

Cutback protests get to minister

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Kelly Lamrock says protests against reductions to school support staff make him "feel miserable" and he would reverse the cuts if he could.

The education minister told reporters in Fredericton on Tuesday that the province's dire financial situation has forced him to make difficult decisions, including laying off library assistants, teacher assistants and intervention workers to save \$2.9 million.

"All I can say is, if our revenues start growing again these (positions) would be the first things we'd put back," said the Liberal MLA for Fredericton- Fort Nashwaak, who was confronted on Tuesday with another round of protests across the province.

"People can't make me feel any worse about having to do it," he said. "I hate it. The demonstrations certainly succeed in making me feel miserable. We don't have more money, but without more money I can't change the decision."

More than 300 school support staff have been laid off and nearly 300 more will have their hours significantly reduced next year, according to the **Canadian Union of Public Employees**, which represents the workers.

The bulk of those losing their jobs are library assistants and intervention workers, but teacher assistants are also being laid off in some districts.

Dressed in black to illustrate the gravity of the occasion, school support staff gathered at locations across the province to call on Lamrock to reverse the cuts.

"We truly are mourning education as we know it in New Brunswick," Sandy Harding, president of **CUPE** Local 2745, told about 30 protesters outside the provincial legislature.

Meanwhile, Christine Benjamin, a library assistant at Rothesay High School who was laid off, took part in a protest outside her school.

Benjamin plans to reapply for the new, three-hour-a-day position at the school beginning next fall, but said that because of the cuts there will be lots of competition for the job.

Her major concern, however, lies with the students.

"I feel I created a culture of reading in this school," Benjamin said, standing outside the school.

"We've really worked hard at it and now it's like saying none of that matters, like reading doesn't matter. They say literacy is so important. How can they say you don't need a library?"

The Education Department budget for 2009-10 is \$963 million, an increase of \$21 million over last year.

But because of an increase in teachers' wages under the new collective agreement and the cost of hiring about 200 new teachers, Lamrock still needed to slash \$23.8 million.

Lamrock has said he tried to find several ways to avoid making the job cuts, including asking teachers to waive a cap on classroom sizes for one year, which would have saved \$9.8 million.

Progressive Conservative leader David Alward said the Liberal government is cutting its budget in the wrong places.

"We have said that we would not cut services in the classroom," the Woodstock MLA said.

"It goes against their platform commitments in 2006.

"It goes against everything that the minister of Education has said in the past."

- with files from Candice Mac Lean