

B.C. bill would limit class sizes
30-student cap cuts chances of strike by teachers

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Proposed class-size rules announced Thursday by the Liberal government would restrict most classes in Grades 4 to 12 to a maximum of 30 students -- with no more than three special-needs kids -- and significantly reduce the likelihood of another strike over the issue by the B.C. Teachers' Federation this fall.

The union had said it would not sign an agreement during contract talks now underway unless B.C. once again had class-size caps for Grade 4 and up, which were removed in 2002 in favour of district-wide averages.

Under the proposed amendments to the B.C. School Act, classes in Grades 4 to 7 could exceed 30 students only if the classroom teacher, the school principal and the superintendent agreed. In the higher grades, school principals would be required to consult the classroom teacher and win approval from the superintendent before creating larger classes.

"We believe this is a step in the right direction . . . a small step, but it's a step," said union president Jinny Sims, who led a 10-day strike last fall that pushed her members' concerns about class size and class composition into the limelight. "I believe the premier heard our concerns."

Since then, the matter has been the subject of intense debate at a learning roundtable created after the strike to deal with contentious issues.

For the first time since 2002, all of the key educational stakeholders were applauding the Liberals' response to a highly controversial issue in the K-12 education system.

Organizations representing school trustees, principals and parents said the bill permits the flexibility that's needed in creating classes while also addressing teachers' concerns about classes with more than 30 students. The union had called for lower limits -- 28 students or fewer -- but the key was having a firm cap.

"It's very, very good news," added NDP education critic John Horgan. "It appears to me to be a positive resolution."

Penny Tees, president of the B.C. School Trustees' Association, said the proposed changes -- to take effect in September if the bill is passed by the legislature -- wouldn't affect a large number of classes but would significantly change working relationships because of the requirement that all parties be consulted.

Not only must principals talk to teachers and the superintendent before creating classes that exceed 30, they must also consult with their school planning council on class organization every year.

"One of the concerns we heard at the learning roundtable is that parents and teachers are often not involved in organizing classes," Bond said in a release. "This legislation ensures parents and teachers have a say in how classes are organized.

For the first time, superintendents would have to verify that schools are in compliance with the rules, confirm that classes are well-organized and report that to the school board and the district parent organization. The school board would accept the report -- or order changes -- and submit it to the education minister, who would make it public.

If school boards did not comply with class size and composition requirements, the province would dispatch a special administrator to work with the board. If a board failed to cooperate, the minister would have the authority to dissolve it and appoint a trustee.

Recently, it was discovered that 15 of 60 school boards were not in compliance with the School Act requirement that their average class size for Grades 4 to 12 not exceed 30, but there was no punishment.

Bond said the legislation is "a work in progress." The amendments would require the minister to appoint a committee with representation from all key stakeholders within a year to determine whether the amendments were working.

Tees said school trustees would have to move quickly to ensure changes are in place by September, especially since their budgets for 2006-07 have already been prepared. She also expressed some concern about the cost but said it's too soon to say if that will cause problems.

Bond said she is not providing additional money for the class-size caps, but said the extra money pumped into the system for class size and class composition as part of the deal that settled last fall's strike, along with the additional funds that are available due to declining enrolments should be sufficient.

Kim Howland, president of the B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, said her group wasn't convinced that class-size caps were the best use of education dollars but she would withhold judgment during the first year. She said she also had some concerns about the limit on three special-needs kids per classroom.

Her group will be reviewing that during its annual general meeting next month when it discusses a resolution that says such limits discriminate against special-needs children.

Class size for kindergarten has been capped at 22 students since 2002 while Grades 1 to 3 are limited to 24.