

Disappointment, questions linger on extracurriculars

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Not everyone is celebrating the return of extracurriculars to Ontario high schools.

While the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation and the Liberal government are heralding the return of voluntary activities by union members as a sign of peace, others are not so sure.

Many union members reacted to their leaders' announcement Monday with a skeptical, wait-and-see approach.

Tory education critic Lisa MacLeod grilled Liberals about the "secret" cost of labour peace but her motion to clarify teachers' job description was shot down by the other parties at Queen's Park Tuesday.

Meanwhile, a grassroots group, Organization of Ontario Secondary Students, launched an initiative pushing for arbitration in school labour disputes, hoping to prevent the fiasco over after-school activities from ever happening again.

A return to normal in York Region high schools is still up in the air.

"There is no on/off switch for voluntary activities and we have no guarantees what level of return there might be by members," Colleen Ireland, president of York Region's OSSTF, said Monday, following an announce-

ment by union president Ken Coran that a "new phase" in labour relations had begun.

The federation has recommended members suspend their political protest and return to volunteer duties because, Mr. Coran said, there has been a "genesis, a change, a metamorphosis going back to the way business used to be done".

But what level of extracurriculars will return is yet to be seen.

"Members have fulfilled their obligations faithfully in regards to their responsibilities in the classroom and in support of students who need additional help," Ms Ireland said. "Whatever members decide will be an individual and personal decision as has been their right all along."

Teachers and parents reacted quickly to Mr. Coran's media statement via social media, many union members crying foul, saying the union backed down and they would not return to extracurriculars without a collective agreement.

Others pointed to coincidences: a recent \$10,000 donation to Kathleen Wynne's election campaign by one OSSTF district, and the timing of the return to extracurriculars, coming just as students are registering this spring for high school and possibly choosing to transfer to Catholic schools.

In his media statement Monday, Mr. Coran said a decline in enrolment, as students leave the troubled public system, is "definitely a concern", but local public school boards have not corroborated the information.

Spokesperson Julia Seeratan said the York Catholic board has not seen a recent spike in enrolment, but adds it's too early to tell; numbers are not yet being tracked at the board level.

At the York public board, spokesperson Christina Choo-Hum said enrolment figures are slightly lower for the coming year, but that drop was already forecast and not attributable to the labour unrest.

She pointed to other factors, in addition to labour troubles, as the cause, including changing demographics and increased student mobility as more schools offer special programs.

But she said the high school union's statement earlier this week was welcome news.

As administrators wait to see how many school clubs and teams will resume, "there is a sense of optimism," she said.

Elementary teachers continued their voluntary withdrawal as union leaders met this week. A decision was expected by Friday.

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