

SPC Community Bulletin

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The Cost of Attending Elementary and Secondary School

The Social Planning Council of Ottawa (SPC) is working on a social inclusion project for families with children under 6 called "Kids and Community". Our goal is to improve inclusion in early learning, healthy development and the transition to school. We are working with low income families, Aboriginal families, families of diverse backgrounds, and families where a parent is Deaf or has a disability. In partnership with parents and organizations in Ottawa and with the Renfrew County Child Poverty Action Network, we are building parent-community partnerships and encouraging policy and program improvements to increase inclusion for all families. The Ottawa "Kids and Community" project is one part of a larger project led by the Social Planning Network of Ontario www.spno.ca.

This is the third of four information bulletins on inclusion issues identified by parents in the project. 200 parents in 23 focus groups told us what was working well and what was getting in the way of their role of supporting their children's early learning and transition into school. This bulletin examines the challenge of school fees, including school supplies, and identifies what steps we can each take to improve the situation.

What We Heard

Parents in the Kids and Community focus groups had a very serious concern with the growing cost of school fees in elementary and secondary schools. Parents shared several types of fees:

1. Fees related to their children attending classes, including fees for courses, course materials, labs, mandatory agendas and transportation for older children.
2. Costs for supplies, whether the parent buys them from a store or pays a fee to the school for supplies which the school purchases for all the children.
3. Fees for activities significantly related to course work (such as a class trip to a museum).
4. Fees for activities which enhance the learning but are not core curriculum, such as a school concert, an arts presentation, sports etc.
5. Fees for incidentals and for fundraising, including pizza days, school photos, book clubs, fundraising activities, etc.

"Elementary school is supposed to be free. When I was in school all I needed was a lunch and clothing. Now it's terrible. A \$50 fee for each child! It's even more for children in high school."

"They want us to chaperone the school trip but I can't even afford for my child to go on the trip."

"My daughter was required to pay for an agenda. I didn't have the money right then. They gave it to her and she started using it. Then, two weeks later, they took it back from her because I still wasn't able to pay."

"I don't think they should be doing pizza days and fundraisers in the school. All the parents get the sheet home. Then you are either going to have to pay it and do without, or swallow your pride and ask for help, or tell the kids you can't afford it and leave them out. It forces us to live beyond our means so we don't have for things that are essential. Things like pizza – leave that for the parents for something special once in a while at home."

"The kids feel the lack of money and are made to feel the lack of money all the time."

What Parents Said in the Focus Groups

Isn't Public Education Paid For By Taxes?

Although public education continues to be funded through taxes, there has been an incremental process of re-defining what is included in "public education" and what is considered an "extra". Across Canada, policy decisions at all levels of government have led to educational funding frameworks which leave school boards facing serious financial challenges. Within broad policy guidelines from Ministries of Education, Boards and individual schools have considerable discretion to move to a more "market based" approach. Costs which were formerly covered within school board budgets are increasingly being downloaded to parent councils and to individual parents. For example, in 2005 / 2006 public schools in Ontario reported fundraising over \$500 million. These funds were used for equipment, activities, property enhancements and staffing (such as lunchtime supervision).³

Provincial education policy is often not clear on where the line is drawn between services provided and "extras". This creates challenges for individual boards and schools, which are left to their own interpretations. In British Columbia, the issue was brought to the B.C. Supreme Court, which made a ruling on Sept. 29, 2006 striking down some provisions of a Ministerial Order Regarding School Fees.

This piecemeal approach across the country on core principles within education policy points to a pressing need for a national public policy debate to clarify what is included in universal and equitable public education, and to determine appropriate funding frameworks to support it.

How Much Are Families Spending?

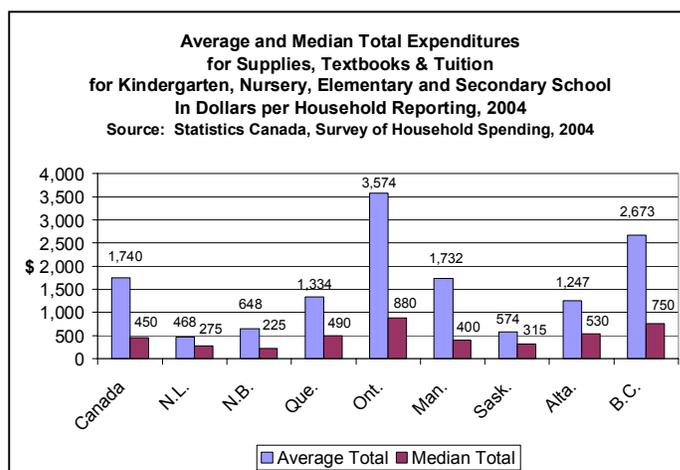
The amount and range of school costs per family varies across each province, school board, school and grade level. Despite variances between schools and individuals, it is clear that the cost of children attending public school has been steadily increasing. Parents in the focus groups were very concerned about the increasing costs to send their children to school.

