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EMSB to post \$15-million deficit, blames COVID-19

Board chairperson Joe Ortona will ask the Quebec government to cover the COVID-related expenses or face major budget cuts.

Jason Magder • Montreal Gazette
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The EMSB spent an unexpected \$1.75 million to purchase about 800 purifiers in 30 of its 55 buildings in an effort to limit the threat of COVID-19. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

The English Montreal School Board said Wednesday that it's facing a \$15-million budget deficit, with \$10 million being blamed on adaptations to schools and teaching as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The board unveiled the projected shortfall at its monthly meeting Wednesday night. The shortfall forecast is based on expenses incurred up to the end of last year, for the end of the board's financial year on June 30, 2021.



Interim director general Russell Copeman said the shortfall takes into account a \$7.7-million deficit that was already expected because of COVID-related expenses.

Board chairperson Joe Ortona said he's disappointed the Quebec government has not yet committed to covering COVID-related expenses.

"Not a single penny has come from the government, despite the fact that they are the ones giving us these orders," he said.

Because of the pandemic, the board had to make many adaptations to its buildings and its learning

Because of the pandemic, the board had to make many adaptations to its buildings and its learning environments. Among them was the \$1.75-million purchase of about 800 purifiers in all buildings where mechanical ventilation systems are not in place, about 30 of the EMSB's 55 buildings. Other major expenses include \$5 million for distance learning, \$1.6 million for personal protective equipment and \$3 million in lost daycare fees that were reimbursed during the March-June period last year when all schools were closed.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Ortona said the EMSB isn't alone. All school boards and service centres are facing skyrocketing expenses. In fact, the projected deficit could reach higher if there are schools that have to be shut down, or if there are other unforeseen events before the end of the school year, Ortona said.

"The deficit could go down to \$8 million, but it could go up to \$20 million for all we know," he said in a telephone interview Wednesday night.

While the EMSB has been in a battle with the government in recent years about the board's management, Ortona pointed out that the budget the board is working with was put in place by a government-appointed trustee, and nearly all the COVID-related expenses were for measures imposed by the province. He pointed out that the province has already reimbursed municipalities for their COVID-related expenses.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

“It would be such a disservice to cut in areas where the children benefit directly in order to offset these costs that the government should cover,” he said.

“I’m not willing to cut services that benefit the children. If I have to explain why we incurred such a massive deficit, then we’ll explain it. It’s quite simple: here’s a list of the COVID expenses we had, some of which were not budgeted by the government-appointed trustee, some of which were unforeseen.”

During the meeting, Commissioner James Kromida was highly critical of the province, saying the health ministry paid thousands for an assistant to train Public Health Director Horacio Arruda to better communicate at news conferences, but has refused to pay the cost of air purifiers, and still won’t commit to paying for personal protective equipment for staff and students.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

“This plan (for COVID measures) was not costed, which is beyond my understanding,” he said.

Commissioner Joseph Lalla called the situation “shameful.” Adding that the province “has not paid a single penny for students across the province.”

The EMSB reported a total of 200 COVID-19 cases among students and staff from mid-January until Feb. 12, compared with 338 in the last four months of 2020. Lester B. Pearson posted 129 positive cases from Jan. 4 to Feb. 14, compared with 166 from Sept. 11 to Dec. 16.

As of Wednesday, no EMSB schools were closed because of outbreaks.

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