

Ecker may scuttle teacher deal

Public school board fears education minister's definition of classroom time

BY GIANNI COLAVECCHIA
Staff Writer

The public school board has reached a tentative arrangement with its teachers unions that would mean "a few more" teachers in classrooms next year.

But whether that arrangement stands up depends on the definition of instructional time to be released by Education Minister Janet Ecker early this month.

Gerry Harrison, president of the York Region branch of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, said forcing the union's members to spend more time teaching is just a way to reduce the number of teachers.

"Of course, you won't need as many teachers. That's just the way the math works out," Harrison said of the strict definition of classroom time. "If I'm teaching an extra class, then you don't need another teacher for that group."

Harrison expects it will give his union and the board less room to negotiate as they try to reach a deal before the current contract expires on Aug. 31.

Instructional time has become a contentious issue since Ecker announced last month she will enact a regulation that defines teaching time and excludes the hours teachers spend covering for absent colleagues. She has threatened to force teachers into supervising extracurricular activities if they resist her plan.

Bill 160, the controversial education reform that prompted illegal teacher strikes across the province two years ago, requires instructors to spend more than four hours teaching in an average day. Negotiators agreed the time spent covering for

absent teachers would count as instructional time. Reid Cawston, chairperson of the board's negotiation advisory committee, said officials discussed staffing issues with trustees before reaching the staffing arrangement, which keeps last year's student-teacher ratio.

Negotiators haven't hammered out any contracts and may have to make changes when the province releases further information.

But even if the numbers change, Cawston said teachers aren't likely to suffer major job losses.

"I can't see that happening. Not with our growth," he said.

Oak Ridges MPP Frank Klees denied the province is trying to get rid of teachers.

"That's simply not true. It's about ensuring we have the co-operation of school boards and teachers unions on what was originally made clear," he said.

The province is only spelling out the meaning of instructional time because both sides were engaging in "creative interpretation" of the rules, he added.

Klees said the ministry is trying to assist negotiations by releasing the definition as early as possible. He said officials will have to "get back to the drawing board" if they come up with unsatisfactory deals.

But he wouldn't say how the province would make boards and unions comply with the policy.

"We are not going to tear up collective agreements," he said.

Locally, rumours swirled that high-ranking board officials bypassed trustees and held secret meetings with union negotiators.

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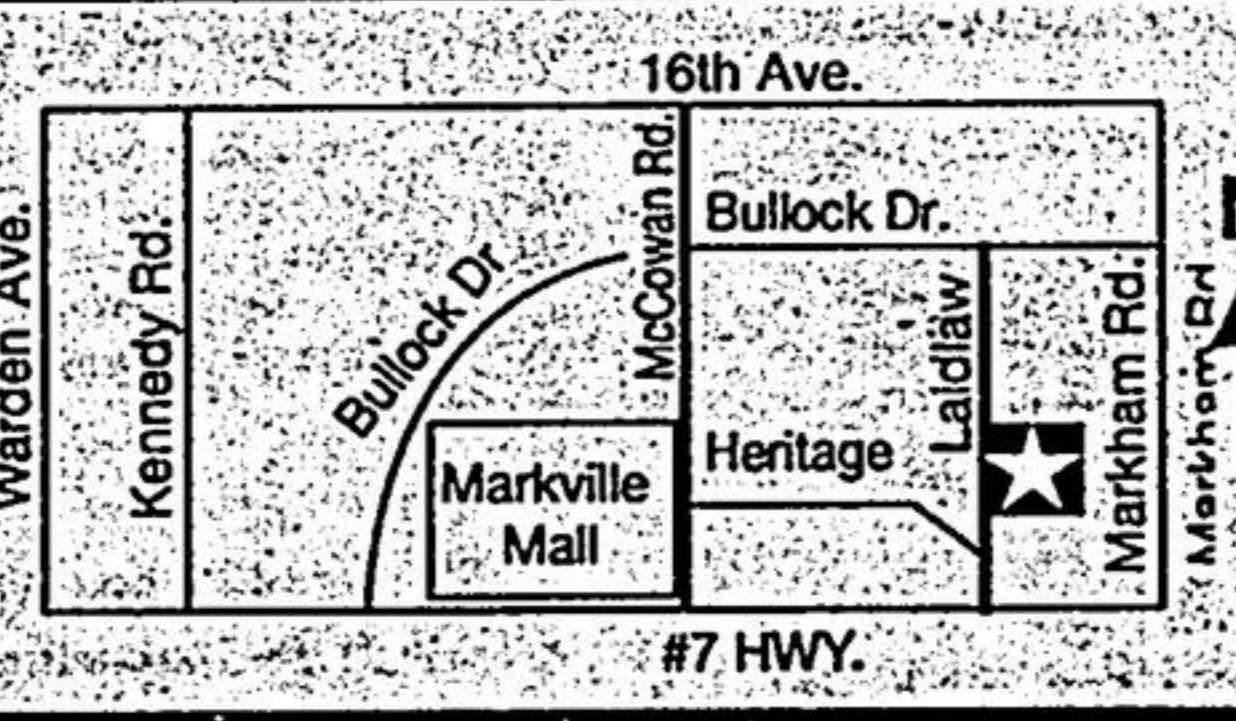
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