



5 The Cost of a School Day in Public Education: *“They make you think school is free but it is not”.*

Who We Are:

- Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO) Host of the Knowledge Network for Student Well-Being (KNSWB) Equity and Inclusion Community of Practice with a focus on Low-Income Students and Families.

Objectives

- To bring knowledge and awareness of the inequitable and exclusionary experiences of students from low income families to educators at the local level in our communities (teachers, principals, superintendents, trustees).
- To build a base of awareness and commitment among educators, parents and students in our communities that could advocate for systemic change in the education system to end/reduce inequitable and exclusionary treatment of low-income students and families.
- To interrupt biases, assumptions and commonly held misconceptions of low-income students and parents which serve to undermine student achievement, well-being and meaningful parent engagement.

The Cost of a School Day Student Voice Project

The project aimed to ascertain what barriers high school youth from low-income families face in being able to fully participate in school activities and instruction. It was carried out by the Social Planning Network of Ontario's Student Well-Being Community of Practice in partnership with the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton. Funding was provided by the Hamilton Community Foundation. This monograph summarizes the findings of the full report.

The report documents the views of 35 youth, gathered from 5 focus groups and the comments reflect the input of youth as well as other key informants, including: representatives from community service agencies, public health, education and also parents. The findings indicate that youth coming from low-income families face both open and hidden barriers to their full participation in schools. The participants were mainly between the ages of 16 to 18 from a variety of backgrounds including homeless, newcomers and Indigenous youth. They reported on the school practices that they found helpful and made suggestions for change. Youth participants' experience demonstrated the need to change current policy and practices and key informants provided recommendations for action at school, school board, Provincial and Federal government levels.

Learning at School

Youth reported that the costs of supplies needed at school is a financial burden and that when they don't have the right supplies or equipment such as a scientific calculator, they are sometimes treated poorly by the teachers. The Ontario Ministry of Education policy only relates to when a fee can be charged, but does not address what must be provided free. * **Quotes: “It's not right for a teacher to yell at someone because they don't have a pencil and paper; feel depressed for others.” “Teachers pay for things with their own money.”**

School Boards may not always equitably allocate their resources to schools in areas of high poverty. Faced with the high degrees of need, these schools may not be able to offer the same supports that students receive in an area or school, with less needs.

Key informants were aware of the unconscious bias within the school system that reinforces lower expectations of students from low income backgrounds. Applied and locally developed courses are predominately filled by students from lower income families. Students in these courses have less success in Provincial tests than those in academic courses, and they do not qualify students for entrance to university. Fewer youth from low income families go on to college or university. It is important that schools examine their instructional practices to determine whether they are perpetuating student inequities in attainment. The long-term ramifications are lower earning potential throughout one's lifetime.

Dressing for School

- ◆ Clothing is important to youth for many reasons including status, and identity, but it is expensive as youth are paying adult prices for shoes and clothing.
- ◆ Some families can't afford to provide many clothes for their children, so if the school requires uniforms, they should be good quality to stand up to frequent wear and washing.
- ◆ Laundry becomes an issue if families do not have access to hot water, or find laundry facilities expensive.
- ◆ Physical Education classes require special clothing to be worn before students can participate which equals additional costs.
- ◆ Menstrual sanitary products are expensive and some families cannot afford them resulting in some girls not attending school when they have their period.

Quotes:

"Easier if all wear the same clothes and no-one is 'expensive'."

"If want to fit in must wear brand name clothing,"

"Some students are wearing the same clothes every day. Some class rooms smell."

"I am shy to go and get clothes from the clothing closet."

Food at School Canada is the only developed country that does not have a National School Food Program. Providing nutritious food at school can improve achievement. "Researchers have concluded from a Quebec study that school food supplementation is a moderating factor in the association between household food insecurity and scholastic difficulties for adolescents (Roustit et. al. 2009)".

Access to food was a big topic with youth in this study. Many School Boards contract out cafeteria services to companies, sometimes being provided a percentage of the profits for school purposes. Students reported that the food sold at the cafeterias was too expensive.

Quotes:

"Can't function properly if no nutrition during the school day"

"Ashamed if don't have money for school lunch"

Getting to School

In urban areas students from low income families may be late for school as :

- **their families do not own a car;**
- **their families cannot afford bus fare;**
- **they may be expected to help with younger siblings and or do chores at home first;**
- **local bus services are not well coordinated;**
- **they may have inadequate winter clothes for walking in winter weather.**

In urban areas, school boards sometimes provide free bus tickets to eligible students for use on local transit rather than school busses. In addition, Boards may provide additional free bus tickets to some students in low income neighborhoods who do not qualify for regular free transportation, but must still walk several kilometers each way. This is a very inconsistent approach at best, varying from school to school, and based on staff knowing which students require the support.

Students from low income families may have less choice about which schools they attend, missing out on special programs, because of transportation issues. Low income students in effect are restricted to attending only those schools to which they qualify for free transportation.

Low-income families in urban areas are more likely to move frequently in search of affordable housing. When families move, students may have to change schools because they are not eligible for bus transportation to their last school. Changes of schools at the secondary level are disruptive for youth, in losing friends and missing instruction.

