

EDUCATION: Minister sends letter to Ontario school boards

Teachers 'not welcome' on local school councils

BY JENNIFER BROWN
STAFF WRITER

Teachers are no longer welcome at their school councils, following a directive from Education Minister Dave Johnson that they and other school board employees not be elected as members this fall.

In a letter to all school boards sent out Sept. 23, Johnson indicates each board should prevent its teachers and other employees from running in parent council elections.

York Region public board superintendent Bill Gordon said he has yet to see the letter from Johnson, but a meeting of senior staff has been set for Monday to review the issue.

But Gordon notes three-quarters of the school council elections in the region have already been held.

Many current council members don't understand what all the fuss is about.

"We have three teachers on our council and we're very happy — it works very well," said Brian

Welpton, past chairperson of the Maple Leaf Public School council. "We get good input from teachers."

Welpton says teachers were key in the planning of a new playground at the school.

"They're the ones who know what the kids are doing at recess," he said.

The Education Improvement Commission is in the middle of province-wide public meetings on the role of school councils, but already concluded teachers may intimidate other parents.

But teachers don't know understand the conflict.

"People on these councils aren't intimidated by teachers," Gerry Harrison, president of the York Region branch of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation.

"I've had members ask me how they can do that — we're taxpayers and we're parents."

Before becoming union leader, Harrison served as a teacher representative on a secondary school council in the region.

School councils hold discussions around school plans and budgets among other items — things teachers can provide input on, Harrison says.

He says some schools would be hard-pressed to form a school council without staff and teacher members.

"We had a really hard time trying to get enough parents out," he said. "At that level, sometimes a son or daughter don't want you involved."

At Rogers Public School in Newmarket, school council chairperson John Crawford and the executive have already fired off a letter to Johnson outlining their concerns.

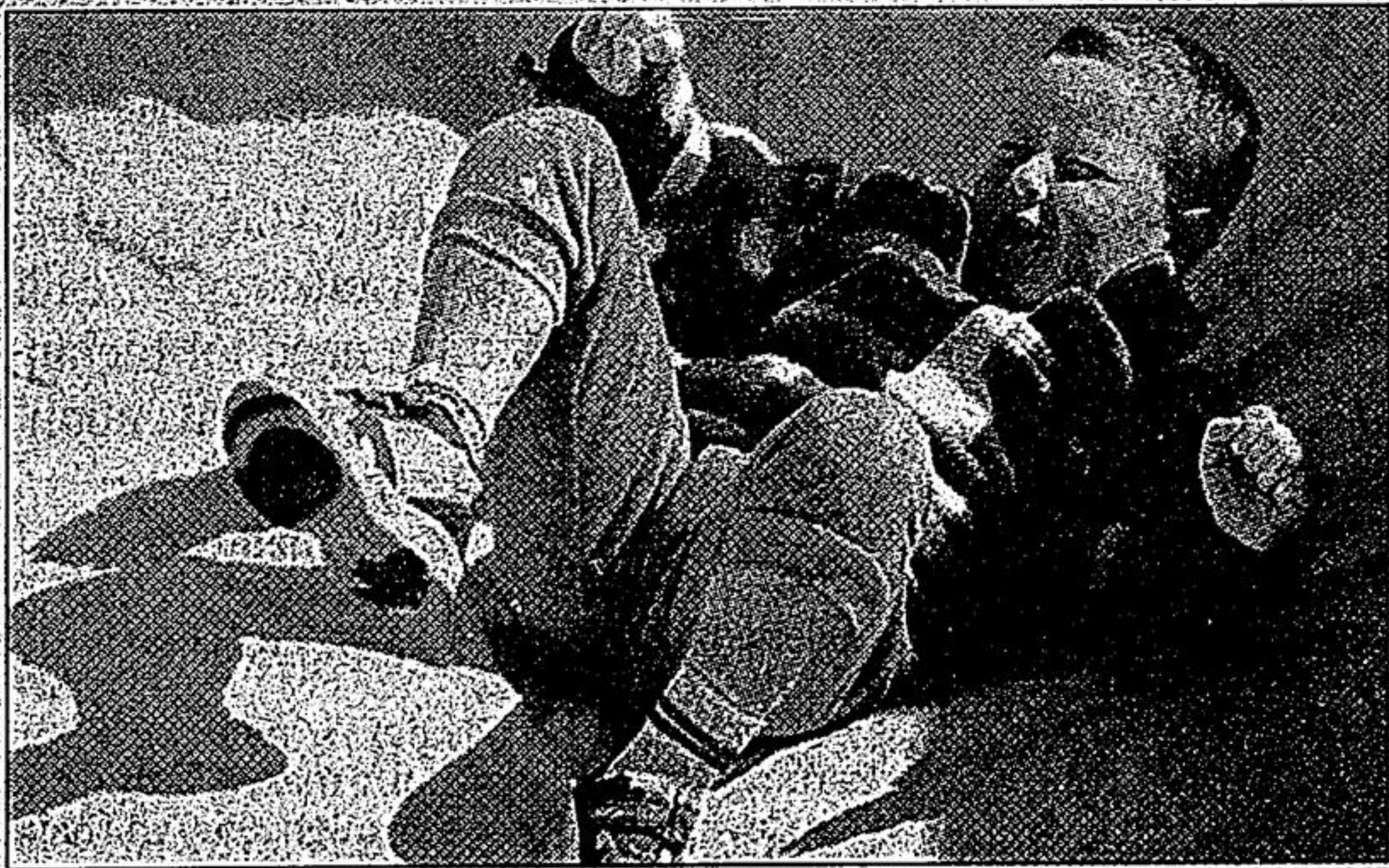
"...we find the underlying suggestion that parents and the school community cannot be effectively represented by teachers and/or board employees who are elected to council repugnant. These individuals bring a wealth of insight and knowledge to council, and do so with the sole intent of enhancing the school environment," Crawford wrote.

