

Classes will need adjusting

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The BC government's latest legislation on class size and composition will mean more discussions and careful planning for School District No. 70.

At Tuesday night's school board meeting, superintendent Harry Janzen discussed the bill and its implications for the district.

"It's one of the few bills that I've ever seen in the legislature that was passed unanimously by both sides of the house," he said.

The bill, which has now passed second reading is a long, dense document that makes provisions not only for class composition and size, but also in the areas of distance education and the BC College of Teachers.

"The critical piece of this is the class size and composition," Janzen told trustees.

The legislation makes no changes to the maximums for Kindergarten, requiring classes to be no larger than 22 students. The district must also maintain an average of 19 students per Kindergarten class.

"Prior to the legislation, Kindergarten classes were not allowed to be larger than 22, and the average could be no higher than 19," Janzen said. "Typically, in our district, it's been around 16.5 or 17."

However, any classes with any number of Kindergarten children in them are still bound to the rule.

Classes in Grades 1 to 3 will see very little change as well. No class is to have more than 24 students, and the district must maintain an average of 21 students in those classes.

Bill 33 has introduced new provisions for Grades 4 to 7, where previously, Grades 4 to 12 had to maintain an average of 30.

"That's never been a problem because we've had dozens and dozens and dozens of classes in the district that are below 20, particularly in the secondary school, so our averages tended to be around 24," Janzen said. "Now that the grades have been separated and we have legislation for Grades 4 to 7, the class size maximum (for them) is 30, the average is 28.0."

Unlike the regulations for Kindergarten to Grade 3, exceptions can be made to the rules during the course of the school year. Grades 4 to 7 classes can be increased only if the teacher consents.

"For example, if there was a class of 30 intermediate students in Tofino, and a student showed up on May 15, and the district had already spent all of its staffing money, and we didn't want the parent to have to drive that kid to Ucluelet, we would approach that teacher and go 'we are seeking your approval to have your class size to be at 31 for the remainder of the year'," Janzen said, noting that the district does not intend to start off the school year with oversized classes.

The Grade 8 to 12 average and class size limit of 30 shouldn't be a problem, but if those amounts should ever need to be exceeded, the district must consult and seek approval from the class teacher, principal and superintendent.

"Clearly there are many areas in which we want to exceed classes by 30 in secondary school, band being the most notable example," Janzen said.

Further to this, the new bill states that no class should have more than three special needs students, but this rule can be exceeded after consultation with the class teacher and superintendent.

"Clearly, it would not have worked to have a firm cap of three," Janzen said. "Dunn middle school has 105 designated special needs students, it has 17 classes."

Janzen said those numbers are nothing new for E.J. Dunn, which has been working on a very creative and thoughtful way of working with special needs students in the school.

"They're really leading the way for district in what they're doing there right now," he said.

Bill 33 also includes new requirements for reporting class size and composition. The district superintendent must review and report on the organization of all classes in the school district, and verify that the district complies with class-size and composition legislation.

The school board may accept the report, or instruct the superintendent to revise it and then forward it to the education minister who must make the report public.

"These are all really good opportunities, I think to explain how the district works, to talk about how we're organizing things, talk about why we're planning things the way we are," Janzen said.

Despite the fact that there are more primary students in the district, Janzen said declining enrollment

"But there are going to be some issues around this, there will be no doubt about it," Janzen cautioned.

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