

Local students take part in walkout over education cuts



By Alex McKinnon

High school students across the province walked out of class last Thursday (April 4) in protest of cuts being made to education by the Ontario Progressive Conservative government.

With over 100,000 students walking out province-wide, it provided many with an opportunity to have their voices heard, particularly here in Orangeville, as a group of more than 200 youth from Orangeville District Secondary School and Westside Secondary School gathered in protest outside Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones' Orangeville office on Broadway.

This strike is part of a series of walkouts protesting recent moves by the PC government. In September of last year, students engaged in a similar walkout protesting proposed changes to the provincial sex education curriculum.

Organizers of the latest walkout are part of an all-student group called 'Students Say No'.

Kirsten O'Brian has been involved with the movement since the beginning of the school year. A Grade 11 student at Westside, Kirsten has several concerns over the way the PC government is going about announcing its changes.

On increased class sizes, she explained, 'So usually we have an average of 28 kids per class, but that's going to go up to an average of 35, but it can go up to 45 kids, so when kids don't have as much one-on-one time with the teacher it wrecks the quality of the education.'

However, Education Minister Lisa Thompson offered a different perspective saying in an interview with CBC Radio's Metro Morning, that larger class sizes will be more beneficial for students by making them more resilient.

'When students are currently preparing to go off to post-secondary education, we're hearing from professors and employers alike that they're lacking coping skills and they're lacking resiliency,' she said.

She added, 'By increasing class sizes in high school, we're preparing them for the reality of post-secondary as well as the world of work.'

Many of those who walked out on Thursday were Grade 12 students and will be graduating in June. Many of them raised concerns that the PC government's cuts to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) will preclude many from attending post-secondary.

One of those students is Abby Kohut, a Grade 12 student from ODSS. When asked about her concerns, she had this to say: 'I'm in Grade 12 and going off to university next year, but education doesn't just end with me. All kids going into high school are going to lose funding, and I'm going to lose funding through OSAP. It's really upsetting to see a bunch of policy changes that deeply affect our education.'

A majority of those interviewed by The Citizen expressed concerns over cuts to OSAP.

Another major concern of those interviewed was the change in funding for autism and special education services.

'Both my cousin and sister have severe autism. Cuts to autism funding will affect us a lot, my sister specifically. She goes to art therapy, she goes to camps in the summer and the autism funding pays for all of that for her. Without that, it will be a real struggle for her,' said Makenna Caron, a Grade 11 student from ODSS.

These changes to autism funding have caused much controversy, with many parents of autistic children taking part in protests all over the province. Recently, however, the funding was increased due to the parental pressure.

Meanwhile, these cuts also seem to be placing increased pressure on school boards across the province.

The Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB) recently issued layoff notices to 54 elementary teachers, telling CBC News the move was caused by 'changes in provincial revenue?', 'changes to autism funding?', 'local priority funding that expires in August?' and 'other staffing considerations.'

UGDSB spokesperson Heather Loney said that while about 50 percent of the notices were issued in Dufferin County, the board hopes to recall all 54 of those issued notices.

In a statement, Ms. Loney said that '(we) strongly support students' voice. This includes students expressing their viewpoint in a peaceful manner that does not include the destruction of property, the exposure of students and others to risks involving health and safety, and does not hinder the operation of our schools.'

She added, 'Students are not punished for participating in the walkout, regular attendance procedures are followed. School staff are (working) with students to find ways for them to voice their opinion, without interrupting classroom learning.'

Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones said the student demonstration in Orangeville last week took place while she was at Queen's Park. 'Although my staff reported that no students came into the office to discuss their issues or asked to speak to me directly, I'm always happy to speak to constituents about our Government's plan, Education That Works For You, because it will ensure students leave school prepared for the realities of today's modern global economy,' Ms. Jones said. 'I respect students' rights to share their concerns, however I would prefer to see students in classrooms learning and finding other ways of voicing their ideas.'

Referencing the PC government's planned reform of education, Ms. Jones noted this was something that would 'finally?' put student success and the priorities of parents first.

'Our plan that is based on research and data,' she said. 'I recognize and respect the roles teachers play as they lead classrooms across Ontario. When it comes to class sizes, the evidence is clear: it's the quality of the teacher at the front of the classroom that determines student success. Ontario has and will continue to have the lowest class sizes in Canada, despite these minor changes.'

She added, 'Everything we are doing is responsible and measured, and will ensure the sustainability of our publicly funded school system while prioritizing student success.'

While some in the community derided those who walked out as just skipping class, or not knowing enough, one student took issue. 'They say we don't know anything but you learn what you need to learn,' said Kailey Verner, a student at ODSS.

The Students Say No movement is currently not planning any further walkouts and students are advised not to take part in any walkout being planned by other groups. They are instead encouraged to take part in a letter-writing campaign being conducted by the movement.

'The Students Say No provincial organizing team does not condone or support any subsequent methods of action (such as a 'student' strike) unless otherwise spread by the organizing team themselves, which will always have the 'Students Say No' logo on it. we are HEAVILY discouraging a student strike and any further walkouts,' said Deelan Sabido, a provincial organizer and Grade 11 student from Milton.

He added that any further walkouts 'will always be spread from the Instagram accounts of provincial organizers, and once recovered, the @studentssayno Instagram'

Further information regarding the movement may be found on their Instagram page; <https://www.instagram.com/studentssayno/>.