

## Politics and bureaucracy fail young swimmers

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The saga of pools in Toronto District School Board schools appeared to come to a happy ending last week when North Toronto Councillor Josh Matlow said, rah rah, the pools are saved, aren't we wonderful, gold stars for all.

The problem is, the well-intentioned, camera-ready Matlow failed to see beyond the boundaries of his toney North York community where, indeed, the pools were saved. If Matlow were to fix his gaze south and east, toward some of Toronto's poorest neighbourhoods, he would see the story of the pools isn't quite so rosy. In fact it's an embarrassment. Embarrassing to the TDSB, which has chosen to close 13 pools in some of the city's lowest income, highest immigrant communities. Embarrassing to our ideologically rigid mayor, who should be able to see that these pools might be easily saved with a pittance of an investment.

Both levels of government – the city and the school board – share responsibility for pools but are mired in the three P's: policy, protocol and process. Add to the mix the rancid bad blood that historically has surrounded the pool issue and you get some seriously murky water.

But a few things are swimmingly clear: in the east end of Toronto – essentially the Broadview to Coxwell and Queen to Danforth area, five pools are closing. If you're a parent in this area, you're either going to have to teach your kids to swim yourself or make sure they steer clear of the water.

Closed and drained are the Danforth Tech and Eastern Commerce Secondary pools. History suggests that in the future these pools will be used to house broken desks and battered books. Or, as happened at CALC – the City Adult Learning Centre – the pool may, ahem, be filled with cement.

Further east, Monarch Park Secondary, a fabulous hot water (81 degrees) pool with no stairs to navigate and in a state of good repair, is also closed. Monarch Park is one of 13 "probationary" pools that has three months to get its act together – that is, raise enough funds (\$71,000) to cover annual operating costs – or risk being drained.

A few blocks away, Earl Grey Middle School's pool is on the chopping block as well. It, too, is closed and has three months to raise \$56,000, either through philanthropy or by attracting pool programmers – water polo organizations, swim teams, mom and baby fitness programs – that will contribute to operating costs by renting the pool. Earl Grey is in Ward 30, where 30 per cent of students live beneath the poverty line. Swimming lessons would be a nice distraction.

And then there is "Queen A."

Queen Alexandra School is located in the south end of Ward 30, and is one of the highest need, low income, single parent schools in Toronto. For perspective, 39.2 per cent of the children in the ward between the ages of 10 and 14 live below the LICO (low income cut-off rate) and many attend this school. With the Queen A pool now closed (it requires \$36,800), 350 students will lose aquatic lessons as part of their phys. ed. program. Another 200 children from neighbouring schools who travel to Queen A will lose their swimming lessons, too. Community-based after-school swimming programs and YMCA summer camps and aquatics programs will be axed.

That's bad enough. Now try to reconcile this with the recent announcement by Education Minister Kathleen Wynne that her government will spend millions of dollars so schools will be open to community groups to run programs after school. Open for what? How about swimming? Not at Queen A!

Not Kafkaesque enough for you? Now add to the mix the fact that Queen A qualifies for \$34,000 in provincial government support because of its low income status – but the TDSB says it can't use the money to save its pool! Huh?

Once again, the city could have been part of a solution, but no. The Jimmie Simpson Community Centre – a "priority centre" offering free community programs – will be shut down for eight months for renovations. The city was invited to move its programs to Queen A, which is just down the street. That would have provided the funds needed to keep Queen A open. But Miller – adversarial as ever – wasn't about to give the TDSB any further funding for pools. Too bad kids, maybe your parents can buy you some lessons at a private swim club. Yep, he's a mayor for all the people, unless you're poor, or you're a kid, or a swimmer.

In order to save Queen A, the community needs to rally, raise funds, coordinate programming and attract new users. The challenge is that most Queen A parents are busy holding down three jobs and, culturally, may not appreciate the importance that swimming plays in child and community safety... until something goes wrong. Just think back to this summer's headlines on drowning deaths and it's clear lots can go wrong.

Then there's the dysfunction of the TDSB. On the one hand it has told all these probationary pools that they have to raise money by getting groups "to permit" their pools. But call the TDSB's permit department and it will tell you the pool is closed and can't be "permitted." A cynic might conclude there is a conspiracy here, but sadly it's just the dismissive, entitled, disorganization of a board that wants the pools to go away.

In the middle of all this political dysfunction are our kids. They just want to have fun. Of course, for them the path of least resistance leads to the computer screen. Which is why with all the press, policy and position papers around obesity and sedentary lifestyles, you'd think finding the funding and political leadership to keep pools open would be easy. But that would be simple common sense, a no brainer.

So, our request is simple. Could one of our politicians – Kathleen Wynn, Josh Matlow, Cathy Dandy, Paula Fletcher, David Miller, step up? Take a deep breath and try holding

the hand of your government counterpart. Invite the social agencies whose activities you fund to be part of the solution. Stop building turf, start building consensus, recognize pools for the assets they are. Get it done, help our kids, save these pools.

If not, those of us who live here on the "wrong side of the tracks" will wait until next November. We will take your measure, and then we will vote.

*Debbie Gordon and Janet Dabrus are members of a volunteer pool advocacy group called Let's Make Waves, <http://www.letsmakewaves.ca/>.*