

Teachers, assistants rally against reported plan to cut funding

Written By **MIKE BAKER**

A rumoured 4 percent cut to Ontario's education budget would have 'seriously long-lasting impacts' on students, according to many Dufferin County educators.

In the wake of suggestions from Premier Doug Ford's office that the provincial government may be contemplating cuts to the education sector, teachers, educational assistants (EA) and early childhood educators (ECE) from across the province rallied together last week to send a clear and direct message to Ontario's top brass.

Cries of 'No cuts to education' could be heard along Broadway last Thursday (Feb. 7) as more than 30 individuals gathered outside local MPP Sylvia Jones' office for an informational rally designed to inform the public about such cuts.

'Right off the bat, we want to point out that this is not a political rally,' said Laura Tremble, a representative of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation and an EA with Upper Grand District School Board. 'This is about making our community aware of what is happening. OSSTF front line workers are concerned that the Premier is going to make deep cuts to publicly funded education in our community at a time when students need more supports.'

She added, 'These cuts will certainly not benefit the students of Ontario.'

While there has been little information provided by the Province regarding where, specifically, potential cuts would be made, Ms. Tremble pointed out that a 4 percent budget reduction would equate to an approximate \$1 billion decrease in funding.

'We're not sure what is going to happen, but it could result in the layoffs of child youth workers, therapists and psychologists that are in classrooms for students who need extra supports,' Ms. Tremble said. 'If those people get laid off, it will have a domino effect in the classroom for teachers and educational assistants.'

There were fears amongst some in attendance that full-time kindergarten could be cut. Last month, Premier Ford confirmed his government would conduct a thorough review of the program and would be consulting with both parents and teachers before making a final decision. Introduced by former Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty, full-day kindergarten was fully rolled out in 2014 and is estimated to cost the provincial government in the region of \$1.5 billion a year.

Ms. Tremble is also concerned that class size caps could be removed at the elementary level. Currently, kindergarten classes may hold up to 29 students, while primary grades are allowed a maximum of 23 students.

'That would almost certainly lead to more work for teachers right across the board,' Ms. Tremble said. 'For the kids who have different, specific needs, it would make things more difficult, for sure.'

Andrew Aloe is the president of the local branch of the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario. He noted today's teachers should be receiving more support from the government rather than facing up to the prospect of having services taken away.

'A lot of our members are dealing with the same issues in classrooms today. They don't have the necessary supports in place for students with special needs and they are dealing with a lot of violent behaviours,' Mr. Aloe told the Free Press. 'We have a teacher who received a concussion last year because a student punched her in the ear. Our members are experiencing this sort of thing on a daily basis.'

He expressed his belief that kindergarten classes are already overcrowded and that simply piling more bodies into a classroom would have a detrimental effect on the quality of education in Ontario.

?It's a shame governments look solely at the costs and the supposed waste there is in education, when really it should be viewed more as an investment. We need to protect our kids and give them the best kind of schooling they can get,? Mr. Aloe said.

While last week's rally took place outside MPP Jones' office, she was not in Orangeville at the time. Ms. Tremble noted Ms. Jones was willing to meet to discuss issues relating to education.

?Our hope is that the government listens, that the Premier listens,? Ms. Tremble said.

Speaking on behalf of the teachers in attendance at last week's rally, Bettina Martin, a Grade 6 teacher at Island Lake Public School, said she would be disappointed to see any cuts made to the education sector. Speaking specifically about class sizes, she noted a return to the days of having 30-plus kids in one room would be a blow to teachers across the province.

?Our class sizes in the junior grades are perfect right now. My big fear is that class sizes will become larger again,? Ms. Martin said. ?I have taught a class of 33 students before? It would appear, to me, that the needs of our students are becoming greater while the support we're receiving is being reduced.?

Ms. Tremble noted OSSTF would be organizing further province-wide rallies in the future as the organization continues with its mission of informing the public about the potential impacts cuts to education will have on students.