

2023-24 Budget Town Halls: Wednesday, June 7, 2023 - Questions and Answers

Afternoon Session – 1 to 2 p.m.

Q1: Can we have a list of position cuts and schools? Affected schools have been quiet about this and we need to be (accurately) informed.

A1: This information will come directly from schools. Schools are aware of the positions that they will have for next year (compared to this year). Sometimes it's based on enrolment. If enrolment has gone up or down, then you may see an increase or decrease in staff, which would have nothing to do with budget reductions or additions.

Q2: Could you please explain why/how a VP can be removed from an elementary school?

A2: We all recognize the importance of vice-principals in schools. There are a number of factors that were considered when allocating VPs, including enrollment, but also the types of needs at the school. The 38.5 VPs that were added two years ago did not exist in our schools at that time, despite our enrolment being higher than it currently is. With the addition of 28 VPs back to the budget for next year, the TDSB will actually have more VPs than it did 3 years ago.

Q3: How do schools access the Math Recovery Plan and Early Reading intervention funding? What is the criteria?

A3: The Ministry will be determining what schools should have these supports. We have not received this information from the Ministry yet. Once we receive it, we will be able to start allocating these resources accordingly.

Q4: How many salaries are centrally-assigned positions that do not work directly with students? For example, what is the number of centralized principals, teachers in positions that do not work directly in school, etc. What percentage of salaries are centrally-assigned and has this increased in the past 3 years? Have those positions been kept despite the urgent need for staff in schools?

A4: Approximately 19% of our salaries and benefits go to our facilities, administration and other central staff. These positions have decreased or remained the same over the last couple of years.

Q5: Can you please describe the process by which the Ministry determines the GSN and PPF? Is there any collaboration with the TDSB? Or is it simply presented to the TDSB as a dictate? Is this process codified in a specific law or charter?

A5: The funding model was changed to a formula driven model a number of years ago in order to equitably fund education across the province. For the most part, there are opportunities before the GSN comes out for consultation with school boards, trustees and the public. Once the GSN is released, there's no back and forth between any of the boards and the Ministry. The number is what it is, and then our enrollment determines exactly how much we receive.

Q6: What type of roles constitute the increased safety spending? Educational assistants or something else?

A6: There are several roles including School-Based Safety Monitors, Social Workers, and Child and Youth Workers.

Q7: Question about SIP funding applications - Does this include students in ISP classes, like Behavioural and ASD classes?

A7: It would include all of our students with special education needs that receive support from two or more adults. We will use the data from all of our sites and classes that support students with special education needs and the ratios of staff to students that we have in those classes to determine the eligible claims.

Q8: Will there be cuts to PSS staff, specifically speech and language pathologists and social workers? If so, how many per learning centre?

A8: Aside from the elimination of COVID Learning Recovery Funding by the Ministry, we have not made any reductions in any areas of PSS. However, COVID Learning Recovery Funding did include Child and Youth Workers, Child and Youth Counsellors and Social Workers.

Q9: Under POD, which schools would be closed and has there been a projection made for future student growth based on residential development? There are some schools that are severely overcrowded (like Wedgewood). How can you close schools when you have severely overcrowded ones?

A9: Right now, there is a moratorium by the Ministry of Education that does not allow us to close schools. In the example of Wedgewood, enrolment is higher than capacity so there are a number of portables at the school. In cases like this, we work through Ministry processes when they allow us to be able to ask for additional funding for either a new school, if possible, or an addition to the school. And then working with our Planning department, we also look at boundaries and other schools nearby and see if anything can be done. In certain situations, when there are new developments, you may see signs that say if you move into the area, you may not be able to attend the specific neighbourhood school due to capacity issues. Accommodation reviews are somewhat dictated by the Ministry, but are also determined a lot by public input. Our Secondary Program Review strategy, which is posted on the website, identifies the secondary program areas where we would be looking at doing pupil accommodation reviews once we are allowed.

Q10: How do we get the government to repay the TDSB for Covid-19 related expenses?

