

EDUCATION: Bargaining time spent arguing over when meeting was to start

Catholic talks stalled again

BY PATRICK CASEY
 STAFF WRITER

After a day of confusion and just 95 minutes of negotiating talks between York Region's Catholic school board and its teachers have broken off.

Despite calls from parents for both parties to bargain until an agreement is reached, both sides say they will wait for provincial mediator Bruce Janisse to call them back to the bargaining table.

The two sides spent nearly 17 hours at the table Wednesday, but most of Thursday's bargaining time was lost in a disagreement over when the meeting was to start.

The union thought the session was to start at noon, but the board thought talks were to start at 9:30 p.m. The two sides didn't meet until the evening and walked away from the table just after 11 p.m.

"Even if you get past the potential of a mix-up of when the thing was going to start, it was clear the board had no intention of going anywhere with their proposals," said Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association district president Ihor Baczynsky.

Parents are fighting to get their children back into school. They met with Education Minister Dave Johnson last week and have another meeting sched-

uled for 11 a.m. Monday. They are scheduled to stage a rally today at the board offices in Aurora.

But despite their pleas, the two sides remain far apart.

"We were never negotiating a new contract, we were only negotiating to get the children back in class," board vice-chairperson Elizabeth Crowe said. "We want to find a solution to this, but we haven't even received a response from the union to several proposals we presented them last weekend. We are negotiating with ourselves."

Schools could close doors

Baczynsky said the union is offering to send all teachers back to class if the board agrees to maintain the current collective agreement while negotiations continue. But Crowe said that solution would force the board to hire 100 new high school teachers to handle the additional classes teachers are being asked to instruct.

Furthermore, there are not enough principals, vice-principals and support staff on hand in the schools to make that option work, she said.

"You need qualified staff to teach courses like science and computers," Crowe added. "You can't have a Grade 2 teacher watching a Grade 10 class."

The board may be forced to close its 71 schools if parents continue to demand children be in class, with or without their teachers.

About 100 students from St. Michael Catholic Academy in Thornhill showed up for school Thursday and Friday, as part of a protest initiated by exasperated parents.

The campaign is showing signs of spreading across the region, and if that happens, the board will close all of its schools. "We will be making day-by-day assessments with our principals, but if necessary, we will move to close the schools," superintendent Barbara Bodkin said.

While striking teachers took their picket signs to the board headquarters in Aurora, several educational assistants and a host of parent volunteers supervised the children at St. Michael.

But classes were reduced to little more than creative writing and drawing lessons.

With nine lost days of class and negotiations broken off, the St. Michael school council is drafting a \$10-million class action lawsuit, naming the school board, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association and its local unit, Education Minister Dave Johnson and Premier Mike Harris.

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