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MLAs defer education budget

Tensions rise over miscommunication about junior kindergarten and reduced class time pilot project

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Northern News Services
Wednesday, February 22, 2017

SOMBA K'E/YELLOWKNIFE

MLAs sat in the assembly past 8 p.m. Monday night only to defer the Education, Culture and Employment budget, which they began reviewing last Thursday.

Several regular members dedicated their opening comments on Friday to addressing poor communication of education initiatives such as junior kindergarten and a pilot program to reduce classroom instruction hours across the territory.

"I just want to impress on the minister that we really need to improve the communication with the public and with the regular MLAs around these initiatives so that he can turn us into supporters instead of adversaries," said Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green on Friday.

Her statements were echoed by Nahendeh MLA Shane Thompson, Frame Lake MLA Kevin O'Reilly, and Kam Lake MLA Kieron Testart, who asked what the minister is doing to improve the department's "severely lacking" communications.

Education Minister Alfred Moses admitted the department could have done a better job rolling out information to the public and regular MLAs about junior kindergarten. Concerns had swirled over whether it would be fully funded after an all-but-clear statement on the program was made during the budget address Feb. 1.

Even now, some school officials wonder whether the "full funding" that has been promised will cover buses and other education programming.

On Monday, the minister confirmed education authorities will have to make administrative cuts as junior kindergarten is rolled out this year, something Yellowknife Catholic Schools is also expecting to do.

"We are working on our communications protocol and making sure that we're making it as sufficient as we can in the future," Moses said. "We take it as a learning experience and we'll be learning from this."

Deputy minister of Education, Culture and Employment Sylvia Haener said the department takes communications seriously.

"One of the realities that we face, however, is that there are often several different speakers when it comes to communication," Haener said. "At times the messaging is not consistent between us in the ministry and the education authorities, because

we're not always in agreement on how to structure and proceed with different programs."

Specifically regarding junior kindergarten, Tu Nedhe-Willideh MLA Tom Beaulieu expressed concern about the well-being of students who will enter the program requiring inclusive schooling.

"There is a high number of those students in the small communities, and it's not being funded," he said. "Now, on top of that, we're adding four-year-olds with no targeted inclusive schooling dollars and no targeted aboriginal language instruction."

MLAs aren't only worried about students losing education funding, but class time, a subject Green brought up in the assembly on Friday.

"There are some significant loose ends around instructional hours at this point," she said, asking the education minister for clarification on behalf of parents who she said have been calling her seeking answers on the pilot program to reduce instructional hours.

Moses said parents should talk to school principals, as each school is developing an individual plan to reduce class time by up to 100 hours a year.

Green said the minister's response "completely misses the point."

"This is an agreement between the GNWT and the teachers' association," she said.

"The onus is on the GNWT to communicate with parents about the (agreement) that they reached with the teachers' association and to be proactive in telling them what this project is about."

O'Reilly added it would have been "helpful" if MLAs were informed about the collective agreements, especially as they are now faced with the prospect of amending a bill in order to allow the pilot program to take effect. Right now, the minimum number of instructional hours the Education Act requires per year for students in Grades 7 through 12 is 1,045, and this number will have to change to accommodate the collective agreement.

Green questioned Moses on Monday about how teachers will feel if one school cuts more hours than others.

"If I'm a Grade 3 teacher and my hours are reduced by 100, and I'm a high school teacher and my hours are reduced by 50, then what kind of compensation or incentive or other acknowledgment will I receive that, in fact, my hours have not been reduced by a total of 100 or near 100?" she asked.

Moses replied there would be no compensation.

"I think some of the incentives would be for the teachers to be able to get some planning done, assess what is going on in the classrooms, as well as the professional development side," he said.

"I am sure all these things are being brought up as the schools are developing their instructional hours."

The minister agreed to set up a technical briefing on the pilot program for MLAs, in order to clarify their concerns.

A public meeting between the education minister and the Standing Committee on Social Development was scheduled to take place on the pilot program last night.



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