Negotiations are about fairness

Misleading statements made to the media by David Clegg, president of the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario oblige the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association to restate the facts. Everyone who is concerned about student success and safety in Ontario's elementary schools needs to know what OPSBA proposed in these negotiations. Our proposal focused additional resources on improving student achievement and on providing secure and safe learning environments. Our proposal would have provided higher salaries and more preparation time for teachers. Our proposal offered schools the peace, stability and confidence in continued progress that strengthens public education for students and staff.

The original Ministry Provincial Discussion Table (PDT) agreement was faithfully reflected in the OPSBA Proposal to ETFO. It included a three per cent annual salary increase for four years, compounding to 12.55 per cent by 2012, more teachers to improve class sizes, more teachers to improve student programs and more teachers to provide more planning time for existing teachers, PLUS improvements in benefits and other working conditions for English public elementary teachers.

In his letter, David Clegg claims that ETFO’s proposal met the government’s financial parameters. This is not true. In a letter issued to the media on December 17, Education Minister Kathleen Wynne confirmed that ETFO's demands far exceeded the funding provided in the Provincial Discussion Table agreement.

"The ETFO final proposal was not mutually agreed to by the parties and was not within the financial parameters established by the Ministry," said Minister Wynne. "OPSBA did raise legitimate concerns about the financial implications created by ETFO's final proposal. The only agreement that the Ministry would have endorsed was one that was mutually agreed upon by both parties and within the financial parameters established by the Ministry."

ETFO's final offer would have cost at least $463 million more over 5 years than had already been agreed to by the three other Provincial Teachers' Unions.

David Clegg also accuses OPSBA of contract "strips" - an inflammatory term that implies removing benefits and reducing salary. Collective agreements do not just deal with monetary issues such as salary. They deal with a variety of working conditions which determine how teachers spend their
time during the school day. The kinds of things OPSBA wanted to address, that the union refers to as "strips", include the following:

- Clarifying the provincial law which requires teachers to be present and available to their students in their classrooms or teaching areas 15 minutes before the start of classes in the morning and 5 minutes before classes start in the afternoon
- Giving principals a reasonable say in how teachers would have used some of their new preparation time during the school day when they are not teaching their students
- Allowing principals the ability to provide reasonable amounts of teacher professional development after classes are let out, so that student instructional time is not disrupted
- In unusual situations, ensuring that principals will be able to depart from scheduled teacher supervision assignments in order to ensure student safety

These are reasonable requests unequivocally related to student safety and student achievement.

It does not matter how many times ETFO proclaims that their proposal was within the funding requirements of the Province — the simple fact is that it is not. We have estimated that the ETFO agreement would cost Boards approximately $463 million dollars in excess of the PDT funding over 5 years. Since the Ministry will not fund outside of the agreed upon financial parameters, our local public boards would have to bear the extra $463 million dollars. This would have caused many, if not all, public school boards to be in a deficit position.

ETFO's letter suggests a so-called "giving up" of 3 percent of salary in the last year of the collective agreement. Although ETFO has characterized this move as creating a significant saving, the "front-end loading" of ETFO’s proposed higher percentages in years two and three would have wiped out any savings. In fact, under the ETFO proposal, teachers would still have received the same total amount of money over the 4 years of the contract as if they would have received had they been given the 3 per cent a year proposed by the Ministry.

These phantom "savings" were then supposed to "fund" thirty more minutes of preparation time per teacher beginning in 2011-12 at an unfunded cost to Boards of $106 million over 4 years and a further unfunded cost to Boards of $190 million per year beginning in 2012-13.

We are dismayed that ETFO would threaten to initiate strike votes given that ETFO's leadership had every opportunity to sign a provincial agreement that would support student success and public education.

The interests of our students must continue to remain the first priority for all parties - there can be no disruption to their education. This is what parents expect of us and what students deserve.

Loralea Carruthers

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