

# Two-Tier Public Education

*Parents should not be required to pay user fees to purchase school services.*

**By Dennis Locking**

Every parent knows the financial challenges posed by the start-up of every school year. Clothes. Books. Backpacks. Supplies. And all at the worst time. Then come more dollar requests for the odd field trip, wood project, or athletic tournament.

Money requests once considered reasonable have become a user-fee nightmare for parents with no limit in sight. Throughout the public system, parents are now being asked, coerced, threatened, bullied, and just plain laden with guilt into paying more and more.

We pay fees for overall general admission to the school, lunchroom privileges, busing, calculators, books, lockers, computers, photo-copying, and special class tuition fees. If you want your child on a sports team or in a school band, expect to fork over a few hundred dollars more.

The list grows every year. As a consequence, Calgary parents can pay between \$500 and \$1,000 per student just to gain access to their public high school.

Parents who can't afford these taxes face collection agencies or worse. Some boards won't allow students to stand in graduation exercises or block access to certain classes until their parents pay up.

In some cases, parents have paid \$900 for lunch supervision for their children who must be bused to distant schools as boards attempt to gain utilization percentages imposed by the province.

Growing frustration has encouraged more than 200 parents from all political stripes to join together and form a group called Parents for Public Education (PPE) last year. We have

one goal: to draw attention to the negative effects of user fees.

And we've taken the unusual step of withholding many fees requested by various school boards in order to make our point. We aren't comfortable doing this but feel we have no choice.

they are used for computers, textbooks, repairs, petty cash, etc.

User fees won't go away any time soon, because school boards find them an easy source of revenue. Few parents want to say no because they are afraid of the repercussions to their children.

In fact, user fees are likely to continue to multiply and increase until we develop a clear-cut definition of public schooling and ensure sufficient funds are provided to buy the desired services.

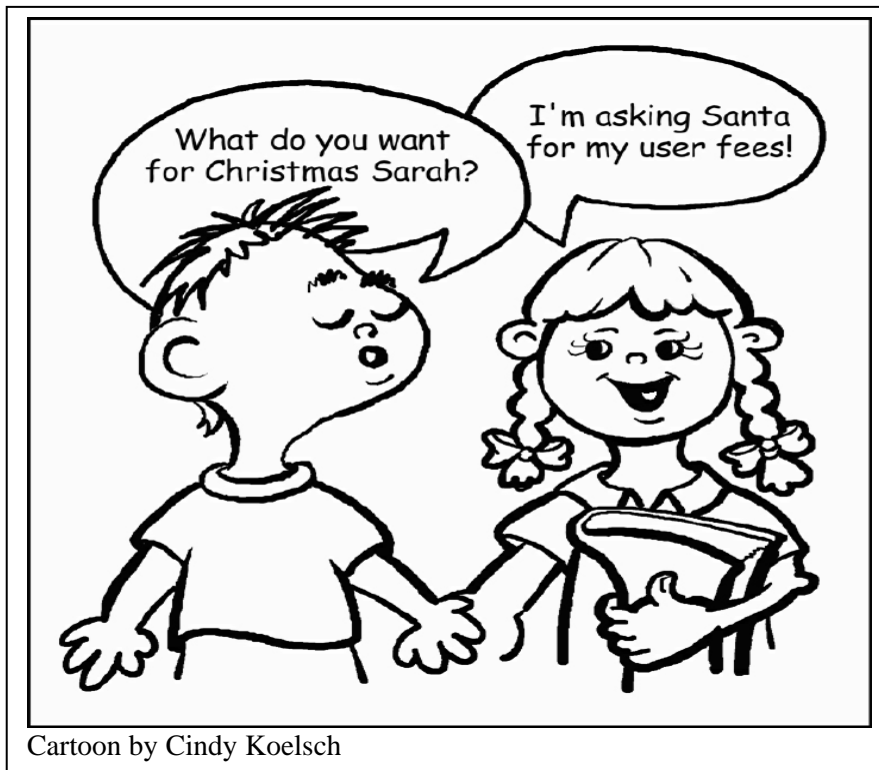
In turn, local school boards must resist the temptation to address as many social issues as there are interest groups. And parents must stop demanding more than the tax system can bear.

Parents want an education system,

not a baby-sitting system or a social service system. Most parents are willing to pay taxes to cover the cost of educational programs, but they should not be required to pay user fees to purchase additional services.

The more schools depend on user fees, the more arbitrary and exclusive the system will become. User fees are discriminatory and non-accountable. Public education may not be able to do everything, but those services that we do ask it to deliver should be available to all children.

*(Adapted with permission from "Choices: Calgary's Parent Guide to Good Education", March 2003. Mr. Locking is a Calgary parent.)*



Cartoon by Cindy Koelsch

So what can other parents do about rising user fees? For starters, get informed. The School Act is very clear about user fees. Section 49(1) states that "A board shall not charge any tuition fees with respect to the enrollment in a school operated by the board of its resident students or the resident student or any other board or the Government."

Yet the fees being charged by Calgary Public and other boards clearly amount to tuition charges, since some students are being denied access to classes or activities if fees are unpaid.

By the Calgary Board's own admission, all user fees, whether for books or bands, go into general revenue or individual school funds where