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Written Deputation – City of Toronto Budget 2015

TDSB Inner City Advisory Committee

February 3rd, 2015

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As members of the TDSB Inner City Advisory Committee and Toronto parents – thank you for this opportunity to speak to the city's proposed budget.

The Inner City Advisory Committee's (ICAC) mission is to close the opportunity gap for all students within the TDSB, advocating for appropriate community investments, and drawing on the expertise and support of academic, institutional and community partnerships.

We congratulate the city for steps in advancing the wellbeing of children and families. The elimination of TTC fares for children 12 and under will allow parents, community groups, and schools to take children out to programs and field trips with minimal cost for transportation. We applaud this move, while cautioning that increasing transit fares for parents will simultaneously put pressure on family budgets.

We thank the city for embarking on the development of a broader Poverty Reduction Strategy. However, we are concerned that aspects in the 2015 budget will set us back on the path we have started.

The reality of poverty in our city is well understood. A CAS report released this November stated that 29% of our children live in poverty. That number masks the fact that poverty is concentrated in areas where that number jumps to 50%. Child poverty means families are living in poverty.

We know that female-headed households bear the brunt of this reality. The Canadian Women's Foundation states that 80% of lone-parent families are women-led. 21% of single mothers are low-income, compared to 7% of single fathers.

This reality is felt even more sharply in schools. Half of TDSB's families live with low or very low income. These students are the "Hidden Epidemic" of child poverty in our city. They are on the waiting list. They are at the bus stop. They are at the food bank. Many live in Toronto's "horseshoe of poverty," in the inner suburbs of Scarborough, North York, and Etobicoke, underserved by transit, lacking access to services, recreation, and adequate housing. Their parents face a jobs crisis. We consider city measures to help these families a priority.

In light of this, we feel the following items in the budget are cause for concern:

First, ICAC is concerned that a zero increase to Children's Services indicates there will be no increase in subsidized childcare spots despite a growing waitlist, and that only one new childcare centre will open this year.

Low-income parents desperately need affordable, quality child care that will allow them to access the job market or upgrade their skills.

Child care is absolutely instrumental for families to escape the cycle of poverty. Increased family income better supports the emotional, intellectual and social development of children. Single mothers disproportionately end up in part-time, shift-based, precarious work, that does not allow them to pay for nannies, or that fits the schedule of day-time only childcare services. Toronto needs more subsidized childcare spots, more flexible childcare services, and more families earning more income to grow our city.

Second, ICAC is concerned about the zero increase to the Student Nutrition Program, other than to cover the inflationary costs.

Families living in poverty struggle to provide adequate, nutritious food to their children. A 2013 study found that of every 5 children in Toronto, one relies on food banks, and goes hungry at least one or two days a week. In the TDSB, three out of five students come to school hungry. This has a devastating impact on children's mental and physical development, and leads to higher rates of long-term illness and disability which are disproportionately costly to our society.

The Student Nutrition Program plays a vital role in combating the harmful effects of poverty on children, and it is imperative that Toronto invests in the long-term well-being of all child residents.

Third, we note that the Youth Lounge initiative will not include a promised "Phase 2" expansion of 3 additional lounges in community centers. Youth Lounges were highlighted in the City's Youth Recreation Engagement Strategy. Both the city and community agencies led studies that stated that youth, especially those living in disadvantage, need safe and welcoming places to be. We ask the City to reconsider the choice not to invest in expanding this much-needed program.

TDSB's Model Schools for Inner Cities program includes, as one of its Essential Components, a commitment to providing support services to meet the social, emotional, and physical well-being of students. This commitment includes running hearing and vision clinics in every Model School. Children are who require them are provided with free eyeglasses - the cost of which are prohibitive for many low-income families. Model Schools feature 7 in-school pediatric clinics across the City. An example of the impact of this program is George Webster Elementary School in east Toronto, where 800 families now have access to a primary care doctor.

Over the last 18 months, growing concern has emerged regarding the dental health of children growing up in poverty, for which a visit to the dentist is financially out of reach. ICAC views dental health as a next step for

supporting the well-being of Model Schools students, ensuring better long-term outcomes for these children. This step will require bold new partnership, and we are hopeful that the City will be a key partner.

Model Schools for Inner Cities is committed to establishing schools as the heart of the community. Schools are ideal hubs, located within residential neighbourhoods with existing ties to the immediate community. ICAC views the recent pressure from the provincial government to close local schools with trepidation, because a school closure can steal away the natural focus from a community, removing a safe place to play, a space for recreation programs, meetings, and organizations like Scouts and Girl Guides of Canada. The local school is often a newcomer's first significant connection to their new homeland.

ICAC asks the city to voice its concern to Premier Wynne that school closures in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas will negatively impact the ability of the City to deliver a range of services to residents in underserved regions of the City. It makes sense to utilize existing school facilities in the areas where program participants live. Our children and our schools, we need to prioritize them both. Let's give them the investment they deserve.

Finally, we look forward to supporting and complementing the city's work to create a Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy, particularly in relation to the children and families within the Toronto District School Board.

The TDSB's award winning Model Schools for Inner Cities program serves 150 schools with the greatest need, and includes partnerships with City departments like Public Health and Library, as well as many community agencies, in closing the poverty gap. We urge the City to actively engage TDSB in stronger and expanded partnerships through the new Poverty Reduction Strategy so that what emerges is a Community investment strategy that ensures all of Toronto's children grow up with choices.

Thank you.

Debra Payne, member

Michael Griesz, member

**Inner City Advisory Committee**  
Toronto District School Board  
Contact: Hilary Wollis, Coordinator  
Hilary.Wollis@tdsb.on.ca  
(416) 988-0155