

# Edmonton's public school board asks Ottawa for \$2 million to help educate 500 Syrian students



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Edmonton's public school board is looking to the federal government for \$2 million in extra funding to help pay to educate hundreds of Syrian students.

The board estimates about 500 students from refugee families have enrolled in its classrooms since January.

At a March 15 meeting, public school trustees voted unanimously to write a letter asking the federal government for more than \$2 million in assistance.

"We are committed to providing a high-quality education for each and every one of our students," board chairman Michael Janz said in a news release. "But finding resources to integrate hundreds of additional students is a challenge. We feel this is a fair request to make considering this is a federal priority."

The Trudeau Liberals promised during the election last fall to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2015. It later extended the deadline to the end of February. The province partly funds education based on student enrolment figures finalized at the beginning of the school year. But because the new students arrived later in the year, no funds were allocated, the board said.

The motion to request funding was brought forward by trustee Bridget

Stirling, who described the challenge to integrate Syrian newcomers as “far greater than usual.”

“The majority of Syrian newcomers are families with several children under the age of 18, most of whom are attending or expecting to attend Edmonton public schools,” Stirling said. “Our district has excellent supports in place for students ... but the large number of students is placing additional demands on those resources.”

Trustee Ken Gibson spoke in favour of the motion. He said that in a typical year, the district would typically have the capabilities and the resources to deal with the influx of new students, but “extraordinary circumstances” beyond the district’s control had forced their hand.

“We have a unique population coming with unique needs. And to expect, in this transition period mid-year, that we can simply secure and extract the additional specialized resources that we need to give these children the very best start that we possibly can, is a pretty extraordinary undertaking,” said Gibson. “It’s incumbent on us, as trustees, to make sure our federal government representatives are aware of the challenge they have tasked us with.

“Sadly, this is probably not going to be the only year in which we’re going to see large inflows of refugees from the Middle East, or elsewhere, and we need to get our federal partners thinking about that.”

The letter will be sent to the federal government at the end of the month.

Forty-one Syrian students have enrolled in the Edmonton Catholic School District since September. A board spokesperson said Monday the district had no plans to ask the federal government for additional funds.

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