

Parents facing K turmoil

Court to hear challenge Aug. 19

MARILYN MOYSA
Journal Education Writer

Edmonton

Parents in Edmonton could be left scrambling in September to find day care or babysitters for their kindergarten-aged children, says a school official.

If a lawsuit challenging the Edmonton Public School Board's right to spend money on full-time kindergarten succeeds Aug. 19, the board may be forced to revert to funding only a half-year — or 200-hour — program, said board chairperson Dick Mather. Or the trustees may have to consider charging parents user fees.

Either way, it will mean headaches for working and single parents who are trying to make ends meet or can't squeeze extra time out of their working day.

"It's a nightmare because we could end up right back where we started. If the court says that we erred and we acted inappropriately in making a decision to use these funds for a full kindergarten program, then we're back to square one," Mather said.

The Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta launched the suit in early July after the board decided June 20 to fund a full 400-hour kindergarten program next year, even though the province said it was cutting kindergarten funding in half. The move will cost an extra \$3.4 million.

The association wants the courts to decide if the board has the right to take money from mandatory programs for Grades 1-12 and spend it on kindergarten, which is not considered basic education under the School Act.

When the suit was launched, the association said it feared if the board could take money from mandatory programs, it could divert money from any program.

It's the school board's fault the case is being heard so close to the start of the school year, said association liaison co-ordinator Laurie Wilson-Larson.

The association was ready to have the case heard by July 25,

CHRONOLOGY

February — Klein government announces funding for full-time, 400-hour kindergarten will be halved starting in September.

March — Parents march on the legislature, urging the government to reverse its decision.

May — Glenora Parent Teachers Association asks the board to fund a full program for 1994-95 to buy time to get funding restored.

June — The board agrees after being verbally assured by the province that it is not violating the School Act.

July — The Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta begins action against the board.

but the board wanted the case delayed until Aug. 19, and then Aug. 26, she said. Finally, the association went to a judge to get a date set because it was worried about the impact on parents.

"Now, this leaves everybody — including the schools, the teachers, the parents, the child care centres and the babysitters — all hanging in limbo until it's sorted out," she said.

Mather said trustees couldn't deal with the issue sooner because their next meeting isn't scheduled until Aug. 30.

Before agreeing to fund another 200 hours of kindergarten, trustees wanted the province's assurance they were in compliance with the new School Act. While they received a verbal affirmation, they have never received it in writing.

It's a shame the Learning Disabilities Association is taking such an approach, said Cathy Krysa, of the Glenora Parent Teachers Association, which lobbied for full-time kindergarten.

"It's a shame if what's happening as a result of provincial government cuts to kindergarten is that parents are pitted against parents in attempting to provide the best education for their children. It overwhelms me. I find it frustrating."