

Proposed class fees unfair: parent

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The Ontario Education Ministry's proposed rule for classroom fees is getting a failing grade from some parents and educational organizations.

The new guideline states fees can't be collected for learning materials and activities for courses needed to graduate, including items such as lab fees and textbook deposits.

For example, a student cannot be charged for a textbook in a Grade 9 math class because it is required to earn the credit, which is required for a secondary school diploma.

However, a student taking an elective course, such as Grade 12 art, can be charged fees for supplies.

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A fee guideline is a step in the right direction to creating some sort of consistency across the board, but Newmarket parent Bessie Vlasis would prefer there be no student fees in publicly funded school systems.

Her Grade 10 daughter, Alex, is interested in photography, an elective course that plays into the school board's mandate to develop well-rounded students.

"What if I was a parent who couldn't afford to pay the fee for the course?" she said. "Does that mean my child doesn't get the chance others will because my pockets aren't as deep?"

Annie Kidder, executive director for People for Education, an organization that recommended the ministry create guidelines for school fees in Nov. 2010, said the document falls short of what was expected.

"While it's better to have some guidelines rather than none at all, some of the guidelines are a little vague and leave some grey areas," she said.

According to the guidelines, students cannot be charged fees for registration or administration, textbooks, learning materials that are required to complete a course, such as workbooks, musical instruments, science supplies, lab material kits, safety goggles and mandatory flat fees for any course leading to graduation. There also can't be fees for a guest speaker, visiting teacher or in-class field trip where material being presented is a mandatory element of the course.

"We recognized that it was important to have guidelines in place to ensure that the collection of fees was consistent with the principles of publicly funded education," ministry spokesperson Derek Luk said.

However, fees can still be charged for specialty programs, advanced placement courses, extracurricular trips, events and activities, extended school trips, optional art or music supplies, student activity fees and student agendas and yearbooks. Enhanced learning materials are also included on the list.

"Some areas need clarification, such as what is considered an enhanced learning material?" Ms Kidder said, adding she would like to see a clearer list of items and definitions.

She fears the enhanced learning materials, something of higher quality such as art or woodworking supplies, will lead to a two-tiered classroom of students.

"The guidelines didn't even touch on extracurricular activities, such as after-school sports, to our disappointment," she added. "We just want to ensure all children have the same access to activities."

The guidelines also suggest school boards set a limit on student activity fees, create a subsidy program to support the full participation of students in activities regardless of economic circumstances and ensure fee amounts reflect the actual cost of the service or materials being provided.

The York Region District School Board is reviewing its fee practices to ensure it will be in full compliance with the ministry guidelines, board spokesperson Ross Virgo said.

"We don't charge student fees for textbooks or other essential learning materials," he added. "We are committed to ensuring the essential elements of public education remain accessible to every student."

As for existing fees, such as student activity fees and materials that enhance the learning experience, but are not required to complete a course, it is common practise at local schools to subsidize the fees for students who can't afford to participate.

Many of the best practices in the ministry document are already part of the local board's existing policies regarding fees.

Consultation on the fee guidelines started in 2009 with members of the Education Partnership Table, which was made up of members from trustee associations, labour organizations, principals' associations, school board officials and provincial parent associations, Mr. Luk said.

The document comes into effect this fall.



STAFF PHOTO/SUSIE KOCKERSCHIEDT

Bessie Vlasis and daughter Alex aren't impressed with the government's proposed classroom fee guideline.

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