

Public teachers threaten strike

BY KIM ZARZOUR
Staff Writer

Public elementary school teachers' demand for parity with high school teachers isn't a realistic option in this troubled economy, says the Ontario Public School Boards' Association.

The elementary teachers union said earlier this week it could strike if the province doesn't commit to closing the student funding gap between elementary and high schools.

Union president David Clegg said the teachers won't return to the bargaining table until the province promises to close the gap of \$711 it says exists between the two levels in per-student funding.

But Rick Johnson, past president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, says the demands are costly and "timing is difficult."

"The economic reality is out there. This is what we have to deal with," urging the teachers to return to bargaining.

The government's offer would cost the province \$700 million annually, plus \$1.8 billion in salary increases by the final year of the contract. Mr. Johnson says it would bump salaries to an average \$92,000 to \$93,000 by the fourth year — up from the current \$73,000.

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Education would not say if the ministry is prepared to let the issue come to a strike.

However Patricia MacNeil did say that the Nov. 30 deadline for an agreement set by Queen's Park remains in place and teachers are "welcome to

return to the bargaining table at any time".

Ontario's 73,000 elementary public school teachers and occasional teachers have been without a contract since Aug. 31.

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario hasn't formally contemplated job action or taken a strike vote, but Mr. Clegg said he is hearing "comments from the floor," as he takes his message to teachers across the province, indicating most are prepared to walk.

Ms MacNeil said, "It's important to understand we've had four years of peace and stability that have been very productive for Ontario students. We would like another four years."

Mr. Clegg, a former York Region local president, said, "Salary is not the issue and has never been the issue. The real issue is fairness."

He said the funding gap the Liberals have reduced in the past five years remains "discriminatory", resulting in fewer textbooks, computers, musical instruments, specialist teachers, teacher-librarians, guidance counsellors and design and technology programs in elementary schools.

It also means class sizes in Grades 4 to 8 continue to be unacceptably high. The average class size in grades 4 to 8 is 25 students, compared to 22 in high school. Elementary teachers are not happy with their 40 minutes of daily planning or "prep time"; their high school counterparts receive a 75-minute period, he explained.

The four-year deal being offered by the province includes an additional eight minutes of prep time per

day and a reduction in class size by half a student by 2012. The teachers' union says that would not bring staffing levels to parity with high schools for 30 years. "It falls very far short of what is needed," Mr. Clegg said.

A new 20-page report by Ken Leithwood, education professor at the Ontario Institute for Education, is being distributed across the province as the union spreads its message. In the report, which surveyed more than 3,000 public school teachers, Mr. Leithwood concludes working conditions are more favourable for secondary teachers.

"Teachers in secondary have no idea how good they have it," the report begins, in a quote from teachers.

"They have a way more relaxed day. They have way more freedom. Elementary teachers are running around like hamsters on a wheel."

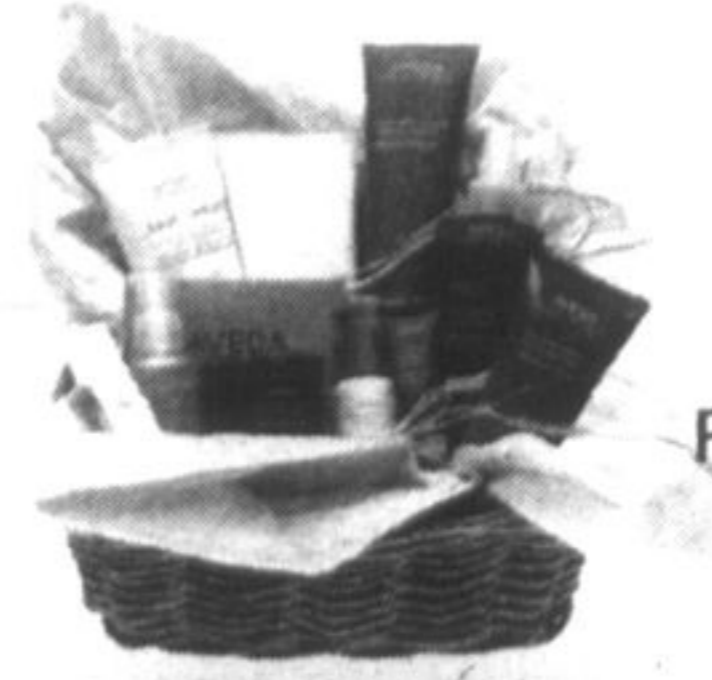
The issue could ignite the first labour dispute in Ontario schools since Premier Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government was elected in 2003. The last full-scale strike to affect York Region public schools was 10 years ago.

The elementary teachers' federation walked away from contract negotiations over the parity issue earlier this year.

The province, which is offering a 3-per-cent pay increase in each of the next four years, gave teachers a Nov. 30 deadline to accept the offer, or see it reduced to a 2-per-cent increase over two years and a withdrawal of the 'extras' such as increased prep time.

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By: Casey Underwood
Freelance Feature Writer

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