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MLAs skeptical of reducing class time

Committee questions process, benefits for students

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SOMBA K'E/YELLOWKNIFE

MLAs are questioning whether a three-year pilot program to reduce class time by up to 100 hours a year across the NWT is truly about improving graduation rates and student success.

The Standing Committee on Social Development got a briefing on the project Tuesday night at the legislative assembly, nearly a month after the Department of Education, Culture and Employment made it public through a media briefing and presentations to parents.

"There's more to graduation rates than just instructional hours," said Kieron Testart, MLA for Kam Lake.

"I wonder if this pilot project - is it really motivated by improving those outcomes, or is it really motivated to improve the workload of teachers?"

He added it isn't clear if reducing class time is the "silver bullet" for improving student success, despite charts and graphs on Canadian graduation rates that were shown to members during the presentation.

Education, Culture and Employment Minister Alfred Moses said the idea is two-sided; the department wants to improve both student outcomes and teacher wellness.

Fraser Oliver, president of the Northwest Territories Teachers' Association, cited a chart showing teachers are working an average 52 hours a week.

But Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green questioned whether the studies used to determine teachers are overworked are accurate enough. In one 2015 survey conducted by the education department, only 15.6 per cent of NWT educators responded.

Frame Lake MLA Kevin O'Reilly wanted to know whether the deal to reduce class time was driven by the department's reduction targets. On Feb. 17 in the legislative assembly, O'Reilly said there have been comments floating around that the GNWT and teacher's association signed off on the pilot project in their collective agreement as a way to avoid paying teachers more money. Moses replied that the project was in no way related to fiscal reductions.

Moses explained evaluations will be done year-to-year at each individual school, as "all our schools are different," he said. But no evaluation model exists as of yet.

The education department is working on developing one to measure student and teacher progress each year, and for the life of the three-year project, according to assistant deputy minister Rita Mueller.

The pilot program is optional, but so far 10 schools have submitted proposals that show reductions between 45 to 65 hours a year, according to Oliver.

NWT students in Grades 1 to 6 are currently required to spend 997 hours a year in school, while students in Grades 7 to 12 are required to be in class for at least 1,045 hours.

Tension rose when MLAs began asking about the decision-making process of the pilot project, which aims to reduce the legislated minimum class time for students between Grades 1 to 12 to 945 hours a year. The NWT Education Act needs to be amended for reductions to occur by the start of the 2017-18 school year.

"In future, I think the legislative intentions should be well canvassed with MLAs ahead of time, especially before those decisions have been made available to the public," Testart said.

Some MLAs have made a fuss with the education minister in the past few weeks because they weren't informed right away that the collective agreement between the GNWT and the teachers' association included the pilot project.

Testart said MLAs could jeopardize the MOU if they don't sign off on the legislative changes. A bill to amend the act has passed its second reading and is now under the review of a standing committee.

Deputy minister Sylvia Haener tried to reassure members by explaining that many NWT schools are already far above the legislated minimum class time, therefore they would still be able to reduce their instructional hours if the bill did not pass. She said the pilot project was carefully designed to function without the legislative changes, if required.

That didn't impress Green.

"Now I have sort of a double feeling of futility. First, we had no hand in talking about this direction, and now we're not needed to endorse it," Green said. "What is it that you are looking for from us?"

After the deputy minister attempted to explain, she then asked the minister to respond to her question. "This is not just to come and have this discussion for the sake of having the discussion," Moses said. "We need to show that we need to make these legislative changes that will allow for that flexibility up to 100 hours."



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