

Catholic parents in Ontario fearing the worst in education cuts

Catholic parents fear the massive March 15 education cuts are just the opening salvo of a campaign to fold Ontario's Catholic schools into a unified public system, while French Catholic trustees are warning of much deeper cuts to come.

"What is the end goal?" asked Annalisa Crudo-Perri, president of the Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education. "Of course, we're always worried about the one system."

At meetings with the Association of Catholic Bishops of Ontario March 19, Crudo-Perri warned the bishops that the separate, Catholic system is under threat.

"There have to be times when you have to make a statement, and this is the time," said Crudo-Perri.

The larger class sizes mandated by the changes in education policy are an existential threat to French Catholic education and all of Ontario's smaller school boards, chair of the Association of French Catholic School Boards Jean Lemay said.

"It will be devastating," said Lemay. "Yesterday morning we were able to talk to our directors of education, all eight of them. They came down with a list of lost positions. Hundreds of teachers will have to be let go."

Education Minister Lisa Thompson has repeatedly claimed no teachers will lose their jobs.

Lemay doesn't think the provincial government has it in for French Catholic education in particular. Rather, he believes the government doesn't understand how its one-per-cent cut in education spending will translate into teaching positions and course options in smaller boards.

"It's not an intentional attack. It's an attack on small school boards," he said.

Lemay is also worried by briefings he has had with Ministry of Education officials who he said have told him the government is planning much deeper cuts in education spending over the term of the government.

"We think the announcements on the 15th were just an opening," he said. "We have heard the ministry over and over again telling us we're looking at a cut between four and seven per cent... We're waiting for the budget (April 11)."

Even at large boards, trustees are raising concerns about the government's dictates on education. Brampton trustee in the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board Anna da Silva has raised the alarm over a requirement that future high school students must obtain a minimum of four out of 30 credits online to earn a diploma.

"The new e-learning policy will not contribute to quality education for all. This policy needs to change," da Silva wrote on her Facebook newsfeed. "We should not be pushing our children to take correspondence courses."

Da Silva said the policy seemed to entirely ignore a digital divide that leaves behind poorer families without the devices or the wi-fi access necessary to take an online course.

Catholic students are also beginning to protest the government's policies. On March 20, hundreds of Bishop Ryan Catholic Secondary students in Hamilton walked out of classes, carrying signs and chanting slogans.

When it comes to the new math curriculum, Lemay worries that the government is trying to solve a problem that doesn't exist in French Catholic schools. In the EQAO standardized math test for Grade 6 students last year, the pass rate in French Catholic boards the pass rate was 80 per cent, he said, compared to 49 per cent in all English-speaking schools.

"I'm not against bringing them (pass rates) closer to 90 or closer to 100 per cent. I would like that," said Lemay. "But let's adjust our changes in the education system for the ones that need to be changed."

Crudi-Perri is angered by government claims that it has consulted exhaustively on its education policy.

"We met with the minister. We had 15 minutes with her," she said. "Did we have a fulsome consultation? No. We didn't."

The consultations are on their way, said a ministry spokesperson.

"Going forward, the government is committed to discussing the key elements of the proposed plan, including hiring practices and class sizes, through a consultation process that allows partners to provide the benefit of their expertise, experience and ideas," Heather Irwin wrote in an e-mail. "These consultations will allow us and our partners, including Catholic education partners, to ensure that our plan is designed to serve the best interests of Ontario students."

Irwin said the government "is committed to support for Ontario's publicly-funded Catholic education system."