

January 18, 2012

Our 70th bargaining session

Today's bargaining session began with a presentation from the union local of school district 57 (Prince George) on why certain specific issues need to be bargained on a local basis. The concerns raised included declining enrollment, district response to inclement weather, and the ability of teachers declared surplus to have input into where they may end up. In each case, the speaker noted the circumstance as being of concern to teachers in Prince George and thus the need for local bargaining.

In response, BCPSEA thanked the teachers for their presentation and outlined why we thought the solutions to the basic issues they had raised should be provincial in nature. While there is no doubt the issues are of concern to Prince George teachers, our experience has been that these same issues are raised in the majority of BC school districts and thus a common provincial solution is warranted. Likewise, we would want to make use of any positive solutions found in school district 57 to help construct common language that could benefit all BC teachers and school districts. Our discussion also focused on when it might be appropriate to use district policy as a way of addressing these concerns (issues often of interest to everyone in the district, not just teachers), rather than putting additional language in the teacher collective agreement.

The afternoon portion of today's bargaining session concentrated on the costing of yesterday's revised list of proposals from the BCTF. In particular, BCPSEA was concerned with union statements in the media that the expense of their revised proposals has been reduced to 'an overall cost of about \$300 million'. Our initial review of the proposals lead us to wonder how they came up with that overall cost figure as even a cursory review indicated a much higher price total.

The costing document tabled today by the BCTF included the following elements:

- A total first year cost of \$305 million for the all of their requested contract improvements (within a proposed 3 year agreement) broken down as:
 - Wage improvements - \$65 million (as an approximate portion of the \$305m)
 - Improved benefits - \$75 million
 - Reduction of salary grid levels - \$32 million
 - Preparation time improvements - \$79 million
 - Improved paid leave provisions - \$55 million

No specifics on the methodology used to reach these figures was provided. BCPSEA requested an explanation of the underlying data and calculations, and reiterated our offer to work with the BCTF to create accurate, shared cost estimates.

It is clear, however, that the total cost of the BCTF proposals over the suggested 3 year agreement far exceed the \$300 million put forward by the BCTF president yesterday. The total cost of the union proposals can be conservatively estimated by using the figures they provided us today.

Year 1 - \$305m (the figure put forward today and in the media by the BCTF as the overall cost of their proposals in the first year)

Year 2 - \$305m + \$130m addition (the over \$130 million is the BCTF estimated cost of the second year 6% salary increase)

Year 3 - \$305m + \$130m + \$130m addition (this additional over \$130m is the BCTF estimated cost of the third year 6% salary increase)

Total Cost - \$305m + (305m + 130m) + (305m + 130m + 130m) = \$1305 million

\$1.3 billion overall cost of their proposals within a 3 year agreement

When asked if these figures were accurate, the union response was to say they felt the proper way to calculate the cost was to only include the increased dollars needed from year to year of the agreement (i.e. \$305m + \$130m + \$130m = \$565m), rather than counting the total cumulative increased costs over the 3 years. The \$305m in year two and the \$305 + \$130 in year three were described as 'existing dollars' that government would not have to add to the education budget.

BCPSEA will spend considerable time over the next couple of days reviewing the union's costing. The cost totals above use the BCTF figures as presented, and have yet to be verified as accurate. The potential cost of the union proposals may be higher than the \$1.3 billion if they have underestimated or not included all of the expenses that would flow to school districts and government from their proposals. These costs also do not include any funding of class size, class composition or non-enrolling teacher staffing improvements that were in requests made directly to government.

The parties agreed not to meet in bargaining tomorrow as scheduled so that BCPSEA could concentrate on a full review of the union proposals and their estimated costs. Talks resume on Tuesday, January 24, 2012.