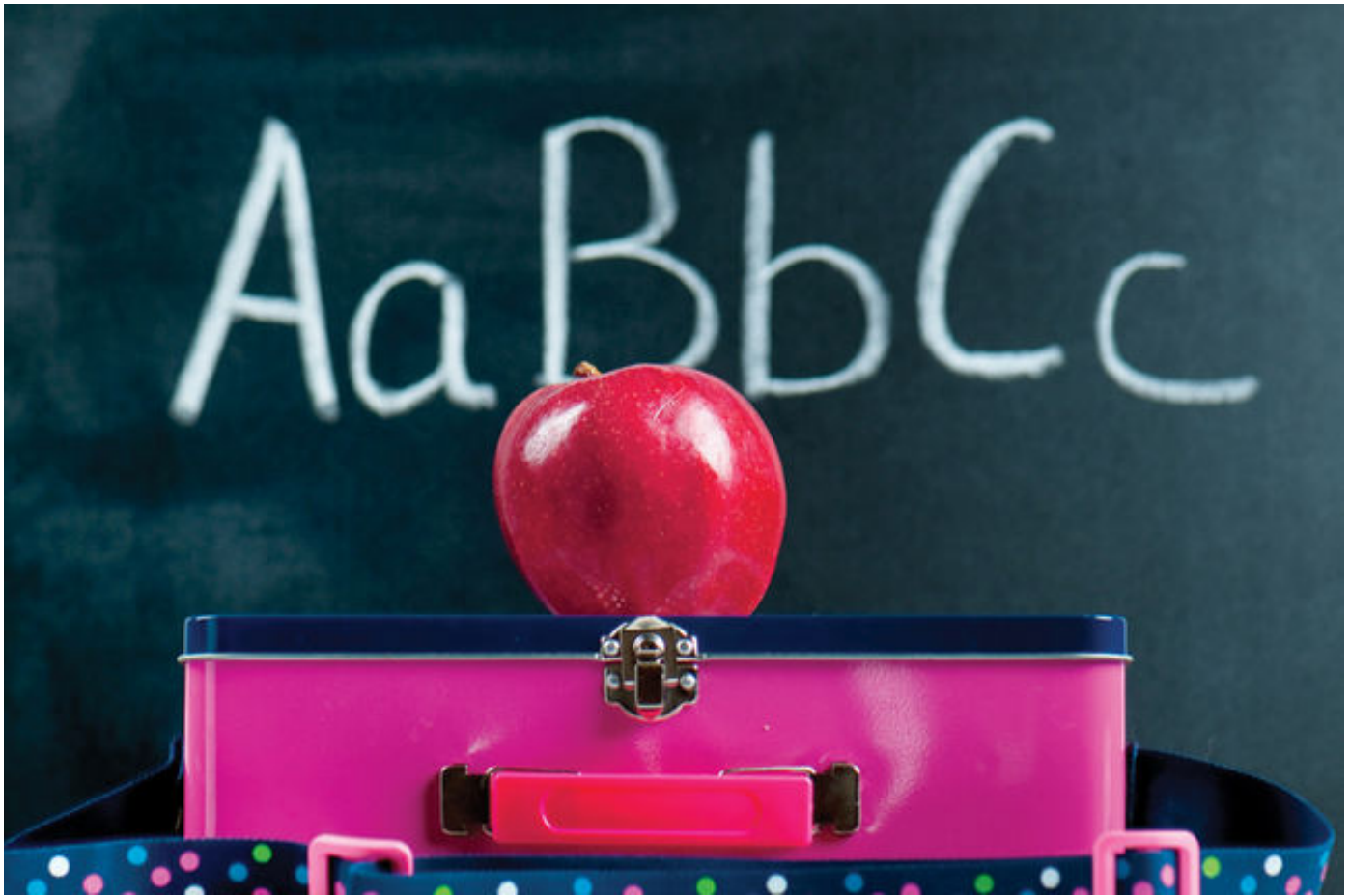




OPINION COLUMN

Column: What's being funded in Northern Ontario?

Tuesday, May 26, 2015 1:27:17 EDT PM



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Guest Columnist

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

School boards crow about their share of the 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.

"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.

Since 2006, the Ministry of Education has awarded more than \$24 million to fund 15,000 PRO grants to local school councils and 568 regional grants -- all aimed at increasing "parent involvement."

Out of 2,279 approved school projects province-wide in 2014-15 totalling more than \$2 million, only 100 or so were awarded to Northern Ontario schools, totalling \$104,670 -- 88 English projects and 23 French projects.

What's been the impact? 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.

PRO grants were initially tied to the McGuinty government's Poverty Reduction Initiative and presented as a way of addressing social inequalities facing identified "priority" school neighbourhoods. In 2014-15, however, only 138 projects were authorized in high priority schools.

Poverty reduction has all but disappeared from the public announcements about PRO grants. In March, 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 March 3, announcing the Parents Reaching Out grants for 2015-16, claimed they were now designed to fund "a wide range of initiatives that help parents become more involved in their child's education."

The Rainbow 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 and practising healthy eating. None of the cited examples related directly to reducing educational inequalities 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.

The one program that might have made a difference, the Learning Opportunities Grant, was substantially cut in 2006 when PRO grants were introduced. 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 Northern Ontario. 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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