A10: Trustees have appealed to the government through letters to the Minister and their local MPPs to request that the Government repay the TDSB for approximately 70 million dollars in COVID-19 related expenses. However, this was not agreed to by the Ministry.

Q11: Can income be generated through renting empty schools to outside agencies/businesses?

A11: We permit our facilities after school and on weekends on a routine basis to community organizations.

Q12: Are there unallocated funds available at the Ministry that could be released to help alleviate this budget shortfall?

A12: We have not received any indication of additional funding. Through the ongoing advocacy of Trustees and staff, we have been asking similar questions and looking for additional assistance for TDSB specific issues.

Q13: Can you please explain what a School Based Safety monitor is? Is that like a security guard?

A13: School-Based Safety Monitors are staff within our secondary schools who monitor the hallways, develop relationships with students, get to know the school, see who's coming and going. It is a unique position at TDSB secondary schools.

Q14: Is there an update on TDSB Aquatic Staff?

A14: Staff were asked by Trustees to determine how many aquatic instructors would be required to bring programming back to the original level, and the answer is approximately six staff (approximately \$400,000). Trustees are considering this as part of the overall budget conversation/approval. So nothing has been added back at this time, but everybody is aware of what it would take, and it will be considered as part of the overall process.

Q15: Is the board happy with this proposed budget?

A15: I don't think any of us are necessarily happy with it. We are pleased that we've been able to reach the goals outlined in the deficit recovery plan. But we have, for a number of years, appealed for sustainable, predictable funding. Generally, we're doing the very best under difficult circumstances. We have put options in front of the Board that get us to where we need to be with as minimal impact on students and programs as possible.

Evening Session – 7 to 8 p.m.

Q1: In light of recent drownings in the GTA, why is the TDSB cutting swim programs for September 2023 and how does the TDSB feel about this knowing that swim skills are life saving?

A1: At this point, the idea to reintroduce some instructors has been introduced at the Committee level, but it has not yet passed at Board. Staff originally brought forward a recommendation that we thought would bring us down to 80 aquatic instructors based on the idea that school pools are routinely closed for repairs and maintenance. Upon further review, it was determined that there would be a marginal impact on programming. As a result, there is a recommendation to reinstate six aquatic instructors that would ensure that all schools have full programming next year.

Q2: Sources of revenue include permits and leases. School pools often lease use to external swim programs. I'm concerned that reduced swim programming in which students get swimming every other week means that students who attend that very school will have less access to the school pools whereas these external organizations use the school pool more. Is that what school pools were built for? To serve these external organizations more than the students who attend the school?

A2: The motion that has been brought forward is to reintroduce six additional instructors to maintain the same level of programming as this year. That still has to be approved by Board.

Q3: Staffing at 87%. It's certainly our greatest asset, but we are getting to the point where that's all we got. The teachers, "boots on the ground," need more tools to do our job. What can the TDSB do to raise more money or get the government to understand that without a boost in funding, the Board commits itself to a downward spiral of reactive measures rather than proactive and forward thinking.

A3: Our Trustees have passed various motions over recent weeks and months, and quite frankly years, about the need for predictable and sustainable funding. Recently, we have appealed to the Government to cover approximately \$70 million in COVID-19 related costs, in addition to gaps in areas such as Special Education. It's also our responsibility as staff to ensure that we're being effective with the funds that we do have and ensuring that we're improving our programs and our delivery models as technology and program needs change.

Q4: Why is school safety not a budget driver?

A4: School safety is a budget driver. It's student and staff safety, mental health and well being.

Q5: How much does the TDSB research department cost?

A5: We don't have exact costs but it would be part of overall central administrative costs.

Q6: Why was a 1:1 device policy implemented?

A6: It was introduced given the importance of technology in education today, and to make sure that we're making the playing field more even so that money is not a barrier to accessing technology. The computers being bought this summer will continue to be bought for next year. It's next summer's computers that will be paused to address some of our budget challenges.

