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Ontario Cuts to English as a Second Language

There are now more than 8,000 English as a Second Language (ESL) learners from kindergarten through high school in the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. Over the last 20 years, as the ESL student population has grown, programs have been developed to meet the needs of these students.

A strong ESL program is the cornerstone of public education in a culturally diverse community. Since the amalgamation in 1998 of the two public boards, Carleton and Ottawa, the newly-formed Ottawa-Carleton District School Board has had to struggle to maintain its ESL programs in the face of increasingly restrictive funding requirements imposed by the provincial Ministry of Education. Each year, there has been a reduction in the amount of ESL support. This year has been no exception, and next year's ESL budget will be even smaller.

This reduced funding is not due to the decisions of the local Board, whose authority to raise money for essential programs was taken away when Bill 160 became law in Ontario. The Board, although supportive of ESL programs, has been forced to make these continuing cuts because of the provincial government's new funding model, which came into effect in September 1999.

The Ministry of Education has devised a complex formula for ESL which essentially grants funding only for children who have arrived in Ontario directly from specified non-English-speaking countries within the last three years.

The government also claims that it provides ESL funding for children born in Ontario who speak their mother tongue during their preschool years. The reality is that school boards receive only a minuscule amount for these children because the government has insisted upon using results from the 1991 and 1996 Canada Census. The Census data must be deemed unreliable due to flawed methods of information-gathering, in addition to being seriously out of date. A far more accurate picture of the true numbers of the thousands of non-English-speaking children who begin school would be provided to the government if it used the data collected by boards of education at kindergarten intake time. This proposal has been made repeatedly to the Ministry of Education, but it has refused to change this part of the funding equation.

In establishing this ill-conceived funding arrangement, the provincial government has made two fundamental errors.

First, it has failed to acknowledge the reality of the language learning process. Research by Dr. James Cummins of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, among others, has shown that children need from five to seven years to achieve proficiency in academic English skills. Young learn-

ers usually acquire conversational fluency within two years. The ability to read and write on an equal footing with English-speaking peers, however, takes much longer to achieve.

Second, the provincial government's funding formula has failed to identify properly *all* the children who need ESL support. As described above, the model doesn't begin to reflect the true number of the thousands of children who were born in Ontario but speak another language at home. The vast majority of these children remain uncounted, by government methods, and therefore unfunded. A prime example of this problem is Cambridge Street Community School in downtown Ottawa, where 82 percent of the 325 students have been identified as needing ESL help. Yet only 47 of the 269 ESL students qualify for support under the new formula for immigrants. [1]

Other students who have been ignored by the formula include First Nations children who speak a native language at home, as well as immigrant students who first lived in Quebec and learned French before coming to Ontario. In fact, all ESL students whose families move to Ontario from any other province are ineligible for funding if they have been in Canada more than three years.

Additionally, many students arrive in Ontario after having been out of school for several years. They may have fled from a country mired in the political turmoil of war or have spent several years in a refugee camp with no schooling. They may have been severely traumatized by their experiences before coming to Ontario. A newly-arrived young immigrant immediately dived under his school desk when his Ottawa teacher flicked the classroom lights for attention. At home in Bosnia, that signal meant that bombs were imminent, and that all students must take cover. Immigrant and refugee ESL students who have had inadequate or interrupted schooling, and those who have suffered trauma, require considerably more time to develop literacy skills in English and settle into Canadian culture than the three-year deadline permitted by the government.

In short, and not surprisingly, according to the narrow constraints of the provincial funding formula, only 40 percent (3,626) of the 8,783 students currently needing ESL support qualify under the new formula. [2]

It seems that what the provincial government had in mind with the implementation of this harshly-defined funding formula has very little to do with the well-being of children and everything to do with saving money.

ESL was the program hardest hit in the budget passed by the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board at the end of March. The Board chopped the ESL program by $2.8 million for the academic year 2000-2001. Although the original proposal to cut $3.8 million was reduced by a last-minute infusion of $1 million from the province, the final cut is severe and disappointing. It represents the continuing erosion of ESL programs.

The immediate result is the loss of 43 ESL teaching positions (30 elementary and 13 secondary). Thus, there will be 80 elementary teaching positions instead of the current 110, and just 17 secondary positions, down from 30. This drop represents a 30 percent reduction in the total number of elementary and secondary teaching positions for next year. The issue is not jobs (ESL teachers will be reassigned to other teaching responsibilities); it is the effect of the cuts on ESL learners in the public school system. When ESL programs are reduced, the implications are significant and far-reaching.

All students are entitled to equal access to the public school system, no matter where they were born or how long their families have lived in Ontario. An ESL learner who is unable to understand and master the language of instruction at school is at risk for becoming a marginalized member of Canadian society. Poor school performance leads to a higher likelihood of dropping out, with consequent heavy costs to society. Higher educational and career opportunities remain closed to ESL learners who are denied access to the training they need to learn English.