³ People for Education. Annual Report on Ontario's Public Schools, 2007. Toronto: People for Education, 2007, p. 4.

Each year, Statistics Canada's Survey of Household Spending collects information on how much households spend for a variety of goods and services.⁴ The figures include expenditures for supplies, textbooks and tuition fees at the kindergarten, nursery, elementary and secondary school level. The data includes households within the public and the private educational systems. There are significant differences between the average and the median, with the biggest differences reflected in the amount of tuition paid.

In 2004, on average, households reporting these expenditures in Canada spent \$1,740 for supplies, textbooks and tuition for kindergarten, nursery, elementary and secondary school. There were very significant differences between provinces. As we see from the following chart, average spending was highest in Ontario (\$3,574) and British Columbia (\$2,673), and lowest in Newfoundland and Labrador (\$468) and Saskatchewan (\$574). Please note that P.E.I. and Nova Scotia are not included in the chart, as data is not available for these provinces.

The median expenditures were significantly less, but still substantial. The national median was \$450. The median for Ontario households was almost twice that, at \$880, while the median for households in New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador were substantially below the national median (\$225 and \$275 respectively).

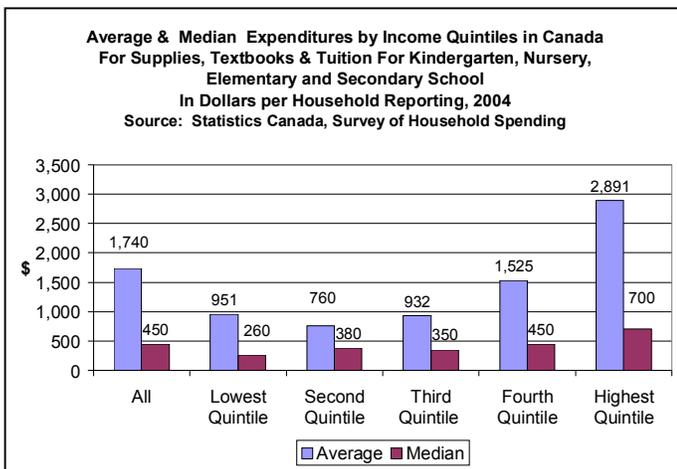


⁴ All data quoted are from Statistics Canada Survey of Household Spending (2004) and reflect figures for households who reported spending on the item.

Low Income Families Particularly Hard Hit by School Fees

All families are affected by the increasing costs of sending their children to public education. As we see from the following chart, households within the highest income quintile spent the most on supplies, textbooks and tuition in 2004 (an average of \$2,891 across Canada). This reflects several factors, including personal choices of the families.

However, low income families face particular hardship. Households across Canada from the lowest income quintile spent an average of \$951 in 2004. In fact, these households spent more, on average than households in either of the next two income quintiles.



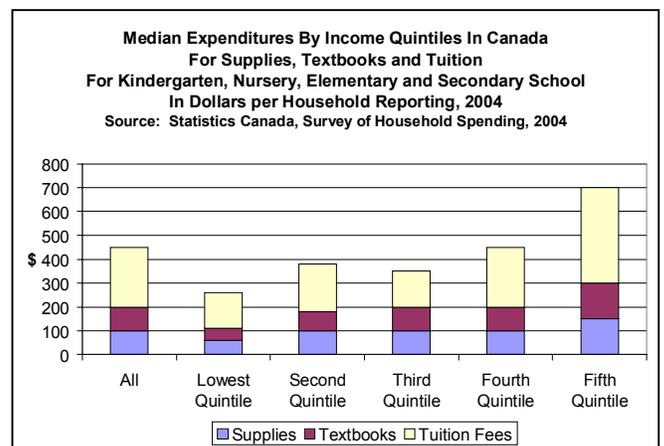
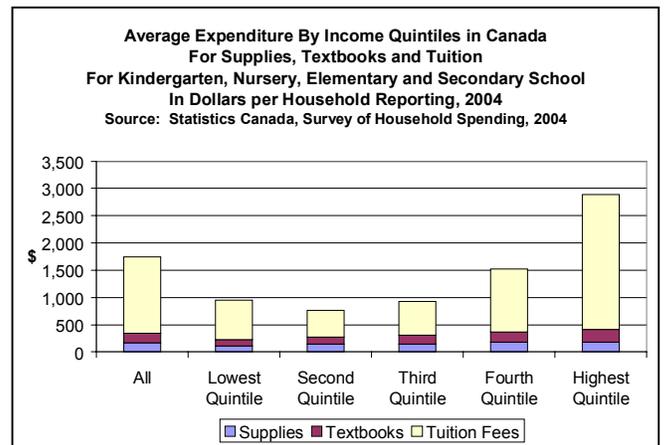
The differences between income quintiles is less dramatic when we look at median expenditures. The median expenditure for households in the lowest quintile was \$260 in Canada – just over half of the national median. The median expenditure for households in the highest income quintile was \$700.

