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Public voices education fears

Visiting committee urged to reject proposed changes to class time, junior kindergarten

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HAY RIVER

A public hearing in Hay River on April 12 left little doubt what many people think of the territorial government's plans to make fundamental changes to the education system.

Proposed changes to the Education Act in Bill 16 - a decrease of up to 100 hours per year in instructional time and introduction of junior kindergarten next school year - were roundly criticized in front of five MLAs on the legislative assembly's Standing Committee on Social Development.

Jane Groenewegen, who has five grandchildren in the education system, was blistering in her criticism of the proposals.

Stressing she has respect for educators and nothing against professional development time, Groenewegen said she was suspicious how the idea of reduced instructional time came about.

"Who precipitated this idea?" she asked. "Did the teachers come and say we need this many more days off from teaching?"

"Or is this something that's thrown on the table during union negotiations with the NWTTA (Northwest Territories Teachers' Association) about how the GNWT could make them happy without putting any real money on the table?"

Standing committee member Frederick Blake, MLA for Mackenzie Delta, confirmed the idea was brought up in union negotiations.

"That's what we were told," he said. "It was agreed to in their negotiations. So now the department is trying to change the act so that they can live up to that."

Groenewegen said the GNWT has been skimping out and cheating education for many years.

"And they keep coming up with these crazy, far-flung, kneejerk, all-over-the-map solutions to things," she said. "Junior kindergarten is one of them."

She said junior kindergarten gives no thought to the fact communities such as Hay River and Yellowknife have programs like Aboriginal Head Start and the Hay River Playschool.

"Did anybody think about that before they decided to gut those programs by pulling all the four year olds out?" she asked.

Groenewegen called on the MLAs to fight the changes, noting they have the power of numbers against cabinet.

"The education of our children is a hill to die on," she said.

Louise Schumann, vice-chairperson of the Hay River District Education Authority (DEA), read a letter the organization submitted to the standing committee on Bill 16.

Schumann noted junior kindergarten students are among the highest needs students in terms of supervision, care and attention.

"It is inconceivable to expect one teacher to serve 16 four-year olds who would otherwise benefit from pupil-teacher ratios of nine to one in day homes and Head Start programs," she stated.

"In addition, JK is also happening without any additional education assistants, aides or supports, which will provide an exceedingly challenging work environment for all staff."

As for the decrease in instructional time, Schumann stated, "School boards and the public are being blindsided by a decision that was made back in September of 2016 and are now expected to be in support of something they know very little about."

Elizabeth McKay, vice-chair of the South Slave Divisional Education Council and chair of the Fort Resolution DEA, told the committee the school system in the region always needs more funding.

McKay said that will be made worse by having to implement the two proposed changes.

"You just can't give us no funding and try and get us to implement new initiatives," she said.

Chief Roy Fabian of K'atlodeeche First Nation said the proposed cutback of instructional time is a big concern.

"The instructional time is probably really important to make sure that the kids are going to get all of the time they need to be able to educate properly for this day and age," Fabian said.

Nahendeh MLA Shane Thompson, chair of the standing committee, noted each school will be allowed to find its own appropriate reduction in instructional time up to 100 hours a year, and that will be done in consultation with DEAs, and approved by school board superintendents and the Department of Education, Culture and Employment.

Schumann of the Hay River DEA noted it has approved a reduction of 60 hours.

Julie Green, MLA for Yellowknife Centre, noted a reduction of 100 hours a year works out to 16 days of school a year.

Green pointed out the concern that MLAs hear most often is that 100 hours mean students will lose a whole year of education while in school, and will they have enough time to complete the Alberta curriculum.

The reduction of instructional time is a three-year pilot project, which Green noted is significant.

"It's my understanding that by calling this reduced instructional hours a pilot project that the change in legislation is desired but not necessary," she said.

"And so I think that if we say, 'No. We don't agree with this,' that they could go ahead with the reduced instructional hours anyway."

The MLA said she is not sure the standing committee can put the brakes on what's going to happen for the next school year, since the department has indicated legislative changes are desirable but not mandatory.

Green said the department's memorandum of understanding with the teachers' union might mean the changes in instructional time are a fait accompli.

"We were told the changes needed to happen and our job was to make them happen," she said.

Green recognizes what that means to the consultation process, including the hearing in Hay River.

"And I very much regret if this turns out to be a giant waste of time, both of your time and mine, but that is a possibility," she said.

The standing committee was also seeking feedback on Bill 18, an act to amend the Health and Social Services Professions Act. However, no one at the hearing mentioned that bill. The standing committee also held hearings in Yellowknife and Inuvik.

It will prepare a report on its findings for the legislative assembly.



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