

TDSB's \$143 school pencil sharpener just the beginning

Just when you thought high costs for small jobs at Toronto schools couldn't get worse, the Star obtains Toronto District School Board work orders that show they can

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The pencil sharpener that started it all: maintenance workers with the Toronto District School Board charged taxpayers \$143 to install it at Sir John A. Macdonald Collegiate.

Moira Welsh / Toronto Star File Photo

By Kevin Donovan

The high cost to perform tens of thousands of small jobs — hanging pictures, mounting bulletin boards and yes, more pencil sharpener installations — are costing the Toronto District School Board a small fortune, according to data obtained by the Star.

At one school, Emery Collegiate Institute in North York, a work crew was summoned to hang three pictures one day in March 2011, a job that took seven hours and cost \$266. Eight days later, workers were once again called to the same school to “hang three pictures on the wall.” That time, workers billed for 24 hours at a cost to taxpayers of \$857.

The 293,000 work orders covering a two-year period ending this fall represent \$158 million in construction and maintenance jobs done for Toronto's 600 elementary and secondary public schools.

Last week, the Star asked the school board to provide an explanation for some of the more glaring costs, including the work done at Emery Collegiate. The TDSB is preparing a response, which it estimates will be done in January.

Meanwhile, reacting to an audit and information earlier unearthed by the Star, the provincial education ministry has offered to assist the TDSB in fixing the problem. A PricewaterhouseCoopers report recommends closing schools and contracting out some jobs.

There is also a police investigation underway, looking at allegations of fraud involving some former TDSB workers.

The Toronto public school board is in a cash crunch. It estimates \$3 billion of work needs to be done to bring its aging schools up to an acceptable level.

About 900 workers belonging to the Maintenance and Skilled Trades Council carry out the work as part of a long-standing contract that is radically different from many other boards in Ontario, which contract out many jobs to the lowest bidders. Schools also have janitorial staff, which could do the smaller jobs that have been routinely assigned to the council workers.

Teachers have contacted the Star saying they would like to put up a shelf, a coat hook or attach a pencil sharpener but believe that they are not allowed to. “I was told flat out by my school that we are not allowed to do this work,” said one teacher, speaking on condition of anonymity because the teacher fears job repercussions for talking.

The data obtained by the Star is a mix of small jobs that appear to take too long, and big jobs that take many, many weeks. The data is raw — no conclusions are made in the data as to whether the job was done properly or on time.

When the Star first asked under the freedom of information law for the data, the school board wanted \$3.6 million. When the Star pointed out that the electronic records could be extracted from their system with relative ease, the board relented and handed over the data at no cost.

Here's a short tour of some jobs that caught our eye. The TDSB has not responded yet to questions about these charges.

- \$147.88 to cut one key at the board's “East Education office.”
- \$167 for a job at R.H. McGregor Elementary School described as “four guys needed to move a bench.”
- \$118 to install a pencil sharpener at Vaughan Road Academy (this is cheaper than the \$143 sharpener installation the Star found earlier at another school).
- \$190 to replace a broken toilet seat in the staff washroom at Kensington Community School. That price included the seat, which was \$126.
- \$312 to replace two malfunctioning smoke detectors at Highfield Junior School, plus \$58 for new detectors. The data indicates this important work took seven days from when job was requested to completed.
- \$810 to “remove unpleasant words on (washroom) stall” at Elkhorn Public School.
- \$1,614 (representing 49 hours for a painter) to paint a vice-principal's office at the Etobicoke School of the Arts. Materials were \$82, likely two cans of paint.
- \$2,441 to install a whiteboard on the wall at Rouge Valley Public School, plus the \$127 cost of the board.
- \$2,670 to replace “burned-out bulbs in lunchroom” at H.J. Alexander Community School. That job took 70 hours, and the bulbs were an additional \$337.

The data also includes big jobs, such as \$21,592 labour (which works out to 745 hours) and \$1,849 in materials to replace a broken water main at Hollycrest Middle School. The detail provided makes it impossible to tell if this cost is a fair one. In all cases, the Star has arrived at the number of work hours using the hourly union wage at the TDSB for each trade.

Here's how work gets authorized: each TDSB janitor has a computer terminal in his or her office that is linked to the public school board's work-order system. When a teacher or principal, or the janitor, decides something needs fixing or to be installed, the janitor is asked to create a work order. The janitor inputs the information into a computer terminal. At TDSB maintenance head office, a worker is assigned. Depending on the type of work, one of the 900 skilled tradespeople (electricians, carpenters, plumbers, general maintenance, etc.) with the Maintenance and Skilled Trades Council is dispatched.

The trades council, run by Jimmy Hazel, said in a recent dispatch to trustees that it agrees on-site janitorial staff should be allowed to do some of the smaller jobs.

Meanwhile, at TDSB headquarters, managers are trying to construct a system that will allow them to monitor workers. One suggestion being tossed around is to install GPS systems on trucks. This was discussed after managers discovered some workers said they were at a job site and were actually at a Tim Hortons, a bar, delivering pamphlets for a paving job using TDSB equipment or, in one case, kissing a girlfriend in a school board van.

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