Although the actual amounts paid are lower for households in the lowest income quintile, these amounts represent a greater percentage of their total income. As we see from the following table, for households in the lowest quintile, the average expenditure on tuition, books and supplies represented 6.1% of their income compared to 2% for households in the highest income quintile. The median expenditure for these costs represented 1.6% of the income of households in the lowest quintile compared to 0.7% of the income of households in the highest quintile.

Percentage of Household Income Spent (Before Tax) For Supplies, Textbooks and Tuition For Kindergarten, Nursery, Elementary & Secondary School In Dollars per Household Reporting, 2004 By Income Quintiles

	Average Expenditure as a Percent of Average Income	Median Expenditure as a Percent of Median Income
All Households	2.7	0.9
Lowest Quintile	6.1	1.6
Second Quintile	2.3	1.1
Third Quintile	1.8	0.7
Fourth Quintile	2.0	0.6
Highest Quintile	2.0	0.7

We can see from the charts below, whether looking at average or median expenditures across Canada, there are significant differences in the amount of tuition paid by households. However, tuition is a significant expense even for the lowest income quintiles: with a \$718 average expenditure for tuition and a \$150 median expenditure for tuition. The cost of school supplies is addressed in a separate bulletin.



Conclusions

For many low income families, the growing costs of public education mean they may not have enough money for other basic needs such as food, particularly at the beginning of the school year. This, in turn, affects the voluntary sector, as low income families turn to community agencies for assistance.

Within schools there is increasing pressure on staff to find ways to “do more with less”. Staff are increasingly involved in fundraising initiatives, and in many cases, are contributing from their own pockets to meet expenses. Several school boards have set up a charitable arm to raise funds for schools and families.

There is a pressing need for strategies to mitigate the negative impacts on individual families and schools of the trend to increasing school fees. There are many excellent policies within some individual schools which

ensure that low income families are not stigmatized and low income children have equal access to the educational experience. As a starting point, parents must have clear information on what fees are voluntary, and on subsidy options where fees are not voluntary. Such practices need to be adopted in all schools.

As well, the private sector has a role to play in supporting programs which help low income families and vulnerable schools.

School fees are a key inclusion issue, leading to systemic barriers and unequal access to the educational experience. The issue of school fees goes to the heart of the principle of universal access to public education. It is time for a public discussion on an appropriate funding structure for a universally accessible and equitable education system.

What You Can Do To Help

1. In the school setting, ensure best practices with respect to school fees and other policies which disproportionately affect low income students. Provide parents with clear information on what fees are voluntary and options for subsidies. The Canadian School Boards Association has excellent material on inclusion of low income students.
2. Support charitable programs which provide school supplies for free or at low cost to low income families. You can identify them through your local Community Information Service or donate at Staples stores across Canada.
3. Work with others in the private and non-profit sectors on projects which will increase inclusion in your local schools, particularly schools in more vulnerable neighbourhoods.
4. Inform yourself about education funding formulas and school fees policies at your school Board and Ministry of Education. Contact your school trustee or member of Provincial Parliament to discuss your suggestions.
5. To find out more about these and related issues, we suggest the following websites:
 - Social Planning Council of Ottawa (school fees, inclusion, poverty) www.spcottawa.on.ca
 - People for Education (education policy, funding, school fees and fundraising) www.peopleforeducation.com
 - Canadian School Boards Association (role of schools regarding poverty / inclusion) <http://www.cdnsba.org/publications/publications.php>
 - Renfrew County Child Poverty Action Network (poverty) www.renfrewcountychildpovertynetwork.org
 - Social Planning Network of Ontario (inclusion, education, social issues) www.spno.ca

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The SPC is an independent, non-profit charity working with the community for over 75 years to address social issues and improve quality of life in Ottawa. The Social Planning Council of Ottawa is a United Way funded agency.

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