

Needed: mediators, arbitrators

EDITORIAL

THERE ARE TIMES when collective bargaining doesn't work, because the two sides are so far apart there is no hope of them reaching a settlement without the assistance of a neutral third party.

As we see it, that's precisely the situation facing the Ontario government and the province's teachers.

This week, thousands of those teachers launched a job action in public elementary and secondary schools, as their unions try to apply pressure on the Progressive Conservative government amid tense contract negotiations that seem to be going nowhere.

The twin work-to-rule campaigns are not expected to have an impact inside the classroom, but parents and students will likely be drawn into the unions' ongoing dispute with the government with 'information pickets' outside schools.

Their union says public elementary teachers are starting each day by meeting outside the main school entrance and walking in together, 15 minutes before the morning school bell.

The teachers are no longer participating in EQAO testing, won't take the government's new math proficiency test and won't attend meetings outside the school day.

Meanwhile, at public high schools, teachers are handing out flyers to parents explaining the job action and highlighting the government's policies on education, which teachers are rallying against.

Those educators are no longer attending 'unpaid' after-school staff meetings, won't participate in professional development required by the Ministry of Education and have also stopped taking part in EQAO testing.

The work-to-rule campaign will also affect student report cards as teachers largely leave it up to administrators to fill out, only providing basic information such as grades and brief remarks on student performance.

Both the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) and the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) will meet with government negotiators at least twice this week, but the unions' leaders are signaling that talks aren't heading in the right direction.

As usual, neither side in the dispute is saying a lot about the issues beyond agreeing that they are far apart.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce says the government has been making concessions at the bargaining table especially on class sizes and e-learning. He rejects the notion that his government should carry any of the blame for contract talks going off the rails.

'That would be true if we didn't make moves, significant moves at the table,' he told reporters Monday. 'We've made those moves every single day, week over week and even the days we've introduced those measures have been the days that unions have opted to escalate.'

The reasons behind the apparent deadlock between the two sides are readily apparent.

The Ford government appears determined to balance its annual budgets in its first four-year term, and by cutting its costs rather than raising more revenue through tax increases.

Health care and education being the two biggest expense areas, the government has opted to overhaul the health care system by

scrapping Liberal-founded Local Health Integration Networks and replacing them with a single unit, Ontario Health, and 24 local Ontario Health Teams (OHTs), the first of which was announced this week as being in Mississauga.

On the education front, the government wants to save money through larger classes, fewer subject choices and more online learning, all of which would mean fewer teachers.

In the circumstances, we see no hope of any resolution at the bargaining table and an urgent need for the appointment of mediators who would eventually become arbitrators if they are unable to find a middle ground acceptable to the government and the unions.

Although a decision by the arbitrators to hold the line on class sizes and course options would represent a defeat for the Ford government, they would undoubtedly prefer it to be imposed rather than have them simply cave in to the unions. As for the unions, they undoubtedly would prefer a settlement achieved at the bargaining table but likely already see that as an impossibility,