

Equitable Education?
The Cost of Extracurriculars in Ontario's Schools

A Discussion Paper of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association
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This report is a document produced with the combined expertise of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association, whose executive council includes:

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A variety of individuals contributed their ideas. The creation of this paper was a team effort and is a reflection of the keen interest and concern for this issue.

Dedication:

This paper is dedicated to Ontario's teachers, who daily open horizons and inspire the future, including by working after hours running sports, drama and club programmes.

“Poverty matters in education...[but]...In a truly equitable system, factors such as race, gender and socio-economic status do not prevent students from achieving ambitious outcomes”¹

¹ Ontario Ministry of Education. “Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education”. Queen’s Printer for Ontario: 2008, pg. 8.

Introduction:

At the centre of our society, we treasure the collective strength of educating children together. The last provincial election turned on the question of public education. The premier strives to be seen as “the education premier”. New investments and renewed energies are being poured into the system. We are improving our treasured system with optimism and urgency. We know our education system is good; we are constantly working to make it first class.

We treasure the work of our teachers. We treasure the promise of education, the way it expands horizons for generations. We celebrate and work to ensure equity. At the centre of our search for an equitable society is the principle of free basic education.

But how free is Ontario’s education?

This study focuses on inequities in secondary students’ access to extracurricular activities. Research shows that fees for activities represent a barrier for many students. It also shows that the lack of provincial policy covering fees for extracurricular activities has resulted in wide disparities across boards.

Among the findings:

- ➔ Some 77% of secondary schools charge fees, sometimes as high as 500\$;
- ➔ Student activity fees have increased by over 50% since 2001; and
- ➔ In an average-sized board, start-of-term fees ranged from 10\$ to 55\$.

Increasingly, the reality of public education is one of dichotomy between the rich and the poor. A substantial part of education is neither free nor equitable. The rich receive the benefit of experience while the poor receive a no-frills education; the wealthy can afford to participate in extracurricular activities while the poor cannot.

This disconnect, this inequity, must be remedied. The issue discussed in this paper confronts the government’s goals of equity and poverty reduction. This issue, therefore, must be combatted by the Ministry and school boards if we are to achieve our goals. We must ensure every student has equitable access to a full education, including extracurricular activities. We must ensure we truly reach every student.

The Value:

Extracurricular activity fees can include everything from sports teams, drama productions, club membership and social events. Extracurricular activities are the main mechanism for effective instruction in leadership, sports, art and drama by way of experiential learning. In our education system, separating extracurricular activities from the scope of learning is not only difficult but wrongheaded.

The modern school often relies on extracurriculars to give students ownership and engagement in their education. For many students, their first positive identity comes from involvement in a club that supports and nurtures their interests. Teachers love the way extracurricular or “co-curricular” activities can open horizons for the hardest-to-reach students. Teachers value extracurriculars.

The Ontario Public School Boards’ Association (OPSBA), states, “There is ample evidence that students who participate in school-based extracurricular activities are students who are highly engaged in school and more committed to completing their

education. Extracurricular activities can also foster lifelong appreciation and interests, preparing a young person for life in ways that go beyond academic success.”²

Extracurricular activities help to forge connections between the students and their school community. These links are an important method of engaging students in their education; indeed, school spirit and a positive school community are rooted in school sports or drama productions, and the camaraderie and shared experiences that arise. Students who are a part of extracurricular activities feel an ownership of their education because they can practice their skills in a practical manner, without the spectre of grades. This form of experiential learning is critical to helping students develop their own talents at their own pace and by their own volition.

Indeed, the students who created the marvelous *Imagine a School...* video with the Canadian Education Association “all agree that extra-curricular activities are an essential part of the high school experience and wished that teachers would be recognized publicly for the time and effort that they devote to students outside the classroom”.³ The value of co-curricular activities is clear: they allow students to *own* their education, to select their interests and work towards their own goals.

Extracurricular activities teach skills and they let students see who they can become in a setting that is conducive to their best efforts. They also help forge students’ identities. For some students, being in the art club, painting and crafting, is their first positive identity. Teachers recognise the value of extracurriculars; they get to see the rewards of a student mastering a new skill, witnessing potential and promise.