Q7: I'm also curious why the deficit recovery plan is so aggressive and if someone could speak more to that.

A7: As we can't continue to draw on reserves that were depleted during the pandemic, the Ministry is concerned that we do not have funds available for rainy day issues. For example, in your personal finances, if you have extra expenses, like a leaky roof, you may have to use your savings to pay for the repairs. That's what we've been doing through the pandemic. But that means we can no longer use reserves to balance the budget and we must replenish our reserves so we can draw on them if needed.

Q8: Can you please explain your comment that the reductions in aquatics staffing had "marginal" impacts? While staff selected 8 schools, the impact to these schools, their programs and students is significant.

A8: Initially, we anticipated that there would be marginal impacts. But then after further review of the situation, there are larger impacts. Now a proposal has come back for six additional aquatics instructors which would maintain the current programming.

Q9: The principal and vice principal of our school are split between 2 schools. We have been told that we have lost half a Vice principal for next year. This means our school will have one quarter of a vp. Our school is a model school. We also have 3.5 teachers for 4 grade 4/5/6 classes, meaning kids are dispersed into different classes and lose continuity and sense of belonging. Does this happen all across the board?

A9: It really depends on what it is impacting this school: the reduction in the COVID-19 recovery funding, which did impact some numbers of VPs and teachers. But since this is very specific, we aren't able to provide any more information. I would suggest you talk to your principal or superintendent to get more information about the unique situation at your school. We try to allocate our resources as effectively as possible to support the needs of our students, staff and the system. This can be challenging because we have limited resources but we try to address the most urgent needs.

Q10: Is there a concern that those schools that are deemed not at full capacity that the ministry would take those schools and sell off to go towards funding deficits?

A10: The TDSB has a Long-Term Program and Accommodation Strategy that outlines how we address capacity issues at schools. The Ministry currently has a moratorium on school closures in place so at this point, we don't have any indication that this is on the horizon. However, we're hopeful that it'll be lifted soon because we want to offer viable programs in our schools and small schools can't offer the full breadth of programs that a regular, large school can.

Q11: Re: Swimming Cut Backs. Why are we not setting our programming expectations first and then setting our budgets based on programming, rather than the other way around?

A11: The motion put forward by Trustees is about maintaining the current programming in place this year.

Q12: Will there be aquatics programs for students with developmental disabilities? These programs were in place prior to the pandemic.

A12: We believe they would be if that was part of our regular programming. But this would have to be confirmed by Special Education and aquatic staff.

Q13: Our kids are already struggling with packed classes and lack of support. Really hard to see what is happening.

A13: What you've heard outlined today is various cost adjustments that will impact students and the classroom to the least amount possible. The point of any reductions is to meet our budget demands, while reducing the impact to the greatest extent possible on students. We always work with our Academic colleagues to develop a plan that provides the best support for our students.

Q14: Could you speak to the impact of reducing staff on school climate and the association costs of LTD and sick leave? Relatedly has the boards policy on school safety considered the impact on staff leaves and associated costs?

A14: This is something we've been looking at for a number of months. In certain cases, we have redeployed central staff to help mitigate these issues. It's something we're watching very closely with our Employee Services department and we're working on additional strategies.

Q15: According to Mr. Craig, the special education's spending is greater than the funding. From my, the special education teacher, there exists a substantial and serious difference: funding in special education is limited. Could the Board facilitate a special meeting to further discussion? Or, please give the response to my concern?

A15: Special Education spending is greater than funding, and has been for many years. We don't believe that the Ministry provides enough money to cover Special Education support for students so we use money intended for other things to go above and beyond. I would suggest that you attend a meeting of the TDSB's Special Education Advisory Committee. They deal with this with staff on a regular basis, and have discussions around program impacts and provide advice.

Q16: What is the impact of budget cuts on specialized schools?

A16: There are no cuts specifically for specialized schools. We are looking to ensure that our class sizes across the system are as close to the standards as possible.