

May 19, 2006

I'm often asked – whether I am with superintendents, principals, teachers or parents, or indeed my neighbours or members of the public: “What is going to happen with bargaining with the BC Teachers’ Federation? Will the BCTF settle? Will we have peace and stability as we move into a new school year?”

I don't have a crystal ball, but I am optimistic about negotiations this year. That optimism is based on the success government has had negotiating with the other public sector unions. To date, government has achieved 55 agreements – and 54 of those have been ratified by members, most by more than 90 per cent in favour of the contracts. Those agreements represent 75 per cent of all public sector employees: 188,400 union and 42,000 non-union employees.

That doesn't mean we don't have our work cut out for us. We do. A total of 76 contracts, predominantly in the public school sector and covering more than 70,000 union employees are set to expire on June 30. These include teachers, school district support staff, and staff at universities, colleges and the Queen's Printer.

The current agreement between the BCTF and BCPSEA expires on June 30. The parties are at the bargaining table under the watchful eye of Mr. Vince Ready. Last fall, Mr. Ready was charged with recommending a new bargaining structure for teacher negotiations. Recognizing that implementing a new structure would take time, and mindful of the fact that the BCTF agreement expires on June 30, 2006, Mr. Ready recommended:

- Appointment of a facilitator/mediator to facilitate discussions.
- Small bargaining committees.
- One senior representative from government to convey the mandate.
- Strict timelines for each stage of bargaining.

- Report to the Minister of Labour of no settlement by June 1.
- Continue with the Learning Roundtable discussions regarding class size and composition.

As a result of the recommendations, Mr. Ready has appointed a colleague, Irene Holden, as the facilitator to work with the parties to expedite the bargaining and assist in establishing common grounds.

Under his recommended timeline, Mr. Ready required that the employer present a substantive offer by May 15. On Monday, BCPSEA presented a four-year offer consistent with the government mandate for bargaining. Government has been clear about the mandate: all agreements must be within the financial envelope of the \$6 billion negotiating framework. The agreements must also be fair and affordable, and deliver better services for British Columbians. Wage settlements for the 55 agreements reached to date have generally been between 8 and 14 per cent over four years. All agreements have been for four years or until 2010.

BCPSEA also has some flexibility within the market adjustment portion of the mandate but has not yet advanced those proposals because the BCTF still has a number of other cost demands on the bargaining agenda.

Another reason why I'm optimistic is Bill 33, the recently passed legislation amending the *School Act*. Bill 33 addresses issues of Class Size and Composition, and responds to some of the concerns expressed by the BCTF regarding learning conditions. Bill 33 is one of the outcomes of the Learning Roundtable and it goes a significant distance in addressing some of the concerns expressed at the Roundtable. In particular, it seeks to achieve balance between the views of the BCTF and the views of other members.

The next major date is June 1. If no agreement has been reached by that date, then the facilitator must report to the Labour Minister on the status of bargaining.

So will we have peace and stability in our schools this fall? As I said at the beginning, I don't have a crystal ball. I can tell you we're doing everything we can to reach an agreement.

Is there a Teacher Shortage?

Is there a teacher shortage? Should be an easy question to answer, one would think. But the answer has defied the Teacher Supply and Demand Consortium for nearly a decade. Some things we know:

- **There are no teaching positions vacant in the province today.** Every teaching position is filled with a certified teacher except a very small number of positions, often highly specialized, that are filled with teachers on Letters of Permission.
 - A few remote and small districts report difficulty finding sufficient numbers of teachers, although all have filled their rosters this year.
 - There are skill shortages in specialist positions in many school districts but particularly in small and remote districts. These shortages tend to be in areas requiring speciality skills in special education, assessment, languages, physical sciences and mathematics. Even metro areas struggle to find school psychologists and other specialized teachers like speech pathologists.
 - Teachers on Call (TOCs) are in short supply in some districts. This situation was aggravated by the January hiring of teachers as a result of the strike savings that were returned to districts. Some small and remote districts employ Teachers on Call who do not have a teaching certificate.
 - A number of teachers leave the profession within six years of beginning teaching. The attrition from the teaching profession is similar to or less than that from other professions. Some teachers early in their career make personal decisions to pursue other options as do individuals in any career.
- Enrolment is dropping each year. This translates into a reduced demand for teachers. About 350 fewer teachers are required each year because of enrolment decline.
 - Taken together with enrolment decline, university graduation rates of teachers and in-migration of teachers, about the same number of teachers leave the system as enter it each year. The problem is that the areas of interest and preparation of teachers do not always match the areas of need.

We have heard about an exodus to Alberta and Ontario. There is no evidence to support that teachers are leaving BC for Alberta and Ontario. Here are some interesting numbers.

- There were 1,921 first issue certificates to BC graduates in 2005
- Add to this 673 BC certificates issued to out-of-province teachers
- 152 Alberta teachers apparently migrated to BC as they were issued BC certificates.
- At the same time, only 104 BC teachers left for Alberta, even though BC is a much larger system.
- Clearly, there is no flight to Alberta.
- The net effect is a teacher supply that exceeds attrition.

Does this mean that there is not a teacher supply problem? Some districts have trouble attracting teachers in certain skill areas and regions. **But, generally speaking, we have a sufficient supply of teachers to offset retirements and attrition.**

We know that the impact of every teacher on the children he/she teaches is the most important variable in student success. We need to work together to maintain our access to the most qualified and dedicated professionals to help all our students be successful.