

READ students win fight for funds

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Two years after entering a school for the first time in his life, Gary Smith spent the week wondering if he would have the opportunity again.

Smith, 47, is a student at the Victoria READ Society. He said without the Adult Basic Skills program he is enrolled in, his chances of getting off social assistance and into a paying job are "nil."

When he heard Monday that \$150,000 would be cut from READ's budget, an amount that would eliminate two full-time teaching positions and 30 student spaces, Smith joined his classmates and wrote letters of protest to anyone who would listen.

On Wednesday, they found out their campaign had had an impact.

In a move that left students and staff overjoyed, Jan Pullinger, minister of social development and economic security, announced a change of plans.

"The decision has been reversed, frozen, and is entirely under review," said Pullinger.

It was no small undertaking for the adult students, many of whom are struggling to become literate, to compose letters to politicians and organize press packages.

Many wrote about the difficulties — and embarrassment — of applying for jobs when they couldn't fill out the application form. One student wrote, "I started to use drugs to escape the shame and the pain. The drug cycle lasted 20 years before I realized I had to have help to help myself."

When Angelina Beaudin heard about Pullinger's announcement, the 26-year-old mother who graduates from READ this month shouted, "Oh, that's so cool."

Beaudin said though her math skills were at a Grade 3 level, she squeaked through high school. She got involved in READ five months ago in an effort to make a better life for herself and six-year-old daughter, Kaitlyne. In the near future, Beaudin hopes to study in a family and youth counselling program at UVic.

Melanie Austin, executive director of the Victoria READ Society, is wary of future cuts, but overall, was delighted by the news.

"We will pursue this matter until it's categorically reversed," she said.

Pullinger said the issue was brought to her attention by MLAs Gretchin Brewin, Steve Orchardson and Andrew Petter. She said the review process will be quick and promised to inform READ students and staff of any future changes this summer.