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New class time rules anger teachers unions

BY GIANNI COLAVECCHIA
Staff Writer

York Region teachers unions are slamming the province's new, stricter definition of instructional time, but they're still optimistic it won't prevent them reaching a contract later this year.

Education Minister Janet Ecker has announced she will enact a regulation that defines teaching time and excludes the hours teachers spend covering for absent colleagues.

VOLUNTARY ACTIVITIES

She has threatened to force teachers to supervise extra-curricular activities if they resist.

Ihor Baczynsky, president of the York Catholic Teachers' Association, said compelling teachers to perform voluntary activities goes too far.

"Basically, what you are looking at is a dictatorship," he said. Baczynsky said it's unfair to keep changing the rules governing teachers.

"This government has legislated every change to the point where (it has) become very intrusive in collective bargaining," he said.

Despite this, Baczynsky said it won't be hard to hammer out a collective agreement when instructors' contracts expire later this year.

Gerry Harrison, president of the York Region branch of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, said it will be a lot harder to reach a settlement now than if the regulation didn't exist.

"I don't think it would be impossible to get a deal but it would be much harder. There's no doubt about that," he said.

Teachers are looking for a salary increase but it's unlikely they will strike in September, he added.

Harrison criticized Ecker's plan, saying any time a teacher deals with a student is instructional time.

"It's a pretty narrow view to say the only time you're instructing students is when you're in front of a classroom," he said.

Bill 160, the controversial education reform that prompted illegal teachers' strikes across Ontario two years ago, requires instructors to set aside more than four hours a day in instructional time. Board and union officials agreed the time spent covering for absent teachers would count as instructional time.

Oak Ridges MPP Frank Klees admitted the plan may cause problems during negotiations, but said it's necessary.

"We wouldn't even be having

this discussion if everyone had abided by the original legislation. The boards have become very creative in justifying what instructional time is," he said.

"Apparently we have to tell them how to interpret (instructional time) because the first time, many boards didn't get it right," he said. "We have no choice but to help them interpret it so the message is very clear."

York Catholic school board chairperson Elizabeth Crowe said officials are trying to find a method of scheduling that meets the new definition of instructional time.

SOLUTION POSSIBLE

"What this government is doing is taking away our flexibility," she said.

"Though this has put a wrinkle in our negotiations, I think we can find a solution that will work in York Region."

York Region public school board chairperson Bill Crothers wouldn't comment on the issues of tightening instructional time or forcing teachers to perform extra-curricular activities.

Board and union officials have worked in a productive manner, he said.

"One would be hopeful that we could continue to do that," he added.

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