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## Toronto schools pay high prices for small jobs

Published on Thursday June 21, 2012



1 of 6

The work in question was carried out by some of the 900-strong maintenance and construction trades people who have an exclusive contract with the Toronto District School Board.

MOIRA WELSH/TORONTO STAR

**Moira Welsh and Kevin Donovan**

Staff Reporters

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Here's what taxpayers were charged for work done at Toronto public schools:

Installing a \$17 pencil sharpener: \$143 to put in four screws.

The installation of a sign on a school's front lawn: \$19,000



News Video

An electrical outlet on the wall in a school library: \$3,000

A “breakfast club” kitchen: \$250,000

When the librarian at the electrical outlet school saw the bill she hit the roof, wondering at “the number of books that could have been purchased with \$3000.”

A Star investigation has found examples of charges that are out of whack with the amount of work done. The work in question was carried out by some of the 900-strong maintenance and construction trades people who have an exclusive contract with the [Toronto District School Board](#). In the case of the electrical plug, the job took four hours, but taxpayers were billed 76 hours, which sources say was done to account for the time of idle workers who had no assignments that week.

What makes the situation so serious is that Toronto public schools are facing a [budget crunch](#) so deep one trustee called it a “bloodbath.” Trustees must find \$109 million in [cuts](#), which may cut supports for special needs students, and close some classrooms and cafeterias.

**More:** [Toronto teachers stage protest to answer the public's questions about education cuts](#)

Principals, trustees and parents say that much needed work on Toronto's aging schools is not getting done. Principals were terrified of repercussions from their management and the union and would not go on the record for this story. Some who have complained say they have been threatened by the union with losing their jobs if they speak up.

Union boss Jimmy Hazel, when first asked about these high costs two weeks ago, unleashed a stream of profanity at a Star reporter.

“We don't need to f----- prove anything to anybody about costs,” Hazel said. “A s---load more work was done to justify the cost of that plug job I can tell you.”

Hazel protested that “we have a lot of enemies at the (school) board as well as a lot of friends.”

Later in the conversation, Hazel cooled down and vowed that heads would roll in his own union hall if the Star's information were true.

“If you are right, I will stand behind you in the paper and say it is a problem and you can come with me while I investigate,” Hazel said.

Hazel presides over an unusual organization, sort of a construction company with an exclusive contract with the public board. The almost 900 electricians, plumbers, carpenters and maintenance workers are paid as TDSB employees, but the union has a great deal of say in what they do.

Hazel spent a week on his investigation and also hired a crisis communication consultant. In some of the cases, including the pencil sharpener and the electrical outlet, Hazel now says the problem was a “clerical error” and much of the money was refunded to the schools in question.

The TDSB's chief facilities officer, Angelos Bacopoulos, said in an interview that the board realizes they have a serious problem.

“How widespread it is, I do not know,” Bacopoulos said.

He is trying to fix the system, but faces opposition from the union. The contract with the union expires this August and negotiations will begin in September, a TDSB spokesperson said.

In one of a series of emails Hazel sent the Star over the past week, Hazel downplayed the examples.

“Our division processes approximately 190,000 work orders annually. Regrettably some errors happen in work orders, time slips or in the electronic coding of this information,” Hazel wrote.

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"Our division at the TDSB has a customer service approach that allows any principal or facility supervisor to contact either the skilled trades department or management or both with complaints about work, costs and billing. We will follow up and correct errors. We learn from them, try to find the cause and correct it."

The Star has requested a copy of the massive TDSB database that tracks the work at schools, but it has not yet been released. The database contains, each year, records of roughly 1.8 million person hours of work claimed by the board's unionized electricians, plumbers and carpenters. They are paid in total about \$72 million annually in salaries.

Toronto's public system has the oldest schools in the province, with almost two-thirds of them built in 1950 and 1960. Last year alone, \$61.7 million of capital and maintenance work identified by principals did not get done. All told, the board estimates it would cost \$3 billion to bring the schools to a safe and well-maintained level.

**More:** [Toronto school trustees balance budget](#)

Each year, principals at the almost 600 public schools across Toronto submit requests to get work done. Under a longstanding agreement with Jimmy Hazel's Maintenance and Construction Skilled Trades Council, almost all of that work must be performed by its members, who are TDSB employees. Projects larger than \$1.5 million, or those requiring special skills, can only be done by companies whose workers are part of affiliated unions.

Principals are given budgets for repairs at their school and are asked to prioritize the work.

When the call came in early 2012 to install a new electrical outlet in the library (the librarian wanted to plug in a projector and create a new "learning space" for students) at Albert Campbell Collegiate Institute in Scarborough, it seemed like an easy request. Since it involved electrical work, union rules required two TDSB electricians to be dispatched. The job, which involved attaching a plug to the library wall and then running cable through the suspended ceiling to an electrical panel, took two hours (four person hours in total).

TDSB documents show the bill reflected 76 hours of work, for a total cost of \$2,895.78 (electricians at the board are paid roughly \$38 per hour).

The job was done on Feb. 13. School principal Roy Hu objected to the cost and wrote to the board to complain, according to a string of emails obtained by the Star.

"There were 2 board tradesmen who came in that morning and the job was completed by mid-morning. I cannot imagine how 2 TDSB employees for some 2 odd hours, supplies and materials would cost over \$3000?"

His superintendent (school principals in a district report to a superintendent) took up the case, and in an email to others at the board, Colleen Russell raised the electrical outlet as "an example of a long-standing concern that school principals have had with regards to the exorbitant charges for minor services."

