

Government cuts funding for Saskatchewan language schools



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Published on: March 4, 2016 | Last Updated: March 4, 2016 8:06 PM CST



Ola Tundun, top left, teacher, Girma Sahlu, top middle, president of Saskatchewan Organization for Heritage Languages (SOHL) and Tamara Ruzic, top right, executive director of SOHL pose with students out front of their head office in Regina on Friday. TROY FLEECE / Regina Leader-Post

Language schools in Saskatchewan face an uphill battle after the provincial government cancelled their funding.

The Saskatchewan Organization of Heritage Languages (SOHL) said it was told two days before Christmas that the \$225,000 it receives from the provincial government each year will be cut in a belt-tightening measure.

The bulk of that cash goes directly from the non-profit to more than 80 community-based schools that teach more than 30 languages. Generally, it's after-school and weekend programs for children and youth, though some also provide pre-schools or night classes for adults.

SOHL executive director Tamara Ruzic said she cannot understand why the amount was cut at a time when the provincial government has announced its commitment to Syrian refugees and purports to embrace multiculturalism.

On Monday, SOHL met with Education Minister Don Morgan and Parks, Culture and Sport Minister Mark Docherty.

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The outcome wasn't positive.

"They told us it was a decision because of the economy right now, but our grant truly is so modest," Ruzic said.

"The money was barely enough to keep the schools afloat."

With more immigrants settling in Saskatchewan, Ruzic estimated an average of 10 language schools each year have opened their doors. Arabic schools in particular "are huge, and are only growing."

One of the biggest language schools in the province is in Saskatoon and teaches Chaldean (a Syriac language spoken in Iran, Iraq and parts of Turkey).

Ruzic says about 200 families from that region have immigrated to Saskatoon in the last 20 years, and, like other newcomers, look to the language school as an important community support.

Schools under the SOHL umbrella also provide education in indigenous languages, many of which are endangered.

About 20 kids attend Regina's Yoruba School, of which Ola Tundun is principal. Most of the students came to Saskatchewan from Nigeria as young children or were born here to Nigerian parents.

"It's so important so they can communicate with their parents and other people in the Yoruba community," Tundun said.

As it is, most teachers are volunteers with a small honorarium. The funding cut came "out of the blue," she said, and will make it tough to survive.

“I don’t know what we will do,” Tundun said.

“It will be hard, but we need to try our best to keep our language alive.”

When the province’s forecast deficit was announced this week, Finance Minister Kevin Doherty said the \$427 million was only a small percentage of the province’s overall budget.

As far as Ruzic is concerned, the \$225,000 SOHL receives is “peanuts to the government.”

Her organization also receives funding from Sask. Lotteries, and is “so grateful for that,” but without government funding, she fears schools will struggle.

“I’m really quite afraid that this will mean schools will shut down,” Ruzic said.

“Our country is built on multiculturalism and diversity, and the whole multicultural and multilingual community is affected by this.”

Morgan said while it was a “difficult decision,” the schools don’t fall under the ministry’s mandate.

Instead of the government providing funding of \$4.50 per student per month, he said “this programming can be provided by the parents.”

“We felt it was an appropriate thing to do now, and we’ll see where we go,” he said.

With files from Charles Hamilton, Saskatoon StarPhoenix

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