SEALING A DEAL



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Wang Xilong, chief economic advisor for the Xuzhou Municipal People's Government in China, talks to local officials and business representatives at the new Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville municipal offices on Sandiford Drive. Xilong was part of a touring group of Chinese delegates to visit the area as part of a friendship pact with local businesses Thursday. Xilong and Mayor Wayne Emmerson signed a friendship agreement at the forum, while business owners passed out cards and shook hands. Xilong brought six colleagues with him from China in hopes to further build business relationships with the town, which began in mid-June when Stouffville officials visited Asia. The group signed papers then headed to Sleepy Hollow Golf and Country Club for lunch.



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

HARD BOUNCE

Ryan McQuinn enjoys one of the many rides at the Markham Fair midway opening day Thursday. The fair runs through the weekend. Today's highlights include sheep shearing at Old MacDonald's Barn at 10:30 a.m. and throughout the day; Magician Glenn Ottaway in the entertainment tent at 11:30 a.m.; face painting from noon to 4 p.m. and, of course, a medley of food booths and entertainment shows. Don't miss the fireworks display at dusk.

Teachers want minimum student disruption, union says

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Barker insists if teachers simply agree to continue their current schedules and working conditions, their contracts can be renewed with no other changes.

"The agreement's there, all we're saying is come to the table and let's finalize the language," said Barker, chairperson of the board's negotiation committee.

Until a deal is reached, Barker predicts the unknown will only

cause anxiety for teachers and students in the classroom — especially now that the union has a strike mandate.

Benedict says the "worst-case scenario" would see teachers walking out by Halloween. And even then, it may be a series of rotating strikes.

"It's a strategy teachers are most comfortable with and is a minimum disruption to students," she said.

Considered low compared to

past strike votes, the 77 per cent mandate hasn't shaken the confidence of union leaders.

"Teachers had two weeks of the political protest last year and some teachers are still feeling the aftermath of that, both emotionally and financially," said Benedict. "I think it was a very thoughtful vote by York Region teachers."

The next step for the union is to hold three strike registration days next week, at the Howard Johnson hotel in Aurora and the Crystal

Fountain in Markham.

During these days, teachers can indicate whether they will be walking a picket line and register for strike pay.

Talks are also continuing with high school teachers, with a full day of talks ending Thursday and plans to reschedule for next week.

Barker said the key issues with secondary teachers revolve around staffing and the high cost of York teacher salaries, which she says average \$3,000 more than teachers

in the rest of Ontario.

The board wants teachers to instruct 6.5 periods out of eight per day, compared to the union's demands for a return to six out of eight.

The board argues it needs the 6.5 periods per teacher in order to meet the province's average class size limit of 22 students.

"It's either the provincial wage and the provincial workload, or York Region wage and the York Region workload," said Barker.

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