



Students worried all field trips in jeopardy

Sit-in at school board office sparked by cancellation of trip

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About 70 students - mostly from Mark R. Isfeld Secondary School - staged a 1960s style sit-in at the school board office in Courtenay last Thursday, upset over a recent board decision that denied them an educational trip to Europe.

Sitting quietly and respectfully, many held placards that called on students to stand up for their rights and to save school trips.

"It started with the cancellation of the Europe trip. . . that was completely heartbreaking," said spokesperson Hillary Murray. "Others may now be in jeopardy and we will not stand for that."

The Isfeld trip to London, Paris, Vimy Ridge, and the Juno Beach areas of France was canceled last week after school trustees refused to approve the trip in a close 4-3 vote.

Those voting to not support the trip in principle argued that the district could be open to legal action if it were approved, because of a B.C. Supreme Court ruling last year on school fees.

The ruling states that school boards cannot charge fees for any portion of a course that occurs outside the classroom or school, and which the teacher considers necessary for "the communication of information or knowledge to students" and "sufficient to meet the learning outcomes or assessment requirements of an educational program provided by a board".

However, school boards can charge fees for field trips, or other extracurricular outings or events, not considered necessary by the teacher or the school.

This was reiterated by superintendent Jordan Tinney who came out to meet the students.

"The biggest thing I wanted to do was settle down the miscommunication that there will be huge widespread cancellations," he told reporters following the meeting.

He echoed what he told board members at a special meeting last week that the issue was not a question of whether the trip contained any educational value, which he said it clearly did.

Rather, the question was whether it should be free.

"There's no question there is huge value in the trip, but our mandate is to provide a quality education for all students," he said.

"If it's of any educational value and there are learning outcomes associated with it, then it shall be free."

In an initial proposal to the board, the trip listed several learning outcomes which included assessing Canada's role in both World War I and II as well as assessing the war's impact on Canada.

Tinney also argued that if the trip were to be considered unnecessary, then he asked why the school board would assume liability for a vacation-type trip.

Many students, however, seemed unconvinced.

They questioned the fairness of the board in allowing athletic trips to go ahead while denying academic trips.

Some also felt that the issue of accessibility was contradictory.

"By giving equal opportunity, it's actually providing less opportunity," commented one student.

Tinney responded by saying that athletic trips are not necessary, thereby allowing the board to charge fees.

He stressed that no programs have been canceled so far and that all field trips scheduled for this year will still go ahead, largely because of funds invested by the district at the beginning of the school year.

"We had a system of rules, but the rules have changed and the province is trying to figure out what this means," he told the students.

"If a trip is part of the curriculum, then we would have to pay."

Following the hour long meeting, Murray said she was satisfied with what the group accomplished.

"I feel we got what we wanted," said the grade 11 Isfeld student, referring to the media attention and a meeting with Tinney.

"Our concern was that field trips wouldn't happen and important programs would be canceled."

The group is now in the process of preparing a smaller working group to meet again with the superintendent to go over the recent changes in the legislation as well as to provide further feedback on which programs and trips they would like to see maintained.

Further discussions on how the ruling will affect programs in the district will be held at a school board committee of the whole meeting at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 16 at the school board office.

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