



SUN-TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

Earlier this fall, Richmond Hill high school student Ali Taghva (far left) rallied students at his school to protest loss of extracurriculars. He was among those at a parent forum this week offering ideas to get sports teams back.

Angry parents fighting back over loss of extracurriculars

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About 75 parents from across York Region, fed up with teachers' withdrawal of extracurricular activities, met Wednesday night to vent their anger and plan how to fight back.

The forum, organized by the volunteer group York Region Parent Association, heard moving stories from parents and students about the loss of after-school activities and raised some outside-the-box ideas to end the labour dispute.

The meeting extended 45 minutes beyond the two hours booked at Markham City Hall and included public school board staff and three trustees — Alan Tam, Carol Chan and Juanita Nathan.

The key message: parents are mad as hell and are not going to take it anymore.

SOME STILL COACHING

"I'm getting frustrated by all this," said Farid Wassef, a Stouffville parent with two children in elementary school. "I don't care if it's extracurricular or not. I just want a curriculum where we create a generation of children with strong minds and strong bodies. That's what I care about as a parent and a taxpayer... I don't really care what the hours are. Those are the results I want to see."

Like many who expressed dismay over the protest by teachers against Bill 115, Mr. Wassef said parents need a stronger voice in the dispute.

"We're going to find ourselves, whenever this contract runs out, right back at this ... whatever the next government will be, teachers will be unhappy. We need to have some sort of fair, independent arbitration system to hear from all sides and stakeholders as opposed to parents being tossed around like ping-pong balls."

Many parents expressed confusion over what is voluntary and what is part of a teacher's job.

One mother said she was told teachers at her school would no longer prepare or mark homework after hours and her daughter was assigned the task of marking work of students in lower grades.

"I would like someone to tell me what their responsibilities are so we can at least hold them accountable for that."

John Prickaert, a retired teacher married to an elementary teacher, spoke up for his profession.

Teachers do want to provide extracurricular

activities, he said.

"Are they getting pressure? Possibly. I know teachers now who have never stopped coaching. They started in September. They're coaching now ... Teachers know the importance of the connection to students."

Mr. Prickaert, who taught for 24 years at Huron Heights Secondary in Newmarket and Alexander Mackenzie and Bayview Secondary in Richmond Hill, said teachers don't deny they are paid well, but are worried about what happens to contracts in 2014 and when a new government is elected.

The bargaining process is "riddled with mistakes", he said.

"If there was a little bit of movement from the province, the teacher unions would back off."

The group raised several possible solutions.

King parent Rob McDermid suggested parents picket outside union and board offices in Aurora.

"All we can really do is make what they're doing have consequences, make their working environment a little unpleasant. It's not really a positive action but ... maybe it will speed things up, maybe it will be a little incentive."

Mr. McDermid said parents at his child's elementary school are frustrated by roadblocks that prevent them from taking over activities teachers have abandoned.

"At our school we're not allowed to. We're told the board trying to come up with common policy and, until it does, we should wait."

He urged parents to talk to school staff about how to volunteer, ask the board to speed up removing roadblocks and find out how parents at other schools are handling the situation.

"A lot of times, rules are not as hard and fast as you think."

Some school districts on Ontario have come up with creative solutions to salvage extracurriculars.

In Ottawa-Carlton, a new policy allows principals to prepare a list of activities that can safely operate with volunteers.

In Hamilton, a board trustee plans to introduce a motion to investigate paying parents or community members a stipend to supervise teams and clubs, similar to the way schools hire parents to be lunchroom supervisors.

In York Region, parents are often paid to be lunchroom supervisors but cannot run extracurricular activities without teacher supervi-

sion, according to board spokesperson Licinio Miguelo.

After 6 p.m., outside groups can run sports or clubs in schools, but must first apply for a permit and insurance and liability coverage is required, he said.

An art tutor who spoke at the meeting said he investigated that option and found it too costly.

In Toronto, a school board trustee is working on a motion that would give parents a break on permit fees.

Ali Taghva, a Richmond Green Secondary School student, suggested a different option.

"What about the possibility of region-based sports teams? Use community centres so we don't rely on teachers," he said.

"If we take the schools completely out of the equation, a lot of the roadblocks would be removed. It would be hard, but possible."

"The truth about change is you have to be militant about it. ... As parents, if you want change, you have to be vocal. When we had a rally as students, people listened to us."

COMMUNITY CENTRES

Other suggestions included asking the school board to subsidize police checks to make it easier for parents to volunteer, sending letters to MPPs and speaking to teachers one-on-one.

A former private school teacher suggested parents pressure to make extracurriculars part of teacher contracts and mandatory, as they are in many private schools.

Alick Siu, association co-chairperson and one of the organizers of the parent forum, said the group will determine if there is short-term action parents can take from the brainstormed ideas and is developing an e-petition for parents to sign.

The passionate voices heard Wednesday show parents have had enough, he said.

Garth Thomas, one of the fathers who spoke, agreed. Growing up in Thornhill as a student who struggled with academics, he believes he was saved because extracurriculars were mandatory at his private school and he worries about public school students who miss that safety net.

"The time has come for harsher, outside-the-box ways to get the message across to government and teachers. They need to know we're serious about this."

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