



9 Family and Community Engagement

Reading

Settlement Services: Vital Services for Newcomer Families in Ontario

By Jeff Sprang

Last December, the federal government announced reductions in funding to Canada's settlement programs and agencies. The largest share of the federal funding reduction – an estimated \$43 million – was targeted at Ontario's settlement sector. To this day, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association and its member boards are hard pressed to understand why this decision was made.

“There seems to be no correlation between the funding decisions and the efficacy of the programs that are working well for the success of newcomers as they integrate and become major contributors to Canadian society,” says Catherine Fife, president of OPSBA. “We are seeking greater transparency in the process used to make these decisions since they have such a profound effect on the capacity of our system to serve newcomer children and their families.”

As the provincial organization representing more than 1.2 million students and their families, OPSBA says these deep cuts compromise and destabilize school boards' capacity to respond to the needs of newcomers. The \$43-million reduction is in addition to the over \$200 million that was not spent during the five-year life of the Canada-Ontario Immigration Agreement. More alarming for the sector, and for communities, is the threat of additional cuts to the funding envelope in 2012. School boards consider that the collaboration with the federal government that facilitated the establishment of strong and effective services has been undermined.

“For years, our boards have delivered and maintained highly successful settlement programs that help recent immigrants navigate the school system and support them in their access to other services in the community,” says Fife. “The evidence has shown that these programs and services make a measurable difference to students, in their adjustment to and success in Canadian schools.”



A welcoming community and school are necessary for recent immigrants to begin the integration process into their newly chosen home. A network and infrastructure to support newcomer families has been built over many years, and it will be needed to serve the families and students who continue to come to Ontario. A family's needs related to settlement and integration continue for some time after their arrival in Canada. This makes it particularly distressing that funding cuts will undermine vital services such as the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) program, refugee assistance programs, reception centres, cultural interpretation services and other related programs. School boards are facing the elimination of key programs that have proven to be very effective as well as reductions of 15 to 40 percent in funding to other programs.

Twenty-two school boards have the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) program to assist immigrant students and families in Toronto, Durham, Halton, Peel, York Region, Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo, Ottawa, London, Niagara and Windsor. For the past two years, the Upper Grand District School Board has been negotiating for its own SWIS program with Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). With the announced reduction in federal funding, the program will never get off the ground.

In Peel, three innovative We Welcome the World Centres that serve thousands of newcomer students and families were created with CIC funding and direct involvement. The centres provide an amazing one-stop-shopping experience for newcomer families. A team at the centre serves the needs of the arriving family. The family is welcomed and receives an orientation to the Ontario school system; staff who speak their language fully register the children for school. Centres also connect family members to all the resources they need to get OHIP cards and immunizations; they assist with documentation; and they connect the family to adult learning and job training. The children spend a couple of hours with a certified teacher who identifies literacy and numeracy needs at the elementary or secondary level.

Then the receiving school is sent the information about each child's recommended grade level, educational history and family history. This is how a school might learn that a child seems to be coming from England, but in fact two years ago was a refugee from Somalia and has lost her whole family. This kind of information is invaluable to the school in meeting the learning and



integration needs of children.

The Peel centres have been phenomenally successful. In the first 18 months, 4,400 orientation interviews were conducted – 4,400 separate registrations and referrals. In many cases the families have maintained contact with the centres, looking for additional help and resources. In fact, the Peel board now handles calls from China or Dubai or India saying a family is moving to Peel and wants to make an appointment for the welcome centres.

Toronto is another common destination of choice for many newcomers to Canada. The work of settlement agencies, along with schools and other community services, is essential to their successful integration in their new home.

“The proposed cuts will have a devastating impact on many of our students and their families,” says Chris Bolton, chair of the Toronto District School Board. “These cuts will seriously hamper the ability of newcomer families to integrate successfully and will ultimately affect student achievement.”

Trustees of OPSBA and the TDSB have written letters to federal members of Parliament, including the prime minister and the minister of citizenship and immigration, as well as provincial and municipal representatives to share their concern about the funding cuts and the impact they will have on many of our school communities and families. There is a particular concern about the impact on government-assisted refugees who require long-term assistance with settlement and integration. Consequences include disruption for families and students already struggling to find consistent access to services and supports, loss of interpretation and language assessment services, reduced access to language classes and to experienced settlement staff who provide a familiar face in an environment where so much is unfamiliar.

“The casualties are the families who chose Canada as their new home,” says Fife. “This is a loss for Canada.”

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