**TDSB Budget Games**

**Lesley Johnston**

Over the past few weeks we seem to have been much distracted by $143 pencil sharpeners and $20,000 sign installations. No doubt these gross expenditures need investigating and solutions must be found. Preferably, this investigation would be conducted by a neutral third party in an external audit, and not the Ministry of Education in its Operation Review. After all, this is the same Ministry that consistently raps the knuckles of the TDSB for bad spending choices, thus deflecting any role the Ministry might have in the general under-funding of our education system… “The education system isn’t under-funded – you just need to get your books in order.”

Yet in the face of the $100 million cuts the TDSB just passed to balance the budget of the under-funded board - isn’t it funny how the conversation has been redirected?

April, May – right up until late June – concern and conversation was focused on the death by 1000 cuts the Toronto District School Board was having to make. In March conversation was about a $50 million cut to school-based staff – the teachers, education and office assistants, and vice-principals who run our schools. Let’s not forget that we lost:

* 430 Education Assistants,
* 200 high school teacher positions including 10 teacher-librarian positions,
* 134 school secretarial jobs,
* 17 vice-principals.

All of these staff positions served Toronto students and their absence will be deeply felt, though small and alternative schools will likely be hit the hardest.

But the cuts didn’t end there. For the first time in the past four years that I attended the TDSB final budget deliberations attendees gratefully received the entire 230 page 2012-13 proposed budget. For the first time we, as lay attendees, got to see line by line how the board is spending money. We got to see how the remaining final tally of $47.4 million in cuts was being made. It wasn’t pretty.

Professional development for teachers was cut, as were international language programs and continuing education. Permit fees to use school space will be raised for the third time in 13 months – by 60% - making it even harder for non-profit groups to offer affordable programming to students. This flies in the face of the recommendations from Curling and McMurtry’s Roots *of Youth Violence* report which urged schools to open up space to give youth more opportunities to participate in activities and get off the street. In an obesity epidemic school cafeterias offering health food choices will be closed. Most alarmingly school budgets will once again be cut.

Some last minute wrangling saw an extra million dollars freed up from the Ministry of Education’s Operational Review – meaning the proposed cuts to professional support services (social workers and psychologists serving our students with mental health issues) and special education were taken off the table. The cut to school budgets was also reduced by half. Trustee Dandy put forward a motion to redirect any additional money from the funds remaining in the Education Program Other Grants at the end of the year towards to reducing further cuts. Her motion would have seen the $1.5 million in ESL cuts and the cuts to continuing education, permit fees and school budget averted. The motion was shockingly and narrowly defeated. ESL students – already so underserved in our schools – will now lose another $1.5 million.

When you actually turn from page to page in the 2012-13 proposed budget what you see is a very different story from the one we see on the pages of our media sources. Despite “saving” our barebones special education and professional support service programs, cuts in other lines not widely reported have gone through – a youth counsellor here, an instructional leader there – leaving the system ever more fragile and less able to serve Toronto students.

We have excellent educational staff and no doubt they will do their very best to serve Toronto’s students but what will September look like?

Yes, there will be Full Day Kindergarten in more schools – a tremendous success, and yes, class sizes will be kept low for primary students – but with the loss of education assistants and ever reduced school budgets? Despite what the Minister of Education says – the system is being eroded.

And well before the Province releases its 2013-14 budget we already know, just from what they have said is coming, the TDSB can expect to have to cut another $30 million from its budget next round.

It’s going to take a lot more than figuring out how we came to pay $143 for a pencil sharpener to get us out of this. Yes – the Board and Ministry need to fix this maintenance mess – but let’s not get distracted from the bigger mess we are facing. The TDSB now has several hundred fewer staff to serve Toronto students and tens of millions less to offer their students the programs they need to succeed.

To say it once again – the promised 2010 external review of the funding formula is more needed than ever and two years overdue.

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