Extracurriculars teach a valuable skill: experience. When the classroom proves inadequate, extracurricular activities engage students, and give the invaluable gift of experience.

The High Costs:

Despite the benefit of co-curricular activities, access to school sports, clubs and other opportunities are contingent on paying fees to support the running of the sport or club. The majority of high schools require their students to purchase a “student activity card” and the monies raised go towards paying for extracurricular activities (often through an unwritten understanding between principals, teachers and students’ councils). These activity-card fees are increasingly prevalent and increasingly costly, and they present a barrier to participation, particularly amongst students from lower socio-economic brackets.

The advocacy group People for Education estimates that the number of schools charging athletic activity fees was over 77% in 2007, up from 61% in 2000.⁴ A summary survey of student activity card costs from various school boards across the province

² Schenk, Colleen. “Extracurricular Activities”. Ontario Public School Boards’ Association letter to Hon. Kathleen Wynne, Minister of Education: 31 October 2008, pg. 1.

³ Milton, Penny. *Imagine a school...Video Production*. The Canadian Education Association - L’association canadienne d’éducation: 2007, pg. 12.

⁴ Kidder, Annie & et al. “Fees and Fundraising” pamphlet from “The Annual Report on Ontario’s Public Schools 2007”. People for Education: 2007, pg. 3.

places an approximate value for the card at 35\$, but the fees can be as high as 85\$.⁵ However, this fee is merely a start-of-year levy and in no way covers the costs of extracurricular activities, or the cost borne by a student throughout the year.

In fact, through a comprehensive study of its own secondary schools, the Simcoe County District School Board found a surprising range in activity fees. Students were asked to pay anywhere from 10\$ to 55\$ for a student activity card. These monies would be funneled into clubs and teams to help offset their costs, but even still students were asked to pay an additional 10\$ to 455\$ for sports, with unspecified costs for clubs and band.⁶ Even if the range is caused by the geographic variations in the board there is still much to be explained by the variance evident within, for example, the city of Barrie itself.

Moreover, People for Education also estimates that the costs of secondary school activity fees have increased by over 50% since 2001.⁷ These fees include such items as a student activity card, athletic costs, club membership, tournament travel costs and other so-called “optional” fees.

No Oversight:

No provincial or board policy governs these fees adequately. It seems that individual clubs and teams are paying costs at random with no central authority ensuring the best possible price, either at the school or the board level. Without Ministry (and, in most cases, board) funding to run these programmes, schools are charging students to participate, with the fee and additional costs calculated by a team-by-team or club-by-club basis.

There also appears to be no mechanism for students to “buy in bulk” and reduce their costs if they participate in multiple activities. Students with the financial backing necessary to participate in a variety of extracurricular activities may face costs in the 1000\$ range over the course of the year. To be athletic or artistic in Ontario’s schools costs money. Perversely, a student is penalised for doing well in a sport because each tournament has a separate cost; thus, if a student wins at regionals and hopes to move on to provincials, a financial penalty is incurred. This practice can serve to discourage or impede excellence in extracurricular activities.

Barrier to Equity and Excellence:

Evidence shows that students from lower socio-economic brackets are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities, in part because of these high costs.⁸

Of great concern to student trustees is whether students will miss out because of their financial situation. The Ottawa Social Planning Council notes that the presence of

⁵ Dogra, Nupur. “Extracurricular Fees Vary Across the Province: Memo to the Ontario Student Trustees’ Association (OSTA-AECO) Policy Committee” (unpublished): 19 October 2008, pg., 16-17.

⁶ McAulay, Carol & et al. “Report No. CS-D-18: Secondary School Activity Fees”. Simcoe County District School Board: 14 November 2007, pg. 2.

⁷ Kidder, Annie & et al. “Fees”, pg. 3.

