

THE HIGH COST OF HIGH SCHOOL

Many Ontario schools rely on fees for a substantial portion of their operating expenses.

Some secondary schools raised as much as \$90,000 through course fees this year. And many other schools raised thousands more through a range of activity and athletic fees. Revenue raised through fees is neither equitably distributed among schools, nor consistently accounted for.

FEES AND THE EDUCATION ACT

According to the Ministry of Education,¹ there are a number of “activities, programs or materials which are ineligible for fee charges,” including:

- a registration or administration fee (including library fee);
- a textbook fee or deposit;
- mandatory flat fees for courses leading to graduation, other than specialized programming;² and
- items that are funded through the allocated budget of a school board including, but not limited to, core learning materials for regular classroom programs such as computers, workbooks, textbooks, staff development and training costs.

QUICK FACTS

- 68% of Ontario secondary schools charge fees for courses.
- 73% of secondary schools charge Athletic Fees.
- 92% of secondary schools charge a Student Activity Fee.
- The top Athletic Fee reported in a secondary school is \$1,800.

Despite these prohibitions, there appear to be many grey areas: In some schools, students must pay a Student Activity Fee in order to receive their class timetables; in others, students are charged for French workbooks and science lab materials.

COURSE FEES

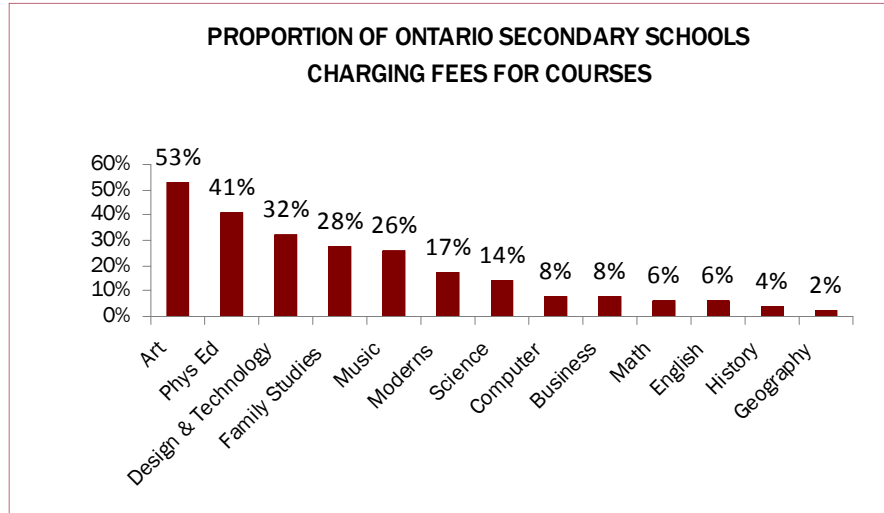
After many years of trending downwards, average course fees are on the rise once again. The average course fee a student might pay in 2010/11 is \$25, but there is a wide range among schools, with some schools raising under \$1,000 per year in course fees,

and others raising over \$90,000. Only a small portion of this discrepancy among schools can be explained by school size.

Our data, combined with information from the Ministry of Education’s School Information Finder, shows that schools with a higher proportion of low income students have lower average course fees. This suggests that fees are charged on a “what the market will bear” basis.

There is also a clear gap in revenues from course fees: the top 10% of schools charging fees takes in the same amount as the bottom 65% put together.

