

Kindergarten appeal to be heard Dec. 5

MARILYN MOYSA

Journal Education Writer

Edmonton

An appeal is going to court on Dec. 5 that will likely determine the fate of kindergarten classes.

If the Edmonton Public School Board loses its appeal of a ruling by Court of Queen's Bench Justice Eileen Nash, it has few options once funding runs out Feb. 9, board chairperson Dick Mather said Tuesday.

"If we lose our appeal, we can either charge user fees, stop offering kindergarten or look for alternative sources of funding," he said.

Other Alberta school boards in the same situation — including the Edmonton Catholic system — will also be affected, he said.

The boards are in a predicament after the Klein government cut funding for kindergarten to 200 hours from 400 this year, making Alberta one of only two provinces in Canada that doesn't offer a fully funded program.

Originally, the board had planned to subsidize kindergarten for the last five months of the year by taking \$3.5 million from its transportation and consulting budgets.

But the non-profit Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta took the board to court over the decision, saying the board had exceeded its power under the School Act.

In a ruling that has far-reaching consequences for other boards, Nash decided Aug. 30 the board can't re-route money from programs that must, by law, be offered to Grade 1 to 12 students and put it into a voluntary program like kindergarten.

If user fees must be charged, Edmonton board administrators are recommending a fee of \$575 per pupil, Mather said.

Both Mather and fellow trustee John Nicoll said they oppose following the lead of their Calgary counterparts, who imposed user fees in September and then expelled students whose parents couldn't pay. "That's absolutely abhorrent," Nicoll said.