



# Robin Pilkey

Chair and Trustee, Ward 7, Parkdale-High Park

5050 Yonge Street, 1st Floor  
Toronto, Ontario M2N 5N8

Tel: (416) 395-8787  
Fax: (416) 397-3114

E-mail: robin.pilkey@tdsb.on.ca

May 31, 2019

The Honorable Lisa Thompson  
Minister of Education  
315 Front Street West  
Toronto, ON  
M7A 0B8

Dear Minister Thompson,

Over the last couple of months, your government has imposed significant cuts to education funding and increased class sizes that will directly and negatively impact our students and the programs and services we offer our school communities. To date, the decisions of your government will add approximately \$42.1M to the Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) overall projected budget shortfall for the upcoming school year of \$67.8M.

Your government's funding reductions to the TDSB include:

- \$9.6 M – increased class sizes for Grades 4-8 that we cannot meet because of our collective agreement;
- \$13.4 M – reduction to the Teacher Qualifications and Experience grant;
- \$1.6M – cancellation of Priorities Schools Initiative ;
- \$7.9 M – reduction in funding for Early Childhood Educators; and
- A loss of revenue due to the new provincial surcharge on school board Visa student tuition fees.

When your government decided to increase elementary average class size in Grades 4 to 8, while reducing the number of elementary teachers, it seems highly unlikely that the Ministry of Education was not aware that some school boards had elementary teacher collective agreements that do not permit them to increase average class size.

Consequently, when the Ministry reduced grants to school boards for the coming school year on the basis of fewer elementary teachers, school boards, such as the TDSB, are financially penalized because they are unable to increase class size and reduce teachers, but the grants are still reduced. For the TDSB, this financial penalty amounts to \$9.6 M.

We are at a loss to understand how this provincial decision on class sizes did not take into consideration those school boards whose collective agreements, which on this issue, are negotiated at the central table, do not permit increasing their elementary average class size.

In our view, there should have been a mitigation strategy put in place to account for this situation. Like many of our parents, we do not understand how the government considers it fair or appropriate that some school boards will now have to cut other areas of their budget as a result of not having the ability to implement the Ministry's decision around the elementary teacher reduction/average class size increase.

In addition, the Ontario government has imposed a provincial surcharge on school boards' International (Visa) student tuition fee revenue. At the TDSB, this surcharge will reduce Board revenue by \$2.9M. The only explanation we have been given for this extraordinary decision is that the government is capturing these dollars to cover administrative costs associated with the fees. We are not aware of any administrative support provided by the Ministry of Education for this program and question why the government would choose to tap into the one of very few revenue sources for school boards outside of the grant system.

The TDSB is the largest and most diverse school board in Canada, supporting students and parents from various backgrounds and levels of socio-economic status. The Priority Schools Initiative ('PSI') was a joint project between the TDSB and the Ministry of Education with the aim of making TDSB school spaces more accessible to the community. Its goal is to improve overall student achievement by providing quality, affordable, after-school programs for students and the local community. The 77 priority schools in the TDSB received PSI funding of \$1.6M in 2018-2019, which was considerably less than the \$2.6M that was originally granted. No funding has been allocated for the 2019-2020 school year. The Ministry's decision to cut the PSI appears indifferent to the needs of our economically challenged communities and the importance of keeping our young people off the streets and in safe recreational facilities. Both locally and provincially, we must continue to do all that we can to support our more challenged communities

Over the last number of years, the TDSB has done an extensive analysis of its expenditures and have found efficiencies and revamped departments to ensure we are doing everything we can to maximize the funding we receive. Over the course of the last few months, senior staff, led by Director John Malloy and senior business officials, have been working on detailed reviews of programs, as well as a line by line analysis of our expenditures in order to provide the Trustees with the information they require to meet the challenges of our budget shortfall.

We are faced with difficult decisions. We will have to make cuts that directly and indirectly, negatively affect our classrooms and students. These decisions will not be made lightly. We have been consulting with our students, staff, parents, guardians and

community members to ensure that we make well-informed decisions about where the remaining budget cuts can be made.

As you are aware, school boards must balance their budgets by June 30 and most school boards are now well into their budget decision-making process. The TDSB budget consultation and decision-making process began in March. From March until the end of May, the only information we have had from the Ministry is a series of memorandums, each one resulting in higher funding reductions to the Board.

You were recently quoted as saying, "We're going to be working with our school boards to cut back on the anxiety that has been perpetuated over the last number of weeks because much of it is absolutely premature." If school boards have to balance their budgets at a Board meeting in June, how could the concerns you are hearing across Ontario be considered premature?

If you are serious about working with school boards, including the TDSB, to cut back on the anxiety that has been expressed by students, parents and school boards across Ontario, please consider the following decisions that would support students:

- Commit to listening to the results of the Ministry consultation on secondary school class size and pay close attention to the analysis you are now getting regarding the impacts on programs, course offerings and student supports;
- Put on hold the decision to increase average class sizes in high schools and put on hold the reductions to high school teachers until such time that there is system-wide and school-board-by-school board data on the impact on high school programs and course options and the concern school boards have with regard to the potential negative impact on graduation rates;
- For the 2019-2020 budget year, restore funding for the Teacher Qualifications and Experience Grant that is tied to the high school teacher reduction;
- Compensate boards, including the TDSB, whose collective agreements require a smaller average class size in Grades 4-8 than the average class size level being funded by the Ministry of Education;
- Reverse the new provincial surcharge on International students – a surcharge that is reducing school board revenue;
- Restore Ministry funding of the Priority School Initiative to cover school permit costs in economically challenged communities and ensure the not-for-profit organizations that provide the support for children and youth can continue to operate; and
- Allow the TDSB to incorporate into their budget balancing strategies the ability and flexibility to both use reserves and run a 1% deficit to balance over two years.

Minister, taking the above decisive actions will go a long way to reducing the anxiety of parents, students and staff at the TDSB and across Ontario. If you are truly listening then you must seize the opportunity to reconsider the wisdom of the significant school board budget and teacher reductions you have pursued.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robin Pilkey', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Robin Pilkey, CPA, CA, ICD.D  
Chair, Toronto District School Board