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EDUCATION: Trustees balk at hiring 140 new teachers

About-face on preparation time raises stakes in elementary talks

BY PATRICK CASEY
STAFF WRITER

York Region's public school trustees have cut elementary teachers' preparation time, just two days after announcing a commitment to maintain the existing contract.

At a board meeting Wednesday night, trustees voted to cap average class sizes at 25 students and provide teachers with 120 minutes of preparation time a week, a reduction of 30 minutes.

The decision arrived less than a day after negotiations with the teachers broke down and represents a 180-degree turn from Monday, when trustees accepted a recommendation by a provincial mediator to maintain the existing staffing levels.

Local elementary teachers federation president Pam Gillan was unavailable for comment as the union prepared its 2,760 teachers for a strike vote.

Board vice-chairperson Karen Barker said preserving staffing levels would have forced the board to hire an additional 140 teachers at an annual cost of \$9 million.

"We hoped to negotiate a

new collective agreement before Tuesday morning. Then we reached an impasse Tuesday night; we simply can't afford to maintain the last contract, given our funding allocation from the ministry."

"I was really quite surprised we didn't reach a deal because we were really close. We just couldn't cut through. We have no qualms saying we have the best teachers and the best-paid teachers in the province and we want to welcome our 50,000 students and teachers back to the classroom on Tuesday."

Barker said if a strike materializes, the region's schools will still be open Tuesday morning and buses will be running. "We are waiting for the mediator to call the parties back together," added Barker on Thursday.

Meanwhile, contract negotiations with the region's 1,800 secondary school teachers resume tomorrow in Richmond Hill with Ontario Ministry of Labour conciliator Kevin Burkett.

At a board meeting Monday evening, trustees approved new staffing arrangements requiring teachers to instruct 6.5 out of eight daily periods, spending

1,250 minutes a week in the classroom.

Teachers would retain a full period for preparation.

As of Thursday afternoon, Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation president Gerry Harrison said the members had not exercised a strike mandate and remained committed to reaching a deal this weekend.

"We are going into negotiations and hopefully things will go favorably," said Harrison. "There's still room to negotiate many of the issues."

"We may have to visit looking at a strike, but we will look at all our options. The one thing teachers do well is prepare and we will be prepared to look at a number of contingency plans."

Just because we have a strike mandate doesn't mean it has to be used at this time," he added. "It could be used Oct. 31 or it could have been used Aug. 31."

Harrison said he doesn't support the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association's suggestion that high school teachers in some boards would report to work Tuesday and then refuse to teach the additional class.



ATTENTION YORK CATHOLIC DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD PARENTS, GUARDIANS AND STUDENTS

On September 1, the provincial executive of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association issued a memorandum indicating it has filed a full-strike notice (both elementary and secondary) for York Region. Over the labour day weekend, we urge parents/guardians to listen to their local media to determine if a strike will commence on the first day of school (Tues., Sept. 8). If this occurs:

- classes will be cancelled
- as a service to parents who cannot make alternate arrangements, schools will be open - provided the Board can ensure that children are safe and adequately supervised - however, parents who are able, will be encouraged to keep their children at home
- principals, vice-principals and non-teaching staff will be in the schools

For September, our Board has assured teachers of the following:

- NO teacher layoffs
- SAME salary
- SAME benefits
- average elementary class sizes will remain the SAME as for the 1997/98 school year
- average secondary class sizes have been REDUCED from 26 to 22
- despite the provincially imposed changes, we are NOT increasing the average number of students a teacher will teach
- to meet new provincial regulations, the majority of our secondary schools will begin their day ONLY 15 minutes earlier

Our teachers remain the highest paid Catholic teachers in the GTA. The Board is already spending more (in teacher salary and benefits) than allocated by the provincial funding formula. Agreeing to teacher salary and staffing demands would seriously impact other key areas of classroom spending such as textbooks, computers and support services.

Call our Teacher Negotiations Information Hotline at (416) 221-5051 or (905) 713-1211, ext. 7040, the local OECTA offices at (416) 492-4200 or (905) 773-2037, or OECTA Provincial at 1-800-268-7230.

Susan LaRosa
Director of Education

Tina Rotondi Molinari
Chair of the Board

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