

Francophone teachers association sues government

Description

The Association of Francophone Teachers of New Brunswick, which represents 3,000 public school teachers, is taking the provincial government to court over what it sees as grossly insufficient funding for French schools.

"We're not asking for icing on the cake, we're asking for the full meal deal. We're asking for equality," said Lucie Martin, vice president of the association.

On Friday, representatives from the group met with the provincial government, which confirmed it would provide \$2.5 million in 2015-2016 as additional funding the francophone school system.

But the group of francophone teachers had asked for \$11.5 million for the next three years, to close the funding gap between English and French schools.

The Association of Francophone Teachers announced on Saturday at its general meeting in Bathurst it would pursue legal action against the province.

The government says it has increased the amount of funding given to francophone schools.

"Last year, the previous government allocated \$1.5 million to this initiative, and this year we are continuing this previous commitment for a total of \$2.5 million," said Education Minister Serge Rousselle, in a statement to CBC News.

"We take note of the francophone teachers association's legal action, and would be inappropriate to comment further."

'We can no longer be patient'

In 2010, a panel of experts on francophone school funding, formed under the provincial government, recommended French schools receive an additional amount of money, called a "permanent resource envelope", to achieve equality in education.

"Education is the most fundamental area for language rights to be upheld. Schools are the key to protection of the language," said Martin.

"This is why [the francophone teachers association] has decided to jump in and say we can no longer be patient, we can no longer, because the damage done to the francophone community is irreparable."

Rousselle was one of the authors of the 2012 report.

Martin said she was disappointed by the education minister's reaction to the group.

“We’ve been very active — we participated actively during the government’s strategic program review. We were present every time,” Martin said.

“We offered ideas on how to increase revenues in order for our government to be in a position to invest in education and respect the constitutional rights but our government has chosen not to take this path.”

Anglophone schools don’t receive more money than francophone schools on a per capita basis, but the francophone teachers association says French schools have different needs, which are more costly and require additional funds.

“If we buy a book that costs \$30 in English ... it will cost over \$50 [in French]. This is what the envelope is for,” said Martin.

“In my own school this year, approximately 90 per cent of my students speak very little or no French. We have to offer extra services for these children.”

French schools have a double mission, to teach students and to ensure the French language survives, which adds a high level of investment, according to Martin.

“We want to maintain the vitality of our French Acadian culture. I don’t think it should be pitted against majority-minority,” she said.

“It’s a constitutional right that a minority has. In Quebec, the English minority has this constitutional right.”

While the provincial government is looking for ways to address budget problems and find \$600 million in savings, Martin says that should have no impact on the education funding sought by the teachers’ union.

“The Supreme Court has stated many times in the past that a right is not negotiable regardless of the financial situation of a province or territory,” said Martin.

“Minister Rousselle knows this and one would presume that Premier Gallant knows this as well.”

The francophone teachers association says even though it’s taking legal action, it’s still open to meeting with the government to resolve the issue

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