Quotes:

"I have to do cleaning and cooking and so I come late to school and miss school work."

"Consistency of provision of free bus tickets needed".

Homework and Wifi Access

- ◆ Homework can be difficult to do without a quiet space to work at home; Conflict between responsibilities at home (cooking, cleaning, caring for younger children) and time for homework
- ◆ Not having access to Wi-Fi was a general concern.
- ◆ Programs that provide access to Wi-Fi and refurbished computers were appreciated but families had to be selected in order to benefit from them.
- ◆ Youth appreciated services at the public libraries and any after-school programs that were accessible.
- ◆ Students noted that the school expects families to have internet at home.
- ◆ Tutoring or extra homework help is needed but usually expensive

Quotes:

"No quiet space to work at home." "Too much family noise." "No light if electricity is off."

"Did not have use of Wi-Fi at night, but need to have it." "Expect everyone to have it." "Get mad if say don't".

School Trips, Clubs and Fun Events—Youth strongly articulated the right to be able to take part in all school events regardless of cost. **Inclusion Matters!**

According to Ministry policy, fees are permissible for any activity, course, material or program not required for graduation. School Trips are commonly financed by fees from parents, grants, school budgets, School Boards' own foundations where they exist, community agencies, and school fundraisers.

Although youth suggested fundraisers as a solution to the cost of school trips, and for other needed items such as school supplies and clothing, there is evidence that schools in low income neighborhoods raise less money from fundraisers than those in wealthier areas perpetuating further inequities. Fundraising also put additional and unnecessary stress on those families who cannot afford to contribute.

Fun school events are often expensive. **The high cost of graduation was mentioned several times.**

Quotes:

"Feel shame if can't go because of the expense."

"If friends go, it's not so good if you are left out because you can't afford it."

Sports and Extra-Curricular Activities

- ◆ **Youth in the focus groups on the whole were not involved in extra-curricular activities or sports.** Only two youth mentioned playing a sport, lacrosse and soccer.
- ◆ Evidence in Hamilton suggests there are large differences in funds raised for athletics between schools that have high needs students and schools with low needs students.
- ◆ **Income plays a big part in whether students participate in sport or other activities.** The school experience for low income students is different than that for students with more income.
- ◆ 87% of secondary schools have student activity fees - up to \$300 per year. A burden for low-income families.

Quotes:

"Joining a team costs money" "Being in a tournament costs money"

"Going to a school sports game costs money."

"Going to a Dance costs money."

Friendships: Are seen as an essential source of support by youth. They commented that in order to have friends, they needed to have money to go out together, or to have a cell phone to fit in or else they could feel left out. Youth may exclude those who appear to have less money than themselves, and this may lead to bullying.

Quotes: *“Have hurt feelings if you don’t have money to go out with friends.” “Feel shame if I can’t go.”*

Stigma, Shame and Bullying: Students go to great lengths to hide their low-income status. This is often referred to as practicing visibility management. They want to avoid the stigma that accompanies being poor. Inclusionary practices require that schools recognize that there are always low-income students in their schools even if they can’t be identified so all practices and decisions must take this reality into account.

Quote: *“Students are not willing to come forward, students are shy: they are made fun of and bullied”*

Recommendations for Change from Students and Stakeholders

Equity and Inclusion

Schools/Boards examine yearly, their equity and inclusion practices/policies and apply an equity lens to the provision of human and other resources and policies such as fundraising, to ensure more equitable approaches.

Ensure that anti-bullying policies are alert to income based bullying and stigma, and that all have specific, measurable, attainable and relevant indicators.

Include the costs of cultural interpretation as an essential tool in those schools’ budgets who have newcomer families or other families who experience language barriers.

Systemic changes are needed by school boards and the Ministry of Education so that all students regardless of income can participate fully in school. Allocate additional resources/funding to schools with large populations of low-income students to remove the financial barriers to full participation in all school activities. Increased funding through **Learning Opportunity Grants could assist with the following:**

Adequate budgets for all school sports, arts and extra-curricular activities so that cost is not a barrier.

Laundry facilities in high schools, available after school and accessible for individual student use.

Provide schools with free menstrual hygiene products for students.

Coordinate with local transit authorities to provide free or reduced student bus cards.

Schools/Boards work closely with Community Partners to support Low-income Students and Families

Apply an equity lens in providing community access to school space before and after school.

Leverage existing relationships with community agencies in high priority areas to enhance and strengthen parent engagement and support opportunities.

Student Nutrition

- ◆ Examine procurement policies and directives with regard to the provision of food to maximize affordability, cultural appropriateness and nutritional value.
- ◆ National School Nutrition Program.

References: For the complete reference list, please refer to the full Report by SPRCH below-

“The Cost of a School Day in Hamilton”. 2019. Judith Bishop, Mariko Bown-Kai, Sandra Khounborinh and Deirdre Pike. Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton. Hamilton.

“The Cost of the School Day”.2015. Sara Spencer, Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland. Glasgow.