

# School boards ‘blindsided’ as Ford government slashes program funding

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The Ford government has cut millions in funding for programs that provide after-school jobs for needy teens, classroom tutors for kids, “student success” supports for racialized youth as well as a project focusing on Indigenous issues, the Star has learned.

The province’s 72 school boards received emails late Friday with the list of programs to be cut or that will see funding reduced, and have been scrambling all weekend to figure out the financial impact, given the specialized grant money was promised by the previous Liberal government last March and may have already been spent.

Not all boards necessarily run each of the axed programs, and it may take weeks before each is able to clarify how it will impact students.

“I have serious concerns,” said Maria Rizzo, chair of the Toronto Catholic District School Board.

“I’m sick to my stomach because I’m afraid of the steps that we’ve taken on poverty, on Indigenous education, and even in the Focus on Youth program – we’ve hired our kids, in the most vulnerable school communities, in the neediest neighbourhoods, just to give them a leg up.”

A spokesperson for Minister of Education Lisa Thompson said Saturday that such funds must be “better managed so that they have the greatest impact on students.”

The EPO grant — which is taking a \$25 million hit — “has a long track record of wasteful spending, overspending and millions of dollars of unfunded commitments,” said Kayla Iafelice.

“We have performed a thorough review of the EPO Fund to ensure that it better aligns with the needs and priorities of Ontario parents, teachers and students while respecting taxpayer dollars,” she said via email.

For this school year, the EPO (Education Programs — Other) will be \$400 million.

Toronto District School Board Chair Robin Pilkey said staff were called into work Saturday to have a look at the numerous emails and attachments sent by the government about the EPO grants – which fund “other” education programs that are typically tied to government priorities and initiatives, and separate from general education grants.

“I would hope that we are not going to be penalized in the middle of the year,” Pilkey said. The government “told people in March that they would get all these EPO grants, and now it’s December.”

“At this point, we don’t have any idea what the dollars are that are attached” to the cancelled programs in the Toronto board, she added. “The information is not great at this point – but there seems to be about 10 that they’re cancelling.”

“Right now, we’re not sure if it’s raising any alarm bells. We’re still trying to figure it out,” she said Saturday.

“I think it could have been done better, and I think the information the boards could have received could have been a lot clearer,” she also said. “I think until we can figure out the exact amount of money, there will be concerns.”

The timing, however, “is bizarre to me,” Pilkey added.

Rizzo said the government only just wrapped up its widespread public consultations on the education system on Saturday, and she would have expected the ministry to listen to what parents want before making such decisions.

“I am truly blindsided by this,” she added.

Friday’s email from the Ministry of Education, obtained by the Star, says it is “committed to supporting our students, so they have the skills to succeed in school, and in life,” but also that “one of the government’s top priorities is making life more affordable for individuals and families – while restoring trust, transparency and accountability to Ontario’s finances.”

It notes the provinces \$14.5 billion deficit “and that it “requires substantial transformation for the province to return to a balanced budget. This means that Ontario needs to modernize the way education is funded and make sure that precious tax dollars are having the greatest impact in the classroom.”

Rizzo said the Toronto Catholic board’s international languages instruction is safe, for this year – though noting funding was cut in half after the Progressive Conservative government took office, dropping from \$6 million to \$3 million. “Now we have a deficit,” she said.

However, because the government had only been in office for 20 days when the board learned of the cutback, she blames the bureaucracy.

“I’m not going to blame the government for doing something they didn’t even know they did,” she added.

Focus on Youth is a program that funds part-time positions for students who live in needy neighbourhoods to work with youth, and was started by the Liberals after a summer of deadly violence involving Toronto youth.

The summer program will continue, but the after-school one will not.

“Believe me when I say to you, it’s a great program,” Rizzo said.

The government’s intentions are not clear, and these cuts “affect schools and parents and communities and kids. Wouldn’t you want to be open and transparent?”

In an email to Toronto public board trustees, obtained by the Star, Director of Education John Malloy said the province will continue to provide funding for the Focus on Youth summer program, updates to broadband, human rights and equity advisers, after school skills and development programs and other mental health and math supports.

Grants were cancelled for tutors in the classroom, student success leaders for racialized students, Indigenous-focused collaborative inquiry, and support for daily physical activity for elementary and secondary students, as well as a program that is for “ensuring equitable access to post-secondary education.”

The Toronto board says such initiatives as community use of schools, Indigenous student leadership, as well as “parent reaching out” grants were not mentioned.

In the Peel District School Board, staff were working to figure out what the changes mean.

“Finance and other Peel District School Board staff are currently reviewing information received from the Ministry of Education on Friday,” said Director of Education Peter Joshua in a statement to the Star.

“It will take some time to analyze and identify the impacts of the ministry’s funding decisions on programs and initiatives planned for the 2018-19 school year. When we’ve determined these impacts, we will communicate them to those who are affected by the changes in funding, including staff, students and families,” Joshua said.

The government memo says it has “carefully reviewed all ministry programs – including all transfer payments – and the government is now focused on making the necessary decisions to reduce spending wherever possible. At the same time, Ontario is making sure that students have what they need to feel safe, supported, and be successful in school.

“At this time, the government has not made any decisions regarding the 2019-20 fiscal year. However, the government will keep balancing the budget as a top priority, and will continue to communicate with you in a timely and transparent manner.”

NDP Education Critic Marit Stiles said “these cuts are going to be deeply felt by children in classrooms. For Doug Ford to take the axe to our kids’ schools is inexcusable.”

Stiles, a former Toronto school board trustee, said “our children need more opportunities and resources — not fewer.”

The education minister’s office said the EPO funding decisions were based on whether projects “provided direct support to students in the classroom” and if they could be “delivered in a more cost-effective mechanism” and had “successful outcomes in the past.”