

# Stouffville Tribune

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## EDITORIAL

### Two sides have swapped places in battle

Most York Region public elementary students are heading back to school today, thanks to an unprecedented move by the school board.

The board has referred its final offer to the Ontario Labour Relations Board, which will submit the offer to a vote by all 2,700 York elementary teachers. Pending that vote, the board has ended its lockout, opening schools again for classes.

Unfortunately, the teachers have responded by launching a series of rotating strikes — shutting down 11 schools each day.

As a result, the two sides have effectively swapped places in the battle for public relations, with the union now on the hot seat instead of the board.

What a disaster. What a history. Last March, after the elementary teachers came within hours of a strike, the teacher unions and the board took a big step toward reconciling their bitter differences.

They decided to establish a task force to repair the damage done by the squabbles of the contract talks. And the parties agreed that next time, negotiators would attempt to maintain a "more collaborative style" and avoid a "confrontational and adversarial bargaining mode."

What happened? The process, and the publicity, this time out simply turned nasty.

Even this latest turn of events — the end to the lockout, which should be cautiously welcomed as an optimistic turn — may be nothing more than vapour. If the teachers turn down the board's offer, rotating strikes could quickly become a permanent walkout. Or the dispute could be sent to binding arbitration, with the board's position seriously weakened by the teachers' rejection of its offer.

Although parents played a key role in changing their minds, the trustees deserve some credit for now ending that lockout and calling for a vote — in effect, putting their offer where their mouths are.

All along, board officials have insisted their offer is fair. And they're convinced most teachers would accept it if the union gave them all the information. Now that the board is putting its offer on the line, we'll find out just how teachers really feel about their union's tough stand.

It's both ironic and disturbing that both sides in this dispute appear to be so far out of touch with public opinion.

The trustees and board officials have been shocked by the lack of public sympathy for their lockout, just as we suspect union officials and teachers will be when they see the reaction to their rotating strikes.

Despite the high level of respect parents have for teachers, the general sentiment is that they are very well-paid professionals who only work nine months of the year, have cushy pension plans and great benefits.

They don't understand or care about teacher concerns over preparation time. They simply expect their schools to be open and their children to be educated without the constant threat of labour disruptions.

We agree with that view. Which is why we're encouraging teachers to accept the board's latest offer when they vote next week — an offer that comes very close to maintaining the status quo at a time of immense financial upheaval.

Both the board and the union have a long way to go before they restore any credibility with the public. The first step in that process is to get the students back in the schools, permanently.

# OPINION



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Reporter got it all wrong

In response to Joan Ransberry's column of Nov. 17 entitled, "Teacher attitude: a real education," Ransberry has just proven to me why I should not have taken the time to speak to her at all when she approached my colleagues and myself at Glad Park Public School on Thursday, Nov. 12, the first day of the board lockout. She wrote that at Glad Park, "we were given a lecture. It was both condescending and snobbish." I take offense to this.

I did in fact explain politely that the reluctance to speak was because we did not have all the information at our disposal, since a union meeting was planned for that night.

Also I indicated that some individuals felt that communication shared with the media was at times misrepresented and were therefore hesitant to share our views.

The next day, following the union meeting, I called Joan at the Tribune office and offered to talk to her to answer any questions she might have.

I apologized for not being able to answer questions the day before, but indicated that I was now able to do so since I had more information.

She indicated that she didn't want all the details she just wanted the local take on the issues which I shared with her. I felt very good about taking the time to call Joan to follow up on her visit to the line at Glad Park.

I was shocked and disappointed to read that my attempts to explain my colleagues' positions, as well as my willingness to communicate with Joan the next morning had been turned into a "condescending and snobbish lecture" in her column.

Unfortunately, this type of journalism proves the point about media misrepresentation.

SUSAN STAPLEY  
STOUFFVILLE

### Time to look after the kids

Change in the education system needs to be done for the good of our children. The system is taxpayer funded. Something both the teachers and the boards seem to forget. Taxes have gone to build luxury buildings for the board and fringe benefits for the members. Taxes have gone to teacher's salaries and to their very rich pension plan.

It is the students that are working under poor conditions. The propaganda on both sides must not confuse parents. My oldest son just started school and I have to say I am disappointed.

The public education system has changed for the worst. The changes over the years have been gradual, I suspect.

While the board and the teachers negotiated the best for each other in terms of benefits, job security, working conditions and money, the children were just left behind.

Today I face a York Region teacher's strike. I look at the paper and I read "Teachers are being used as pawns; Strike is not about kids, or money, but about politics." Tell me, who are the pawns? Teachers? No.

Students and parents. Is the strike about politics? No. Is it about money? Yes. You cannot continue to mismanage money that is given to you.

KATHLEEN ARMSTRONG  
STOUFFVILLE



Doug Devine

### Board, union unwittingly hurt students, again

Despite all the confusion surrounding the public school lockout, several indisputable facts are clear:

- There is absolutely no reason for the schools to be closed.

- The fact they are closed can be blamed 80 per cent on trustees, 15 per cent on provincial union officials and, for a change, no more than 5 per cent on Mike Harris.

- This dispute no longer has anything to do with children, quality of education or local taxpayers.

- If we kicked out the professional negotiators, it would take real teachers and real public representatives about 11 minutes to reach a deal.

In fact, this entire dispute boils down to 11 minutes of in-school teacher preparation time per week — or 2.2 minutes a day.

As important and sacred as prep time is to our teachers, you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone who would be willing to shut down schools over 2.2 minutes.

So why were the schools closed? The answer lies in two recent comments by key officials. The first came from Joe Allin, the board's associate director.

According to union officials, Allin told them even if the board could find the \$5 million to meet the union's demands, it wouldn't be "a political reality" to give York teachers more prep time than other GTA boards.

In other words, the school board shut down the schools simply to score some political points and curry favour with Mike Harris and the province.

The second comment came from the union's provincial president, Phyllis Benedict, in response to a letter from the board to York Region union president Pam Gillan.

Benedict was livid that the letter was addressed to Gillan, since board officials knew that the York negotiations have been taken over by the provincial office.

Benedict's confession is significant in explaining the ludicrous 11-minute deadlock, since provincial union officials obviously have far different priorities than local teachers — not the least of which is doing everything in its power to make life uncomfortable and embarrassing for Mike Harris.

By allowing themselves to become the latest pawns in the union-Harris power struggles, local teachers and trustees have unwittingly hurt the very people they're all supposed to be here to serve — the students.

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