

# Parents sounding off on turmoil in York's public schools

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Parents: Do you have something to say about the turmoil in Ontario public schools?

Worried about the loss of extracurriculars, after-school tutoring or detailed report card comments? Wondering if another teacher strike is looming?

The York Region Parent Association wants to hear from you.

The organization that provides parenting support and advocacy is holding a town-hall-style meeting next week for parents and students to share their concerns, experiences and brainstorm solutions.

Whether you've been gritting your teeth or cheering from the sidelines as teacher unions grapple with the Liberal government, organizers believe it's time you have your say.

Representatives from the school board and teachers' unions will be invited to the event, set for Wednesday, but parents and students get centre stage, said Alick Siu, a Markham parent and association co-chairperson.

"The objective is to discuss the current situation and its impact. We want to gather ideas for a solution and forward them to the appropriate bodies for consideration and positive action," he said.

Parent mediators will provide an explanation of the issues and answer questions about Bill 115 and teachers' job action.

The controversial bill was repealed by the province Wednesday after it was used to remove the right to strike and impose two-year teacher contracts, part of the Dalton McGuinty government's efforts to tackle the provincial deficit.

Education Minister Laurel Broten said the

new contracts for teachers and support staff saved the province \$250 million in 2012-13, growing to \$540 million in 2013-14 with a one-time savings of \$1.1 billion from the elimination of banked sick days.

Teacher unions say repealing the bill now is meaningless; it has already caused damage by removing their labour rights and they are sticking with their protest plans and withdrawal of voluntary duties — the only options they say they have left to fight back.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation has not promised to restore extracurriculars now that the bill has been repealed. Instead, president Ken Coran said the new Liberal premier, once chosen this weekend, should sit down with the unions and "begin the process of rebuilding the trust and respect".

Repealing the bill was just step one, he said. "Restoring our collective bargaining rights so that we can work together to solve the current conflict is the next step."

But parents are tired of the dispute and just want their kids to be able to go on field trips or join a school team, parent association director Nazish Hussain said.

"We've been hearing a whole range of emotions from families", from those who struggled to find child care during threatened walkouts, to those who are worried about what information will be allowed on report cards.

"It's still very confusing for people."

That's part of the problem, said Doug Hart, author and senior research officer with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

It's not clear how consistently teachers have been following the extracurricular boycott, he said, adding surveys show no one

is sure what this fight is about — money or labour rights.

The public was much clearer whose side it was on the last time labour unrest disrupted schools, he said. That was during years Mike Harris was premier, when widespread dissatisfaction with the school system led to recognition the system was underfunded.

This time around, he said, "it's not clear who is wearing the white hat".

Mr. Hart said the survey he co-authored, Public Attitudes Towards Education in Ontario in 2012, found public satisfaction with the school system and with the job teachers are doing at record highs — something that

could now spell trouble for teacher unions vying for public support.

Teachers no longer come across as "champions of the school system against a hostile government", he said, and that means wanting support for higher spending.

## GOOD TO KNOW:

Education Town Hall, Jan. 30, 7 to 9 p.m.

Markham Civic Centre — Canada Room

101 Town Centre Blvd., Markham

RSVP: info@yrparent.ca

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