

After-hours programs in schools get boost

Kennedy makes fees for facility use reasonable

Financial relief may be too late for many groups

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Let the neighbourhood games begin again.

After four years of soaring after-hours fees that priced schools beyond some of Ontario's most needy groups — from disabled swimmers to immigrant students — Queen's Park will restore schools to public use at little cost, says Education Minister Gerard Kennedy.

Kennedy offered no details on how he planned to cover the "relatively small" costs of keeping school buildings open for after-hours programs, but he stated firmly that "schools should not be sitting empty" after hours, and that the public should not be priced out of schools they paid to build in the first place.

The news was cheered by community groups, from gymnasts to Girl Guides, that have been hit by school fee hikes of up to 1,000 per cent after the Conservatives pulled the funding plug after hours.

"This is fabulous news, because our seven-week day camp fees jumped from zero to \$11,000 under the new formula — which sent our membership fees up (and) forced us to take fewer bus trips and do lots and lots of fundraising," said Susan Fletcher, executive director of the Applegrove Community Centre in Toronto's east end.

The new funding formula made boards dependent on Queen's Park for operating grants. The grants stopped when classes ended, leaving neighbourhoods stuck with the bill for weekend and evening caretaking, heat and lights.

For some groups, any relief in user fees will come too late:

★ Special Olympics swim teams have already cut corners to cushion a more than three-

fold jump in school pool fees to \$125 an hour, from \$40 last year. Toronto swimmer Rick Wong, 32, who is developmentally challenged, has had his weekly two-hour practice at West Toronto Collegiate cut in half starting this week.

Said Wong's father Louis, who cares for his son full-time, "One hour goes by very fast when it's your time to meet friends, get fit and expand your horizons."

★ The East Scarborough Boys and Girls Club has closed eight outreach programs after school over the past four years — including homework clubs and team sports — because the fees went from zero to between \$1,000 and \$5,000 per year, said club president David Rew. "Hundreds of kids in high-risk areas now go without programs that really helped — and now the schools sit empty," said Rew.

★ The North York Aquatic club has had to cut membership to 120 from 200 because it cannot afford to rent as many pools in schools, said head coach Murray Drudge. "It would be great if there was a change in this policy, because we've been paying through the nose, but for many, the damage has been done." Already the club rents five pools, rather than eight.

A survey of 149 community groups across the province by Basketball Ontario this summer tracked the new fee's impact:

★ 43 per cent said higher fees have meant fewer children can take part in their programs.

★ A drop in participants was reported by 55 per cent of basketball clubs, 48 per cent of swim clubs and 33 per cent of ice sports.

★ 65 per cent of community sports organizations said they have had to cut programs, sponsorships and even tournaments in order to pay user fees.

"Basketball is only one of a number of sports that has suffered under gym user fees — and it's shameful the programs have had to cap membership and cut access," said executive director Ilene Watt of Basketball Ontario.

"So it's excellent if politicians are talking about changing these fees."