he said.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: kindergarten ^[4]

full-day early learning ^[5]

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