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Parents protest education shortfall

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Abstract (Summary)

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Last year, the Saanich School Board closed Durrance elementary school in Saanich. They also reduced administration positions, maintenance budgets and equipment costs. The district also started charging for bussing and reduced the school year by four days.

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Full Text (571 words)

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Last Friday, half of Saanich's kids roamed free.

Children in the Saanich school district (SD63) enjoyed a four-day weekend while their colleagues in the Greater Victoria School district (SD61) got down to work as usual.

It was the first of four days-off, instigated by the Saanich School District to save money in the wake of declining enrollment. Having fewer work days was chosen over closing schools, or other cost saving measures, by the school district.

While some kids enjoyed the long weekend, others joined their parents on the steps of the Legislature. There, they handed out shortbread cookies to symbolize how Saanich schools are "short on bread."

The idea came from the district's parents, who traditionally have bake sales to raise money, said Ron Broda, president of the Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils of Saanich (COPACS).

Someone jokingly suggested parents could have a giant bake sale to raise the necessary millions.

"The best ideas are sometimes flippant ones," Broda said.

The parents assembled at the Legislature presented four large boxes of cookies to a ministry representative. In high heels and business attire, the woman hauled the cookies up the steps and into the Legislature.

Last year, the Saanich School Board closed Durrance elementary school in Saanich. They also reduced administration positions, maintenance budgets and equipment costs. The district also started charging for bussing and reduced the school year by four days.

The school board expects a \$2 million shortfall next year.

Broda called on the Ministry of Education to give Saanich a one-time \$2 million grant to cover next year.

He also asked for a public inquiry into the public education formula, especially the regulations for how school boards can spend money from received selling schools.

Broda acknowledged that the cuts haven't affected students' academic standing yet.

Saanich students are traditionally high achievers, consistently scoring high on provincial exams and graduation rates.

But Broda and other parents worry about maintaining this status.

To make up for lost time from days off, students have 10 more minutes per day -- two minutes added to each class.

However, Broda wonders if two extra minutes per class is enough. He noted that the change means two less classes each semester per subject.

"To me, that has the potential to significantly impact on students' achievement," he said.

Broda said the problem goes back to 2001, when the province started funding schools based on enrollment.

That kind of formula hurts regions, like Saanich Peninsula, where enrollment is dropping. The Saanich School District border runs south of Royal Oak and Prospect Lake.

The Saanich School Board has cut \$12.5 million worth of services, supplies and programs over the last decade. Music programs, core French instruction, library assistance, special needs aids and youth and family counselling services were all slashed.

The cuts have been slow and steady for the last decade at Royal Oak Middle School and Claremont, said parent John Brody. He had a hard time pinpointing the most obvious loss to his children's schools.

"It is all across the board," he said, noting the loss of the music program was big and that sports have been declining.

Susan Gaby, from Sidney, has noticed that parents are increasingly having to pay for basic supplies.

Things like paper for photocopiers and film that keeps windows from shattering in an earthquake.

"It's weird," she said, about how these times seem so desperate for schools.

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