Russell said it was important to look into the matter as debates about the board budget "rage on." Russell wrote that schools should figure out a way to pay market rate and noted that she had "an even higher quote for the same service" in her board office.

"The Librarian (at Albert Campbell) was quite upset because of the number of books that could have been purchased with \$3000. I have attached the picture (of the outlet) she sent to me but saved you from her email," Russell wrote.

TDSB superintendent Russell refused to speak to the Star about her email. The Star also tried to interview TDSB boss Chris Spence and deputy operations director Penny Mustin (Bacopoulos reports to her) but they refused.

The Star asked Union boss Hazel about the electrical outlet job and he offered several reasons for the high bill, at one point speculating that there must have been asbestos in the roof and his

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workers might have had to don “space suits.” At the end, Hazel said it was an “error in the data entry” on the work order.

TDSB emails show about \$2,000 was refunded to the school’s account after the principal complained.

A source with knowledge of this project told the Star that the four person hour electrical outlet job was padded with 72 additional hours to justify paying the salary of other electricians who had no work to do. The source also told the Star that Hazel has now determined that he has too many electricians, and as many as seven have recently been laid off.

At the Toronto Catholic District School Board, a school system about half the size of the public board, only 70 workers are employed full-time. Other work is contracted out. Spokesperson Angelo Sangiorgio said it would not “make sense” to employ more because there is not enough plumbing or electrical work to keep trades people busy.

Another job the Star looked into involved installing a pencil sharpener at Sir John A. Macdonald Collegiate in 2009. The school purchased the sharpener at Grand and Toy at a cost of \$17.

Principals and custodial staff have long been told that Hazel’s union must do the bulk of the work at schools. The principal at the school, Rick Tarasuk, requested installation of the sharpener and a crew was sent out by the TDSB. The sharpener has five screws. It was installed with only four screws under a bookshelf.

Tarasuk was shocked at the cost and raised the issue at a meeting of east end principals. TDSB director Chris Spence was in attendance and vowed to have the charge reversed.

Later, when the Star asked Hazel why it cost \$143 to install the pencil sharpener, Hazel passed on TDSB emails that labelled the charge a “clerical error.” Sources say Hazel then called school Tarasuk and threatened to use his influence to have him fired. Hazel told the popular principal he would do this by “going upstairs” to the school’s board of directors. Hazel told the Star in an email this week that while “I can’t have anyone fired,” he is going to talk to TDSB director Spence and complain about Tarasuk because he thinks the principal’s conduct could rate “termination” in most workplaces.

The TDSB has told the Star that it has now sent a message out to school caretakers (who work for a different union) instructing them that they may install pencil sharpeners.

At the same school, Sir John A. Macdonald Collegiate, the principal has raised questions about the almost \$40,000 to purchase and install a school sign in 2008. Tarasuk, who came to the school in 2009, raised a complaint about the cost of installation, which was half the bill, and would have represented 500 hours of labour or two electricians working for 14 days.

The 1.8-metre-high electric sign allows the school to post announcements remotely. The sign was purchased for \$19,000 from a Cambridge company. The TDSB trades charged \$19,000 to install it. Installation included a cement foundation and running a wire underground to the school office. An official at the Cambridge company estimated it should cost about \$2,000 to install the sign.

Hazel passed on internal TDSB correspondence that said his trades did the installation for \$19,000, which he said was about \$2,000 less than the original estimate given the school.

The Star also looked into the installation of a “breakfast club” kitchen at a Toronto school, one of a series of kitchens the TDSB is building to help prepare breakfasts for students in low-income areas. The kitchen built at Firgrove School, which measures about 4.3 metres by 2.4 metres, cost taxpayers \$250,000.

Installation of the kitchen, in 2007, was done by a Toronto company. According to the contract between the TDSB and Hazel’s trade council (a grouping of unions) only companies that employ workers who are part of unions affiliated with the trade council are eligible for work on school property.

Union boss Hazel said it would be “inappropriate” to comment on the kitchen job because his trade council was not involved.

In a response to the Star, the TDSB said the contract for the kitchen was awarded to the lowest bidder. The kitchen was a “commercial kitchen” with stainless steel counters. “Fire suppression systems” had to be installed, which raised the cost, a board spokesperson said. The Star requested documents related to the project but the TDSB did not provide them.

Moirá Welsh can be reached at [mwelsh@thestar.ca](mailto:mwelsh@thestar.ca). Kevin Donovan can be reached at (416) 312-3503

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The Trustees are trying to look like the good guys at the TDSB. Why are they there getting a paycheck? The Board could run without any of them. They never do anything and when you try to speak to them, they're not available. Thats a waste of money.

Jul 12, 2012 2:05 PM [Agree](#) (0) [Disagree](#) (0)



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#### Michael R full of it

If you think anyone believes that bull. You're as dumb as I thought. You must be in on it.

Jul 12, 2012 8:50 AM [Agree](#) (0) [Disagree](#) (1)



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#### Union and management

This is when they work great together. Behind the scenes ripping off taxpayers AGAIN. Yes! Again. Meaning their ripping us off somewhere else. Payroll and benefits.

Jul 12, 2012 8:46 AM [Agree](#) (1) [Disagree](#) (0)



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#### This is criminal

This piss-ant Hazel should be investigated and what follows after found guilty.

Jul 12, 2012 8:42 AM [Agree](#) (0) [Disagree](#) (0)