In the regular classroom, teachers must try to meet an ever-widening spectrum of students' needs without the benefit of additional support every

time special programs are taken away. Moreover, the progress of English language learners is compromised when there are fewer ESL classes to offer support. The students most likely to lose out are not the beginners, but the fluent speakers who still need to master reading and writing in English. It is harder for these students to catch up when they are fully integrated into mainstream classrooms before they are able to work at grade-level with their classmates.

Why does the Ontario Ministry of Education put in place with one hand a demanding curriculum which requires every student to meet designated high standards and then, with the other hand, limit the very programs that will enable ESL learners to acquire the language skills they need to achieve these expectations?

In a strong reaction to the increasing ravages of the unjust funding formula, local community members have become advocates for ESL parents, giving a voice to those who remain silent because of language barriers or unfamiliarity with avenues for bringing about change in Canadian society. Teachers, parents, members of community groups like the Ottawa-Carleton Immigrant Services Organization with its Multicultural Liaison Officers and the Community Council for Ethnocultural Equity, among others, recently have involved themselves wholeheartedly in fighting the government's funding policy.

Two special delegations made presentations to the trustees prior to the passing of the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board Budget. The first, by Anita Miller, School Council Chair, and Cecily Liu, OAC Bell High School student and former ESL learner, brought more than 100 concerned parents, students and citizens out to the Board meeting on March 6 in an overwhelming show of grassroots support for saving ESL programs. On March 20, the President of the Ottawa-Carleton Immigration Services Organization, Mitch Kitagawa, and Executive Director, Nancy Worsfold, made a further powerful presentation on behalf of ESL programs. The media also have given local ESL issues some coverage.

In addition to these high-profile events, many committed individuals have been e-mailing, faxing and writing their MPPs, Premier Harris and Education Minister Ecker about their extreme dissatisfaction with current funding arrangements for ESL and the urgent need for change. The letter campaign, in renewed form, will continue as a means of remaining a perpetual thorn in the government's side until concrete and just action is taken.

School Councils are now becoming more deeply involved as lobbyists for ESL children's rights. It is hoped that local Teachers' Federations also will do their share in lobbying the government. Networking between members of Teachers of English as a Second Language (TESL) Ottawa and TESL Ontario in Toronto is beginning to flourish. They are building connections with each other and with other like-minded organizations to pool their resources, experiences and efforts in order to make a bigger impact on government policy-makers.

Our vital concern now is to persuade the government to rewrite the funding formula for ESL. Despite the extra $1 million to the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board for ESL, the fact remains that nearly $3 million have been removed from the ESL program for the coming year. The current procedure of making annual pleas to local Boards of Education at budget time continually relegates the vital ESL program to *ad hoc* status.

It is interesting to consider the meaning of the unexpected arrival of that extra $1 million from the coffers of the provincial government (along with additional funds for special education and other programs). The amount for ESL appears to have been the government's attempt to compensate for a dawning realization that thousands of children have fallen outside the current funding formula. Perhaps the 'letter campaign' has, indeed, been instrumental in promoting this insight.

But sudden 'gifts' of inadequate amounts cannot replace a well-formulated plan for stable and sufficient funding of ESL programs. This plan must be arrived at through a consultative approach between the Ministry of Education representatives and a knowledgeable and professional committee of experts like the ESL Resource Group of Ontario. The goal for ESL advisors and government policy-makers should be to ensure that every ESL learner

can be fully supported in a variety of ways, depending upon each student's need, along the continuum to full, accelerated and equitable integration. An acceptable and mutually agreed-upon means of identifying and counting ESL students must be worked out between the boards of education and the Ministry of Education.

The words of Dr. Mary Ashworth, who inspired more than 100 ESL teachers during a Professional Development Day last February, are an excellent guide for future action. She encourages teachers and administrators to build a plan for the schooling of ESL children through political action for educational change. In her book, *Effective Teachers Effective Schools*, she says: "It is important to create a vision for politicians to respond to rather than to wait for politicians to take the initiative themselves. Politicians should not be left to make uninformed guesses about what is needed" [Ashworth 2000].

Very simply, learning English is the key to educational success for immigrant and refugee children. ESL professionals have learned to their sorrow what happens to essential ESL programs when they are entrusted to government officials who lack the necessary knowledge, commitment and vision. We must continue to inform and educate the government about that vision, to ensure that a fairly-funded and equitable educational experience for all Ontario ESL learners will become the reality.

Carolyn Bullock

Carolyn Bullock recently retired after 22 years as an ESL teacher with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board and as a University of Ottawa instructor for training ESL teachers.

Endnotes

1. Anita Miller, School Council Chair, Cambridge Street School, ESL Delegation to Ottawa-Carleton District School Board trustees, March 6, 2000.

2. Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. (1999). "Admissions: December 1999 School Report." Ottawa.

Reference

Ashworth, Mary. (2000). *Effective Teachers Effective Schools*. Toronto: Pippin Publishing Corporation.

A similar version of this article will be published in the Spring issue of the TESL OTTAWA NEWSLETTER, April 2000.

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