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Boards blast Minister over 'savings plan' demand

The well is dry. We know it, the parents know it, the teachers know it and the boards of education across the province know it. More importantly, the provincial government responsible for adequately funding the public education system should know it. Sadly, that did not stop them from trying to go to the well one more time.

We have now been to the provincial bargaining table three times. Talks were adjourned last year to give the employer and the Ministry of Education "an opportunity to properly prepare for support staff bargaining." That turned out to be a letter from the minister telling locally-elected school boards to slash their budgets by 1.5% in each of two years to pay for long overdue support staff wage hikes and submit a "savings plan" by mid-January.

Response from school boards has been swift - there are no savings left to squeeze out of the system - only out of the quality of education for our children. In one response to Education Minister Don McRae, School District 57 (Prince George) board chair Sharel Warrington said schools have already had their budgets reduced significantly and should not have to find more savings to cover employee wage increases.

"In balancing our budgets, we have had to introduce and execute drastic measures to stretch finite resources, while at the same time striving to meet the needs of our students and district operations," said Warrington. "It is of great concern the ministry believes there are broad savings readily available in the K-12 sector." (a selection of board letters sent to the minister is available on our website at: bcschools.cupe.ca)

Now the government appears to have backed off a bit in response to the deluge of outrage from the boards, admitting to a problem with its delivery (but not necessarily its content). The ministry has now said it will meet with BCPSEA and BCSTA to discuss "a way forward." From our perspective this looked like a clumsy attempt to direct bargaining by backhandedly telegraphing an arbitrary wage ceiling from outside the free collective bargaining process.

As CUPE BC K-12 presidents' council chair Colin Pawson explains: "It demands unattainable cutbacks from a system already stretched past the limit by years of chronic underfunding. Add to that the government's insistence that every school board in BC

must by law deliver a 'balanced budget' that ignores what districts need to ensure the best quality of education possible for our children. It's still unclear where this 1.5% figure came from. It certainly doesn't represent a realistic amount to address long overdue catch-up or even wage increases in the private sector."

"The only way forward is for the government to accept and act on its responsibility for adequately funding public education. It would be irresponsible for this provincial government to push K-12 workers into a corner where they have to take job action to negotiate long overdue wage provisions," says Pawson.

At this point, no further talks have been scheduled. You bargaining committee did receive a presentation this week on the concept of a standardized provincial benefits plan from Morneau Shepell, Canada's largest administrator of pension and benefits plans.

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