

District students protest cuts

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By [Sam Odrowski](#) & [Ken Kellar](#)

Students from Fort High and Rainy River recently took a stand for their education.

They joined roughly 600 other schools across Ontario on Thursday who walked out to protest the province's nearly \$1 billion worth of cuts to education.

Fort Frances High School students Hailey Gushuliak and Ariel Plante said they saw the walkout as a last resort to have their voices heard.

"We've tried everything," Gushuliak said.

"We've tried reasoning with the government, we've tried writing letters, so today all high schools and some elementary schools across Ontario all decided to walk out all at the same time because we can't stand for what the government is trying to do to students," she added.

Grade 12 RRHS student Aubree McQuaker said she's concerned the cuts will create a legacy of lower quality education in Ontario.

"It's not just the students standing before you, it's the entire generation coming up and the generations after it that's going to be affected," she remarked.

Fellow Grade 12 student Aynsley Williams who organized the walkout said she's most worried about the province's changes to OSAP, cuts to autism programs, increased class sizes, and reduced funding for specialized programming.

"I just hope this protest actually sends a message to the province, because it's not just Toronto, it's not just the big schools—every little school in Ontario will be affected," she stressed.

Rainy River District School Board chair Raymond Roy said he's concerned that the cuts will have a negative impact on the number of students graduating each year.

"Our graduation rates have been steadily climbing to approximately 85 percent, based on the students who started and finished with us over 5 years," noted Roy.

"I can't emphasize enough that we're worried about the impact that cuts will have on our graduation rate and on school boards across the whole province," he added. "It's definitely a challenging time."

Roy said one of the most significant parts of the cuts increasing one teacher for every 22 students to 28 which will negatively impact specialized programs.

"We are concerned that there may be potentially less options for our students," he stressed.

Special courses such as music and art or ones that require complicated equipment often have lower enrolment and with the increased average class sizes, there will be less available for students.

The increased average class sizes is projected to cut one quarter of all post-secondary courses currently offered in Ontario and \$700 million from the education system when including the addition of e-learning.

Many RRHS students are upset about the province's move to introduce e-learning courses for the 2020-21 school year, noting that online learning isn't for everybody.

"There's different kinds of learners, right? Everyone's not going to learn best from something online," Williams remarked.

She said the introduction of e-learning feels like the province is reducing the quality of education just to cut costs.

In Fort Frances, Fort High student Brenden Laur agreed that forcing students to take mandatory online classes would have a negative impact on those who learn in different ways.

"For me personally, learning through a computer, that's not what I do. That's not what a lot of people do," he said.

A minimum of 6,000 teachers are expected to be phased out of the system over the next few years, which Williams said will have a negative effect on her future.

"I personally want to be a teacher so these cuts going to affect me as a teacher and eventually as a parent," she noted.

As well, the province is cutting the Secondary Programming Grant which is for hiring student success teachers that provide extra supports for more vulnerable students.

These students will also be affected by cut to the Local Priorities program which provided funding for close to 900 full-time teachers and close to 2,000 education workers to support students who are at-risk.

Northwest Catholic District School Board (NCDSB) director of education Brenden Hyatt told the Times he doesn't yet know all the specific details of the cuts but indicated that there will be impacts.

He said the board will have a much better idea of where they stand by the end of the month, after the grants for students needs funding is received.

"I can certainly understand that having increased class sizes will present various challenges," Hyatt reasoned.

"Less teacher and student interaction would be one of them," he added.

Larger class sizes also means there's less one on one support for the board's most vulnerable learners, Hyatt noted.

"So there are concerns and... we want to work this current government to come up with the best solutions," he said.

"At the end of the day we will do what we need to do as a school board to support student's learning," added Hyatt.

Gushuliak and Plante said they were surprised to see so many of their fellow students make the march from Fort High to MPP Greg Rickford's office on Scott Street, and hoped that the walkouts would be enough to make the government start to listen to student voices.

"I just want them to rethink it," Plante said.

Williams is happy all of the students at RRHS participated in the walkout and said it worked well to raise awareness among her classmates who weren't well read on the issue.

"I think this has helped a lot of students in our school realize what it's for," she noted. "I just hope that this actually sends a message to the province."