⁸ Willams, J. D. & et al. “What did you do in school today?” The Canadian Education Association - L’association canadienne d’éducation: forthcoming national report.

fees in secondary schools is a barrier to including low-income students in schools, giving students unable to afford extracurricular fees the feeling that they “didn’t belong”.⁹

The Canadian Education Association’s “Agenda for Youth” documents how “disengagement from secondary school...is a significant source of inequity in Canadian society...because disengagement is disproportionately experienced by students living in poverty”.¹⁰ Milton and Dunleavy further suggest, “effective learners take responsibility for their own learning”,¹¹ suggesting that extracurricular activities allow students to direct themselves in a way that is successful to student engagement because it allows students to take ownership of their education.

Ideally, school sports can serve as a way to foster school community and introduce excellence in athletics and teamwork to students unable to afford expensive private programmes. Arts extracurriculars, similarly, open students’ minds to their own potential. However, with a diverse range of fees guarding access to these necessary education horizons, the question arises: is our education equitable?, because it certainly isn’t entirely free.

Addressing the Problem:

School boards are trying to solve the problem. The Simcoe County District School Board is investigating its fees and hoping to achieve standardisation through a study occurring this academic year. The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board has mandated clear communication on funding-request forms to help direct those families with lower incomes to assistance. Many boards have also adopted measures to have equitable access to field trips, such as a visit to a museum.

A report of the Saskatchewan School Boards’ Association, “Fees, Fundraising and Fairness - A Guide for Schools” (2003), suggests that clear communication, consistency across schools and a fee waiver for students without the family income necessary to pay are needed provisions for any school using extracurricular activity fees. According to a survey, however, it appears the guidelines have not been implemented to the extent envisioned by the paper.¹² Nonetheless, the report and the two Ontario boards are at the forefront in seeking to address this barrier to equitable education.

However, this problem needs to be addressed through concerted effort across the province to achieve equity for students, and to improve student success.

⁹ Social Planning Council of Ottawa. “The Cost of Attending Elementary and Secondary School: School Fees Bulletin”. Ottawa: August 2007, pg. 4.

¹⁰ Dunleavy, Jodene & Milton, Penny. “Student Engagement for Effective Teaching and Deep Learning”. *Education Canada*. Fall 2008: Vol 48, no 5, pg. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹² Rodgers, Luke. “Canadian Education Association School Fees Memo to the OSTA-AECO Policy Committee” (unpublished): 11 December 2008, p. 2.

Recommendations:

Short-Term (2009-2010):

- I. The Ministry must work with students and school boards to clearly define what an "extracurricular activity" is in a system of education that relies on experiential learning.
- II. Each school board should undertake a study, similar to the one noted by the Simcoe County DSB, to understand the fees their students are asked to pay.
- III. From this study, school boards should bring in a standard fee within their jurisdiction to ensure equity. This standard can be achieved by creating an ombudsman within boards' finance departments to track fees and ensure schools are paying the most competitive price.
- IV. Moreover, all requests for money must be communicated by means of a "fee-request form" and the form must specify that there are alternative means for those students unable to afford the fee. School boards, with Ministry support, need to develop benevolence funds to ensure any student can participate in the extracurriculars they desire, regardless of family income, as an "Every Child Plays" programme.

Long-term (2010-2012):

- I. The Ministry must work with its partners in other ministries (e.g. Children and Youth Services), non-profit community organisations, school boards and other stakeholders to ensure effective, affordable community use of schools for sports and club programmes.
- II. Furthermore, working with these partnerships, the Ministry should assume responsibility for the funding of extracurricular activities as a means to empower students to lead their own learning through "ownership education". With a relatively standard fee within boards, the Ministry must begin funding to phase out student activity fees, including by funding equipment renewal (e.g. sport uniforms, musical instruments, etc), and by reinstating transportation funding. Changes to legislation to ban these fees in schools should also be proposed.

Conclusion:

We must reach every student. Extracurricular activities are a key component of a successful education. To achieve equity, the Ministry and school boards need to gain control of this problem, institute measures to address the needs of students from poor homes and create a standardised fee system. A better funding formulae will also provide cash needed to buy new equipment and breathe life into extracurricular activities. Achieving a standard, clearly defined fee should be the first step, with the eventual goal of removing fees to extracurricular activities in mind for the long term. The experiential education that extracurricular activities provide is a necessary part of a system that allows students to be engaged in education they feel is theirs to own and appreciate. Students must have equitable access to all school activities. We must reach every student.

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