

Editorial ? Wanted: an alternative to impasses

So here we are in the middle of July, 10 months after negotiations began toward hammering out collective agreements with Ontario's teachers, and what has been accomplished?

Nothing.

And even that is an overly generous appraisal of the current situation.

Thanks to legislation enacted last year that was to have provided a means of achieving such contracts without resorting to strikes, lockouts or government legislation imposing a settlement, collective bargaining has taken place at both the provincial and local school board levels. But there has not been a single agreement reached anywhere. Worse yet, there are no current negotiations and only the possibility of an attempt at conciliation in the weeks leading up to September's scheduled school openings.

For reasons never adequately explained, the provincial talks that ought to be merely between the Ministry of Education and the various unions seem to have been dominated by a third party, representatives of the school boards.

Whatever the case, the public has been told precious little as to what has been discussed, with the school boards' representatives claiming that changes one of the unions is demanding would cost \$3.2 billion and the union claiming they haven't even got around to making their salary demands.

Equally mystifying is the recent ability of the Upper Grand District School Board to pass a 2015-16 budget that's both balanced and compliant with provincial instructions in the absence of any labour agreements.

Meanwhile, the Liberal government says it has no money to spend on better salaries and benefits and that is clearly an under-statement of its situation, with experts warning that it cannot keep its promise to produce a balanced budget by 2018 and its credit rating being downgraded last week.

In the circumstances, it's hardly appropriate for Premier Kathleen Wynne and Education Minister Liz Sandals to continue their hands-off approach. What's clearly needed now is a major change in tactics, starting with a firm commitment from Queen's Park that a province-wide teachers' strike will simply not be permitted.

Any worthwhile action plan should involve a commitment to achieve a contract covering salaries, benefits and class sizes no later than mid-August.

This could happen in one of two ways, either by naming an arbitrator or by opening up the negotiations to the public through use of the Internet, thus allowing parents and other taxpayers to understand what the issues are and express their opinions as to who was right, and if necessary making the talks non-stop until a deal is reached.

Granted, we know of no precedent for such an alternative. But the possibility didn't exist in pre-Web days, and in this case every Ontarian, as a taxpayer, has a direct interest in the proceedings. And although such open hearings would involve added costs, we suppose those could be offset by permitting some commercials.

We submit that the option's advantages would far outweigh any disadvantages.

For one thing, all the negotiators would be on their best behaviour, be they politicians, civil servants or union representatives.

For another, it would be virtually impossible for one party to misrepresent the positions taken by the other party or parties, since everything would be on the public record.

Ideally, such talks would start with opening statements as to the parties' objectives. The government's would hopefully be a commitment to maintain educational standards while keeping costs under control. It shouldn't take a rocket scientist to determine that at a time of diminishing enrolments the overall budget need not grow in order to provide teachers with salaries that keep pace with today's modest inflation.

Once agreement is reached at the provincial level, the legislature should be recalled to pass a law giving negotiators at the school-board level 90 days to reach local agreements on non-monetary issues or have those issues resolved through arbitration.