

Editorial: Refugee student funding a province-wide issue



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Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau gives Syrian refugee Sylvie Garabedian, centre, a winter jacket as her mother Anjilik Jaghlassian, right, looks on at Pearson International airport in Toronto on Dec. 11, 2015. Edmonton's public school district is asking the federal government for extra funds to help support the hundreds of new students arriving in Edmonton. *NATHAN DENETTE / THE CANADIAN PRESS*

Edmonton public school trustees decided last week to send a letter to the federal government asking for \$2 million in funding to help pay for the education of Syrian students arriving in local schools as part of Canada's effort to resettle tens of thousands of refugees fleeing a terrible civil war.

Though the district says it has excellent supports to help newcomers, this latest wave of an estimated 500 students who have arrived since January is putting a strain on Edmonton Public's resources, according to the school board.

Trustees are right to raise this issue. They are in the best position to understand pressures, new and old, on the education system.

In just five years, the number of "English language learners" in Edmonton public schools jumped from 12,600 students in the 2010-11 school year to more than 22,400 as of September 2015, according to a report presented to trustees in February. About 845 of those students — four per cent of the district's total enrolment — were identified as refugees.

Children who have lived through conflict and are adjusting to life in a new country will come to the classroom with needs that demand extra resources.

But it is not an issue that Edmonton's public board should be dealing with in isolation. School districts across Alberta are welcoming Syrian families; there are federally-funded reception centres in Calgary, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat and Red Deer too.

Ultimately, this is a resource question that best belongs on Alberta education minister David Eggen's desk — not that he needs anything else on a plate already heaped with issues.

Like it or not, education, and the resources that go with it, is an area of provincial responsibility. The exception has been the historically woefully underfunded education system for First Nations students who live on reserves — an area that received some welcome attention in Tuesday's federal budget and deserves still more. Those inequities demand

immediate remedy.

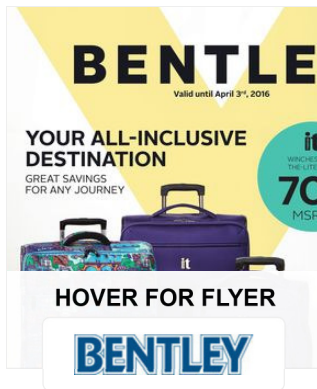
On the provincial front, there needs to be some financial wiggle room for school districts dealing with a sudden influx of students. The current funding model ties a healthy portion of each school district's budget to the number of students in the classroom as of Sept. 30, making it tough to deal with unexpected spikes and extra student needs.

Edmonton's Catholic school district has said it can absorb the needs of several dozen Syrian students without asking for federal funds, but one can understand why the public board is in a different position with hundreds of new students.

This is a situation that Alberta's education minister should discuss with the federal government so that all students can experience the full benefits of the Canadian education system.

Local editorials are the consensus opinion of the Journal's editorial board, comprising Lorne Motley, Kathy Kerr, Sarah O'Donnell and David Evans.

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