

Teachers should give a little to open a new way out of this mess

They have their reasons for wanting to look like heroes. The secondary school teachers, who know they could lose the right to strike this year. The school trustees, who know this is the year their jobs might get the provincial axe.

And the Minister of Education, who kept everyone busy in 1996 with suggestions that Ontario school boards will no longer have to do certain things. Like exist. Or, if they do, they might not have to negotiate new contracts with those pesky teachers.

So these miserable contract talks with teachers in York Region — going nowhere until now — could be the last ones this public school board ever does. It would then be out of their hands, but they could say, by gosh, they held the line.

I can see why the high school teachers, under union president Lynn Johnston, would now fight especially hard to protect their working conditions and chart-topping salaries.

And I can see why the board, having already set an arbitrary number for a tax increase — 1.84 per cent — is just as determined to get its way. If school taxes go up a smidgen more than that, chair Bill Crothers told anxious students two weeks ago, the government and the taxpayers of York Region "would be unhappy."

Those are the fine, fine principles which have brought the threat of a bitter strike to our high schools.



A Reporter's View

Mike Adler

The board seems to be asking teachers to choose between overcrowding their classrooms and a schedule in which they must teach seven (and not the usual six) of eight daily periods.

The board tried to force the "seven of eight" option on teachers — simply announcing it last April — so it could balance its budget, then got slapped by the government and had to withdraw. But it hasn't given up.

The government's expert observer of the contract talks called "seven of eight" the "key issue" and aim for the board. And Richard Jackson, in his fact-finding report, trashed the scheme as "totally driven by short-term economics, and not by any sense, or even much real understanding, of its likely impact" and charged the board was after "an easy and politically attractive solution to a very complex set of problems."

As an alternative, Jackson pointed out, the board could raise the pupil-teacher ratio — putting more students in each class. But, as he reported, "neither the teachers nor the board want this."

Well, that's what the board had in its "final offer" to teachers: the PTR this month will be 15.6; next Septem-

ber it would be 16.9. The difference is like a whole extra class for each teacher, and the quality of education will deteriorate if teachers are spread that thin, Johnston told the student forum.

Crothers' response: "There will be an impact on students," he said, and reducing teachers' "release time" (meaning their two preparation periods) would be one way to deal with that. "Virtually every single employee in Canada has had to face changes in their work," he added, and in British Columbia, teachers teach seven of eight, but don't do supervisory work.

Jackson said the whole province is watching York Region, waiting for a result. "The seven of eight issue, in particular," he stated, "is an important symbol for those who want to reduce the cost of education in the province and believe that that can be done with no detrimental impact on the students in the classroom."

Seven of eight is a bad idea. It's a change for the worse because students will get less attention from teachers, and no one should want that.

The teachers must give a little to open another way out of this mess. A board's proposal to replace school department heads with a smaller number of "deans" would save money, and teachers could take a serious cut in benefits, which Jackson noted have increased 50 per cent in cost in five years.

But the board, much as it wants to please the taxpayers and provincial government, can't continue to base its approach on an arbitrary number. I don't believe the difference between a 1.84-per-cent tax hike and, say, 2.5

per cent is worth disrupting thousands of young lives.

I think most York Region residents would agree, and will admire trustees who signed a contract with teachers peacefully more than those who could sign only after a war.



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