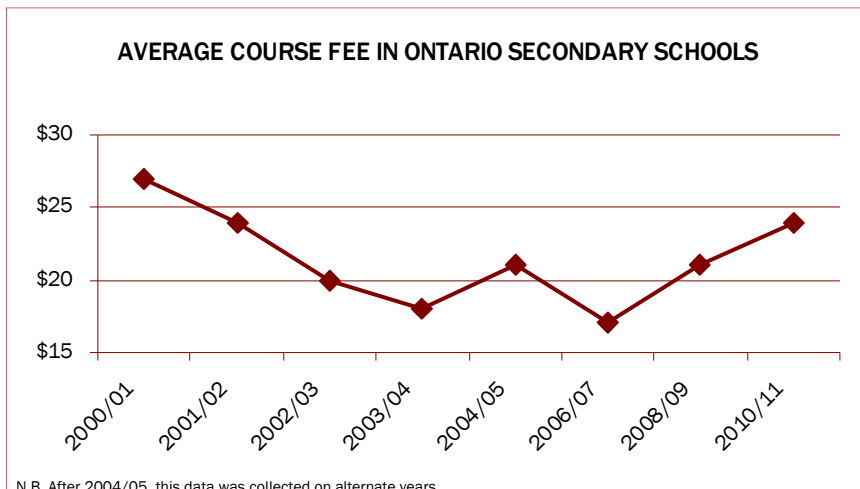
In some cases, the course fees cover the cost of outdoor education, construction materials or art supplies; but 17% of schools charge fees for second language classes and 14% charge fees for science—both courses in which one or more credits are mandatory for graduation. Six per cent of schools report charging fees for English classes, which are mandatory in every grade.



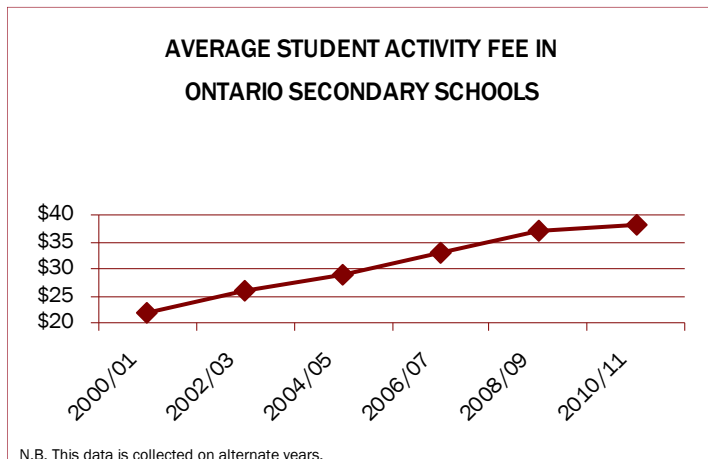
STUDENT ACTIVITY FEES AND FEES FOR SPORTS

Student Activity Fees in secondary schools are also on the rise. Just as with course fees, there is a wide range among schools: Some schools charge as little as \$5, while others charge up to \$100 per student. The average fee has increased from \$22 in 2000/01 to \$38 this year.

Extrapolated province-wide, the total amount raised by secondary schools through Student Activity Fees has risen from approximately \$15 million in 2000/01 to approximately \$26 million this year.



Not only do students pay Student Activity Fees, but many also pay fees to play after-school sports. These Athletic Fees have also increased steadily over the last 10 years. This year, Athletic fees ranged from a low of \$10 to a high of \$1,800. The highest fee this year is more than twenty times higher than the top fee in 2000/01.



EQUITY CONCERNS AND THE PROVINCIAL POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY

Schools have come to rely on the many millions of dollars they collect in fees every year, but fees also represent a substantial barrier for many students: Over 90% of secondary schools report they provide subsidies for students who cannot pay, but simply applying for one of these subsidies may stigmatize some students.

In December 2008, the Ontario government released a report entitled *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*.

The report said that students living in poverty can feel excluded because of their inability to pay for and participate in school activities. At that time, the province recommended that school boards review their policies on school activities. However, the province did not mandate any changes.⁵

A 2010 follow-up report from the province stated that “activity fees are a barrier to participation in school activities for children in low-income households” and that “students should have the opportunity to fully participate in our education system, regardless of their parents' financial situation.”⁶

At that time, the Ministry of Education released a draft guideline regarding fees for learning materials and activities.⁷ Since then, a consultation on the draft guidelines has been held, but no new guidelines have been announced.

