

Cash key to class size

By Diane Strandberg The Tri-City News
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Schools will be scrambling to meet new class size requirements with no extra cash to help ease the transition, says the district's top human resources official.

Rob Carson issued a warning to local school trustees Tuesday that the proposed Bill 33 is "confusing," its timelines "ambitious" and the associated labour issues "contentious."

No money has yet been earmarked to make the changes but Carson said he's "forever hopeful" it will arrive by the time schools have to organize classes next September.

"It's going to mean some stress, particularly at the middle school level," Carson said. This week, school administrators were told to start figuring out how they will meet new class size targets for middle and high schools. But school superintendent Laureen Doerksen said it's too soon to know how much the changes will cost. "There are going to be many pressure points," she said.

Under proposed changes being debated in the legislature, the maximum class size for Grades 4 to 7 would be 30, except with consent from the classroom teacher and approval from the principal and superintendent. Grade 8 to 12 classes would also be kept to 30 pupils but could exceed that after consultation with the classroom teacher and approval by the principal and superintendent.

The bill would also limit to three the number of special needs children with individual education plans (IEP) in a class unless the superintendent and principal approve and the teacher is consulted.

But Carson said schools should stick to the caps to avoid possibly contentious discussions or putting teachers and the superintendent in an awkward position. "We would want schools to be organized below so we don't look to be pressing that," he said.

It's also going to be tough for schools to adjust to new rules about public disclosure, too. Class size reports have to go to School Planning Councils within 15 days of schools reopening in September and the superintendent must submit a report to the board by Oct. 1, instead of by mid-October, as is currently the case.

Trustees raised concerns about the short timeline for implementation and privacy concerns, and will be making a plea for funding in a so-called "needs budget" to Education Minister Shirley Bond.

MIDDLE SCHOOL DILEMMA

Class size maximums of 22 for kindergarten and 24 for Grade 1 to 3 are already in place. But at the middle school level, where classes occasionally climb to 31, and even 33, some reorganization will have to take place to meet new rules depending on enrolment next September. This year, for example, there were 32 middle school classes in Tri-City with 31 students, eight with 32 students and two with 33 students, according to district class size figures. The district maintained a class size average of 26 students for Grades 4 to 12, however, well under the current maximum of 30.

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