

# Mediation set for today EA contract talks not going well

The president of the employee group that represents special education teachers in Halton's public schools says contract talks are not going well and have not been helped by information in a board-issued letter that was inadvertently sent to some parents.

Lynne Gurzi, head of the 500-member Halton District Educational Assistants Association, said a mediation session with the board is set for today (Friday) but to date negotiations have been sporadic and are now somewhat tainted.

Addressing the latter observation, she referred specifically to a letter dated May 14 and signed by the Halton board's top administrator, education director Dusty Papke.

The letter was addressed to the parents and guardians of special needs students and is meant to update them on contract talks.

One clause states, "Unfortunately we have been unsuccessful in reaching a settlement with the EA's union despite offering more in total compensation than has been provided by the province for collective bargaining...."

Gurzi disputes that claim.

"We've had no serious offer from them because we've had nothing in writing. Our total compensation package (now) is the worst in the GTA for the 31 boards."

The board's executive officer of human resources, who is also its lead negotiator in all contract talks, said Thursday that the letter Gurzi cited was not the right one.

Dawn Beckett-Morton said the final version of the letter was the same except that there is no reference to compensation.

"That wasn't in the final letter. That's not the official letter from the board. There was a letter sent out in error and it was called back," said Beckett-Morton.

"It's not public knowledge what we're offering," she added. Gurzi, who said she only learned of the other version of the letter on Thursday, said the damage has been done. She noted she's been inundated with calls from parents of special education pupils wanting to get an update on negotiations.

"Some of the angriest calls were from parents who wanted to know how much we were offered" because they had received the letter with the reference to the board offering more in total compensation than the province was providing in funding.

Gurzi said she is also concerned about wording later in the letter, which was included in the board's final version. It states, "Your child is currently receiving the support of an educational assistant in our schools. You may want to consider making tentative alternate arrangements for your son or daughter should the board find no educational assistant support in our schools on or anytime after Monday, June 2."

The president of the Halton EAs said she interprets that as an indication they may be locked out anytime after that date, the earliest the independent union could go on strike.

"I see that as a veiled threat that if we don't get a deal by May 30 they may be locking us out. We have no intention of striking in June.

The strike vote was intended to send a message to the board that there is solidarity behind the things we feel are important to discuss," said Gurzi.

Beckett-Morton countered by saying the board has not indicated it will lock out the EAs after June 2.

"We have mediation scheduled for May 30 and we'll see what comes out of that.

"As far as I was concerned, a strike vote is a serious thing and it would be very unfair for us to sit back and not give our parents any warning.

"This is a situation where parents have to find alternative support, in some cases, for these children" if the EAs are not in the schools at some point, she said.

Gurzi's group consists of about 400 permanent and term-specific workers as well as about 120 casual and supply EAs.

Gurzi said they have met with the board for only about four hours over three meetings since January.

—By Tim Whitnell, special

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