As school-generated funds become entrenched in school budgets, schools will find it more and more difficult to go without this private funding. But this increased reliance on fees also inevitably leads to a system of “have” and “have not” schools.

PROMOTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Experts agree that extracurricular activities play an important role in students' future success. According to the Ontario Public School Boards' Association,

“Extracurricular activities can ... foster life-long appreciation and interests, preparing a young person for life in ways that go beyond academic success.”³

Participation in extracurricular activities, sports and clubs are key characteristics for evaluating student engagement and students' sense of belonging at school; extensive research, including research from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the National Research Council (U.S.), shows that both engagement and belonging have a significant impact on students' overall success.⁴

PEOPLE FOR EDUCATION'S RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PROVINCE:

1. Articulate and fund a vision for education beyond targets for test scores and graduation rates that outlines what materials, activities and programs should be available at no extra charge to all students in every school in Ontario. This should include:
 - appropriate learning materials for *all* courses, including hands-on technology, arts, health and physical education and computer courses
 - access to extracurricular activities
 - participation in arts and sports programs
2. Require all schools and school boards to provide detailed accounts of all school-generated funds, including funds raised through fees, and provide provincial reports on the total amounts.
3. Establish provincial fee guidelines that:
 - clearly state which fees are not allowed
 - close current loopholes that allow schools to charge fees for courses leading to graduation, and
 - mandate that all school fees are to be voluntary.
4. Provide sufficient provincial funding to ensure that revenue lost because fees are disallowed or made voluntary, does not result in cuts to programs, resources or materials in schools.

NOTES

1. Sékaly, G. F. (4 Sept. 2010) "Update on Fees and Fundraising: Memo to Directors of Education," Toronto: Ministry of Education (Ontario), retrieved March 23, 2011 from http://cal2.edu.gov.on.ca/september2010/2010_B11Eng.pdf.
2. According to the draft fees guidelines, "Specialized Programming is optional courses or activities that students normally choose to attend through an application process, with the knowledge that these programs are beyond the core curriculum. Examples include International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement and Hockey Canada Skills Academy programs." See Ministry of Education (Ontario) (June 2010) "Fees for Learning Materials and Activities Guidelines—Draft for Discussion Purposes," Toronto: Author, retrieved March 23, 2011 from http://cal2.edu.gov.on.ca/june2010/FeesGuidelines_June2010.pdf.
3. Scott, J. (2009) "Equitable Education? The Cost of Extracurriculars in Ontario's Schools," Toronto: Ontario Student Trustees' Association, retrieved March 23, 2011 from <http://www.osta-aeco.org/media/reports/2009/Equitable%20Education%20-%20The%20Cost%20of%20Extracurriculars%20in%20Ontario's%20Schools.pdf>
4. See Willms, J.D. (2003) *Student engagement at school: A sense of belonging and participation*, Paris: OECD, retrieved March 23, 2011 from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/42/35/33689437.pdf>; National Research Council (U.S.) (2003) *Engaging schools: Fostering high school students' motivation to learn*, Washington: National Academies Press, retrieved March 23, 2011 from http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=10421&page=1.
5. Government of Ontario (2010) *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*, Toronto: Author, retrieved March 23, 2011 from <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/breakingthecycle/report/btc/chapter1.aspx>.
6. Government of Ontario (2010) *Breaking the Cycle: Second Annual Progress Report*, Toronto: Author, retrieved March 23, 2011 from <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/breakingthecycle/report/2010/index.aspx>.
7. See note 2.

METHODOLOGY

This report contains data from the People for Education Annual School Survey, which is distributed to each of Ontario's 4,930 publicly-funded elementary and secondary schools. The full Annual Report on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools will be released in

May. Nineteen per cent of the province's secondary schools participated in the survey, representing 20% of the province's 683,414 secondary school students. Schools from 53 of the province's 72 school boards participated and 52% of the secondary schools in this year's sample also participated in 2009/2010.

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