

Urban school policy needed

Falconer report confirms need for change in urban school funding

Toronto (January 10, 2008) – People for Education, in reaction to the report released today by the Falconer commission, called on the province to develop new policy and funding for urban schools.

“Let’s focus on prevention rather than finding more ways to simply lock down our schools,” says Annie Kidder, Executive Director of the parents’ organization. “Mr. Falconer’s report clearly shows that our current policy does not serve the unique needs of urban schools. Just as rural and northern schools have particular issues, so do urban schools – and it is imperative that we address them.”

Social workers, psychologists, guidance counsellors, youth workers needed

People for Education data show that guidance counsellors are responsible for hundreds of students each, and that even in schools with social workers and psychologists they are available only a few hours per month.

In Toronto in 2006:

- Only 34% of secondary schools had a regularly scheduled psychologist and they were available an average of 14.6 hours per month.
- 76% of secondary schools had a regularly scheduled social worker, but they were available on average less than 10 hours per week.
- 39% of Toronto secondary schools have a regularly scheduled youth worker, they were available an average of 76.5 hours per month.

In 2007:

- There was an average ratio per school of 357 students to one Guidance counsellor, up from 341 to 1 in 2000.
- There was an average ratio 518 students for every one vice-principal.
- The ratio of special education students to special education teachers in high school is 44 students to one teacher, up from 31 to 1 in 2000.

Special grant not working

The Learning Opportunities Grant (LOG) was initially developed to benefit students whose socio-economic status put them at risk of failure in school. The grant was intended to be used for things like increased numbers of counsellors and social workers for high needs schools, smaller class sizes, mentoring programs and educational assistants.

But over the years the province has changed the grant substantially. It has been diluted to cover a wide variety of remedial needs. And many boards say they are forced to use the funding in the grant to cover other costs like heat, light and maintenance.

In 2005, People for Education called on the province to designate a new *Equity in Education Grant* to replace the LOG. This grant would be used solely for providing programs to mitigate socio-economic factors affecting students.

New Safe Schools act an important first step

Revisions to the Education Act covering school safety have focused on prevention and increased flexibility. Some suspensions are no longer mandatory, and principals must take into account what are called “mitigating factors” that led to the behaviour. Schools are now required to have policy in place that outlines a slowly escalating system of consequences for many behaviours – ranging from more support and counselling all the way to expulsion. But People for Education has identified a number of problems with the new act. These problems are reflected in issues identified by Falconer.

- The province now mandates that principals and boards must place expelled or suspended students in special programs, but it remains difficult for many urban boards to cover the costs of the programs.
- The new Act says that principals must take into account things like racial or sexual harassment, a student’s special education needs, and they must consider the effect a suspension might have on a student’s continued education – but principals and vice-principals are already dealing with substantially increased workloads and have received little increase in support staff to provide support to students whose behaviour is affected by mitigating circumstances.

Integration of services and supports required

“We must not look at this report in isolation,” says Kidder. “Some of the problems outlined in the report are connected to the state of our neighbourhoods, our city and our level of support for struggling families.”

The group pointed out that in the last few years there have been a number of reports on the plight of cities and on the fallout from the growing gap between rich and poor. The City Summit Alliance, the United Way, Campaign 2000, the Toronto Social Planning Council, and Canada’s urban mayors have all called on improved resources for urban areas.

As a component of the new policy required for urban schools, People for Education has recommended the province, the city and urban school boards work together to integrate services for families, children and youth.

“We have to think about this in a broader way,” says Kidder. “Let’s look at our recreation programs, our levels of Social Assistance, mental health supports and all of the ways we should be supporting families and kids. Let’s not indulge in simplistic, knee-jerk reactions to this report, but instead make long-term plans that will make a lasting difference to all of our young people.”

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