

# TDSB trustee Irene Atkinson in critical condition after house fire

Veteran Toronto District School Board trustee Irene Atkinson is in critical condition in hospital after a fire in her west-end home Saturday night.



SCHOOL TRUSTEE  
IRENE ATKINSON

Feisty school board trustee Irene Atkinson is fighting for her life after a fire in her High Park home Saturday night.

“This news has hit the trustees and indeed the entire (Toronto District School Board) community very hard,” said board vice-chair Shaun Chen at a news conference Sunday. “We are hoping and praying that she will recover and by all accounts, trustee Atkinson is a fighter.”

Toronto Fire district chief Stephan Powell said emergency responders performed CPR at the scene after Atkinson was found inside her home on High Park Blvd., after the two-alarm blaze broke out in the kitchen around 7 p.m.

Atkinson was taken to hospital, where she was put on life support.

Another woman, who made the call to 911, had to be rescued off

the third-floor balcony because the smoke was too thick to come down through the house.

If anyone can fight the odds, it's Atkinson, say those who know her.

“She's a firebrand and a maverick with a strong bulls--- meter and she's able to be very articulate in telling people 'you're full of it,’” recalled longtime union leader John Weatherup, head of the board's support staff union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees 4400.

The union is part of the Campaign for Public Education network, which threw Atkinson a dinner party and affectionate roast in December to mark her 40th year in public life — which included a carton of cigarettes as a joke for the longtime smoker, known to step out of board meetings at regular intervals for a puff even when she was board chair in 2000.

Among those who attended the tribute was former school trustee Fiona Nelson, who said if Atkinson is sidelined politically, “it will leave a big hole on the board — she was always making a big noise on behalf of children but it was a useful voice for the public to hear.”

Although Nelson recalled Atkinson at times “had a terrible tongue, it was never personal, but she was defending students and children with vigour — and sometimes venom.”

Mayor Rob Ford told CP24 “I'm sure everyone in the city will say a prayer for her.” Premier Kathleen Wynne said Sunday she had worked closely with Atkinson when they were both trustees, and expressed hope for recovery for a woman she described as “a wonderful individual and a force of nature; the kind of person you never imagine could come to any harm.”

With her gravel voice, Atkinson shoots straight from the lip and often serves up a blunt reality check into long-winded debates among the board's 22 trustees — often quoting the parents and community members with whom she works closely.

First elected as a school trustee back in 1972, the single mother of three daughters has served for all but three years as trustee for Parkdale-High Park. Before that she ran a daycare centre in a west-end church to which Nelson, who taught early childhood education at George Brown College at the time, would send students for training, partly because Atkinson integrated children of different abilities, highly innovative at the time.

“You think mother tigers are fierce? Irene Atkinson was a ferocious advocate for any child in her care,” said Nelson, who recalled Atkinson devising a very creative curriculum for a blind girl.

Atkinson later wrote the board's policy on daycare centres located in its schools, and the policy remains largely untouched to this day, noted Nelson.

“Not many people know that Irene's roots are in early childhood education and nutrition and giving moms a voice in child care,” noted board director Donna Quan Sunday. “She was a pioneer for integrative thinking long before there was even a word for it.”

CUPE's John Weatherup said Atkinson has been an outspoken advocate for children from both right and left ends of the political spectrum; from her early days as a card-carrying Progressive Conservative to her more recent life as a staunch New Democrat. Atkinson told the Star once it was the extreme politics of former premier Mike Harris that turned her politics from right to left. "Harris changed me," Atkinson told the Star in 2002; "Harris came in with his Common Sense Revolution and the (school) funding model, and we lost our right to tax — and I changed. I did not like what he stood for."

As a New Democrat, she ran for provincial politics in 1999 against Liberal Gerard Kennedy and lost.

"I lost big-time," she admitted at the time, "but I've never worked so hard. The thought that I would have run for the NDP provincially would never have occurred to me (before). But Harris provoked me."

In 2010, Atkinson was re-elected as trustee with 70 per cent of the vote in Ward 7. She has been a tireless advocate for more funding for education from "the pink palace" — her nickname for Queen's Park.

Trustee Sheila Cary-Meagher also was elected in 1972 for the first time and called Atkinson "smart and hard-working; she was a red Tory who became a Dipper (NDPer)."

City Councillor Josh Matlow served as trustee alongside Atkinson and although he said they did not always agree, "if she screamed at you, you knew it was never personal; it was about the kids and you had to respect her for that.

"That's why the city loves her and cares about her."

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