

How we can fix Ontario's crumbling schools

SACHIN MAHARAJ
AND GORDON PETCH

Of all the duties that educational leaders and policy-makers have, ensuring that schools are safe is arguably the most important. But it looks like that is not happening in our city. Documents from the provincial government state that 56 per cent of schools in the Toronto District School Board are in “critical” or “poor” condition. And sometimes the consequences are dire. As reported by CTV news, a 6-year-old girl went to the bathroom at her Toronto school only to have the stall door collapse on her head, giving her a major concussion that took her more than two months to recover from. Clearly we have a problem.

Teachers have been trying to sound the alarm about these issues for years. According to Elementary Teachers’ of Toronto president John Smith, teachers call the union almost every day about safety concerns in their schools. Perhaps in order to really change things though, teachers unions need to take more drastic measures, as their colleagues in other jurisdictions have done.

For example, in order to call attention to their crumbling school buildings, teachers in Detroit have engaged in a mass “sick-out” campaign. Because it is illegal under Michigan state law for any public employee to go on strike, Detroit teachers

have been calling in to work “sick” en masse, effectively shutting down schools across the district. While this may seem like a radical move, it has at the very least brought the issue to the forefront of public consciousness.

But if we really want to change things, first we need to understand how we got to the current state of affairs. Originally, school boards in Ontario raised most of the money they needed to build, maintain, and operate schools from their local property tax base. School boards could then also raise additional money from new residential and commercial development through Educational Development Charges (EDCs), which were designed to help school boards accommodate new growth. This changed in the 1990s during the “Common Sense Revolution.” Based on its desire to make deep cuts to education spending, the Harris government took over complete control of school board funding. It also instituted a new regulation stating that school boards could no longer receive any money from new development if their total student enrolment to total capacity fell below a certain ratio.

These two changes have had a devastating impact on TDSB finances and the board’s ability to properly maintain and enhance its schools. It is estimated that the TDSB has lost out on hundreds of millions of dollars from forgone EDCs alone. Some might say that the TDSB should have simply shut down and sold all of the schools that are below capacity. But apart from the fact that the TDSB has sold 30 school sites and 82 properties over the last 17 years, in a system where school board trustees are elected locally by ward, closing and selling schools is extremely difficult. There are simply no political incentives to do so.

The provincial government could easily

remedy the situation in a number of ways. First, while maintaining the current level of funding it provides, it could give school boards back the ability to raise additional funds to meet local needs. This would also have the added bonus of undercutting the “provincial underfunding” excuse that is trotted out for almost every problem in schools. Second, it could remove the vacancy requirement needed to access EDCs, and amend the legislation so that these funds can also be used to repair, upgrade, expand and construct new schools.

However, if what the province really wants is to close schools, it should do so itself. It can do this by way of regulation ordering the TDSB to close and sell below-capacity schools to the province at market value. That way the TDSB will be able to immediately access the funds it needs to fix the schools that are currently falling apart.

Once upon a time we did have a system where school boards had the money they needed to effectively repair, maintain, and operate their schools. And the provincial government could easily create such a system again. Premier Kathleen Wynne surely knows this, as she started her political career as a TDSB trustee vehemently opposed to the changes brought by the Harris government. But now that she herself is in the ultimate position of power, the plight of mere school boards seems to have been forgotten.



Sachin Maharaj is a PhD student in educational policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. **Gordon Petch** is a lawyer with over 30 years of experience specializing in municipal law and education planning issues.