

Kindergarten funding group to force issue

Will fight on whatever court rules

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No matter what the decision by the Alberta Court of Appeal today on funding, Edmonton's kindergarten crusaders intend to continue their fight for universal access to early childhood education.

"This issue is not going to die," said Maria Smyth of the Glenora Parent Teachers Association, the group leading the fight against the Klein government's funding cuts earlier this year. They reduced kindergarten time to 200 hours from 400 hours a year.

"I think the Klein government made a policy error and that they do not realize how involved parents are in the interests of their children. This will not just go away."

Today, the appeal court will consider a decision made by Court of Queen's Bench Justice Eileen Nash on Aug. 30.

Nash ruled that under the new School Act the Edmonton Public School Board cannot use funds allocated to Grades 1 to 12 to boost kindergarten hours back to 400.

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.

If the court upholds Nash's decision, Smyth said her group will continue to marshal support from other parent-teacher organizations in the province to pressure the government to reinstate the funding.

If the court defeats the Nash decision, the Glenora PTA will do the same thing.

Allowing school boards to take money from the 1-12 programs to subsidize kindergarten would cause resentment among parents of older students towards those of kindergarten students, she said.

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The Glenora PTA and other

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area PTAs support a private members bill introduced by Liberal education critic Michael Henry on Nov. 2. The bill amends the School Act to make it mandatory for school boards to provide funding for 400 hours a year of kindergarten.

The bill wasn't given a reading in the recently-ended session of the Legislature, but is expected to be re-introduced by Liberal Leader Grant Mitchell when MLAs reconvene in February.

Smyth and others in her organization think that if Conservative MLAs are allowed to vote freely, the bill will pass.

Fellow Glenora PTA member Cathy Krysa pointed out that the decision to chop kindergarten funding was passed by a narrow margin.

"I bet you anything that if they were to do it over again it wouldn't go through," she said.

Government backbench MLA Jon Havelock, former chairman of the Calgary Public School Board, said that although he sympathizes with the cause, he would not vote for any increases to kindergarten funding.

"I'm a strong supporter of ECS [early childhood services], and once we resolve the budget problem we might look at more funding. But we won't do it until the budget is balanced."

He suggested the Edmonton School Board take advantage of a provision in the School Act allowing for a plebiscite in municipal elections on raising school taxes.

"If the board is so committed," said Havelock, "they have the right to go to the general public and vote in an operating increase. They should go out and sell it to the general public."