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School kids' helpers strike

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Hundreds of special-needs students will be forced to stay home from school this morning after educational assistants from the public school board went on strike.

The union representing about 450 educational assistants (EAs) called the work stoppage after mediation with the board broke down yesterday, mainly over wage demands.

Eileen Griffett, president of Local 527 of the Office and Professional Employees International Union, called the board's latest offer insulting.

"We made several monetary concessions throughout the day," she said. "They returned to the table with very little.

"We work with the most difficult and the most needy students in the system and we certainly regret and feel terrible that some ... are going to be without support for the duration of the strike, but we're just taking a stand."

The strike will affect around 1,000 students with special needs, ranging from learning disabilities and severe behavioural problems to cerebral palsy and autism.

Many require such intensive support from EAs that principals warned some parents that their children would have to be kept home if there was a strike.

"A good number (of students) won't be attending school," said Damian Borrelli, executive officer of human resources for the Hamilton-Wentworth District School board. "We're concerned about it -- we're concerned about the students, we're concerned about their parents."

Borrelli felt they were close to an agreement yesterday.

"We made a lot of movement," he said.

"We feel that our total compensation is industry-competitive."

But Griffett said the board's offer of wage increases of zero for 2001 and 2 per cent for 2002 just wasn't enough, given all the concessions they'd made.

Judy Colantino, who has two special-needs kids, is sympathetic to the EAs' demands even though it means her children will have to stay home and potentially fall behind.

"I feel very strongly about supporting them," she said, adding they are watching out for the "most vulnerable people in the system."

Her 17-year-old daughter Katie, who is a quadriplegic, requires an EA to take notes for her and perform basic tasks like opening doors.

Her son, a 12-year-old with Down's syndrome, can't attend school during the strike because his safety could be compromised.

"For him to be there with nobody watching him would be ridiculous."

Government-appointed board supervisor Jim Murray, who controls the board's finances because the trustees submitted an illegal deficit budget, said resolving the situation will be challenging.

"My task right now is all the more difficult because of the need to be more fiscally responsible and prudent. I know that the parents of children with special needs won't like to hear that, but that's simply part of the reality of the situation.

"If we had met their position, then we would have had to reduce the complement of educational assistants and I don't think that's an acceptable alternative because we need as many of these people as we possibly can."

Robert Peters, chair of the board's special educational advisory committee, said because the government appointed the supervisor, it's up to Murray and the government to resolve the dispute.

"Let's see if they're worth the money we're paying them."

His son Timothy is blind and requires an educational assistant to transcribe his school work into braille. They'll send him to school during the strike, but he knows Timothy will be missing a lot.

"You've just taken his ability to read right away from him. (EAs) play a crucial and vital role.

"Without them, our kids can't function to the same level."

Griffett said the union will concentrate its pickets at the education centre, with some at schools to provide information to parents.

She said their intention isn't to disrupt parents dropping kids off at school.

Educational assistants make \$18 to \$19 an hour on average, but don't work full time -- they work 30 hours a week, 10 months of the year.

The workers have been without a contract for more than a year. They've been in a legal strike position since Sunday.

No new talks are scheduled.

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