

What's being funded in the Ontario North? Not much.

BY PAUL W. BENNETT

PARENT grant applications are underway in schools all over the Ontario North. Every May, school parent councils scramble to take advantage of the Ontario Ministry of Education's coveted Parents Reaching Out (PRO) Grants. Few bother to ask: what's being funded — and for what purpose? And what's the actual impact been in Northern Ontario schools?

School boards get to publicly crow about their share of the provincial parent activity grants awarded each fall since 2006. Five months ago, Norm Blaseg, Director of Education for the Rainbow District School Board, saw fit to issue the usual media release recognizing the \$10,425 awarded to 12 different Sudbury region schools, averaging about \$868 per school.

"Parents are important partners in the learning process," Blaseg stated, and "research has shown that involvement of parents . . . has a positive impact on student achievement and overall school performance." Such statements, like apple pie and motherhood, rarely get challenged in the world of education, nor do the programs purporting to promote parent involvement.

In Ontario since 2006, the Ministry of Education has awarded more than \$24 million to fund 15,000 Parents Reaching Out (PRO) grants to local school councils and 568 regional grants — all aimed at increasing "parent involvement" in schools.

A close-up look at the PRO grants to schools in 2014-15 is quite revealing. Out of some 2,279 approved school projects province-wide totalling over \$2 million, only 100 or so were



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awarded to Northern Ontario schools, totalling \$104,670.

Across the North, 88 English projects were funded for \$81,670, ranging from a high of 15 in the Near North DSB (\$14,335) and 13 in Sudbury CDSB (\$12,785) to one or two in the Northwest CDSB (2- \$1,650) and Kenora CDSB (1- \$1,000). Twenty-three French projects were approved in the North, at \$1,000 each, totalling \$23,000.

What's been the impact? The PRO grants mostly go to supporting conventional "parent education" programs. The vast majority of parent councils still busy themselves raising money for class supplies, sponsoring multicultural festivals, and even running "cupcake" parties for the kids, and the grants are having only a minimal impact on changing that focus.

Ontario's PRO grants were initially tied to the Dalton McGuinty Liberal government's "Poverty Reduction Initiative" and presented as a way of addressing social inequalities facing identified "priority" school neighbourhoods.

By the fall of 2014, the ministry's Ottawa Field Services Branch was putting a positive spin on the increased participation of school councils in socially-disadvantaged communi-

ties. Since 2006, after awarding thousands of grants across the province, the ministry reported that applications from priority schools were up 300 per cent and approvals up 450 per cent. In 2014-15, only 138 projects were authorized in "high priority schools." That bears further investigation.

Poverty reduction has all but disappeared from the public announcements about PRO grants. In early March 2015, Education Minister Liz Sandals was singing a different tune: "When parents are active in their children's education, student well-being and achievement are improved — especially in challenging areas like math. This helps students reach their full potential and better prepares them for a bright future."

A ministry media release on March 3, 2015, announcing the Parents Reaching Out grants for 2015-16, claimed that they were now designed to fund "a wide range of initiatives that help parents become more involved in their child's education."

The Rainbow District School Board projects approved for 2014-15 are fairly typical of all boards. Most of the grants go to funding parenting sessions, including programs on overcoming "mathitis," improving personal finance management, practising healthy eating, learning Zumba dancing, and celebrating multiculturalism. None of the cited examples related directly to reducing educational inequal-

ities or child and family poverty.

Spending \$24 million spread out over thousands of Ontario school councils is unlikely to make much of a difference in closing the social inequality gap between school communities.

Speaking on the Sept. 22, 2014 edition of Steve Paikin's TV Ontario program *The Agenda*, Yvonne Kelly, co-ordinator of Freedom 90, perhaps put it best: pursuing a "broad-based prevention framework . . . doesn't help those already

marginalized." That's a neat summary of what went wrong with the PRO grants as an "anti-poverty" initiative.

Ironically, the one program that might have made a difference, the Learning Opportunities Grant (LOG) was substantially cut in 2006 when PRO grants were introduced by the McGuinty government. Launched with the best of intentions, the PRO grants could achieve a greater impact if specifically targeted at

changing the home-school dynamic in socially-disadvantaged school communities, particularly in the Ontario North. Perhaps it's time to re-assess the program to see if the funds can be better directed in addressing the dire needs of "priority" neighbourhoods.

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Out of some 2,279 approved school projects province-wide totalling over \$2 million, only 100 or so were awarded to Northern Ontario schools, totalling \$104,670. And the poverty reduction focus is long gone.