

Teacher-board contract negotiations break down

Both sides frustrated over lack of progress

BY TIM WHITNELL

Special to The Champion

What appeared to be promising contract talks between the Halton District School Board and the union representing its secondary school teachers have broken down.

Two weeks after the president of the Halton union announced he was optimistic a deal could be reached this week, Joe Harwood said he's back to being frustrated.

"We continued to make some minor progress, but when it came down to the short strokes the board is not prepared to mirror settlements across the province. So we stopped."

The president of the 750 full-time equivalent high school teachers with the Ontario secondary School Teachers' Federation, District 20, said the two sides talked from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday.

Provincially-appointed mediator Greg Long presided over the meeting.

No new negotiating dates have

been set in the wake of the break-down in talks.

Halton's public high school teachers have been working without a collective agreement since August 31, 2002.

"The sticking point is a pattern set across the province for split (salary) grids for higher-end rates and the board's not prepared to make that kind of settlement," Mr. Harwood said.

"They are saying we can't go where everybody else has gone and that's very frustrating for us."

**Average settlement
4.2 per cent**

Mr. Harwood said about two dozen school boards have settled contracts with their high school teachers. The average final settlement figure for one year is about 4.2 per cent.

"We're looking at less than some of the settlements and more than others," he said. "We believe that Halton teachers should be somewhere in the middle of the province."

The board's current offer, said Mr. Harwood, would put Halton last in the province in terms of the

top-end of the pay scale for senior teachers.

Dawn Beckett-Morton, the chief negotiator for the Halton board, indicated she's as frustrated as Mr. Harwood.

"It's very hard for people to understand that a board like Halton, which is a very rich community for the most part, we are a very poor school board," said Ms Beckett-Morton.

"It's very hard for everyone to accept, including us. When we look at the resources we have available for salary and contracts, it is not comparable to the other boards. It's not that we are trying to pick a fight with anybody in the whole thing but we have to be able to settle contracts we know we can pay for."

Mr. Harwood is a little more optimistic about making headway on non-monetary contract items.

"There are three or four issues still outstanding," he said.

"The board seemed to indicate they were prepared to move on those and they are going to give us a response in the next couple of days."

The union's current work-to-rule campaign, which includes not covering on-call assignments for absent teachers, isn't being increased at this time, said Mr. Harwood.

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