

TEACHER CONTRACTS

A TRANSITIONAL STAGE IN A BROADER EVOLUTION

Mark Lisac Insight into Government

Let's have another look at the teachers' bargaining framework that we briefly summarized last week — partly to change one item and partly because we ran out of space to talk about everything involved. First, while we reported a 60% formula for school board approval of a deal across the province, the actual ratification arrangement is different.

The timetable calls for representatives of the government, the Alberta School Boards Association and the Alberta Teachers' Association to work out an agreement by Dec. 31. Talks are still at a preliminary stage. Each of the 62 boards will assess whatever deal is put together. If some turn down whatever is negotiated, well, that's a bridge to cross if and when it's reached. It's still not clear to all involved whether the province will insist that a central agreement must be ratified by every board. The government is obviously hoping that the deal will be too good for anyone to turn down. All three parties know that the teachers did well in the current five-year agreement, which expires on Aug. 31. Teacher salaries account for about 55% of board costs. Restraint would seem to be in order for the next few years. But no one is saying that out loud.

The government pays the bill resulting from salary negotiations. This is a way of having it take part in the deal.

It is a further elaboration of a change that began in 2007, but it's a transitional arrangement with uncertainties. ASBA would have preferred to see a legislated bargaining framework in place rather than going ahead on an informal understanding. Enthusiasm is also restrained for other reasons. The central negotiation will address: teacher salaries; sustainable and predictable provincial funding for schools; and a disputes resolution process if individual boards and ATA locals can't agree on an overall final deal.

A second tier of negotiations will see individual boards and ATA locals address all other contract matters. Boards used to be able to trade salary against other factors such as instructional time when they bargained individually. With this new framework, salaries will be set before the other issues are negotiated. And the ATA may still try to raise issues such as the amount of time teachers devote to planning lessons, and to coping with demands to help children with disabilities, or family or mental health issues.

Central bargaining also leaves some local concerns up in the air. The Medicine Hat public board didn't vote in favour of the new bargaining framework. It doesn't think "stable and predictable" funding necessarily equates to equitable funding — chairman **Terry Riley** says Medicine Hat public receives about \$1,000 per student from the province while local charter schools receive \$1,400 and the local francophone board receives about \$1,500.

Movement toward a new bargaining method originated in the bruising teacher strikes of 2002. The 2002-03 learning commission recommended provincewide bargaining through a legislated employers' group. That idea was not accepted — many boards rejected it and the government did not want to impose it. In 2007, a government led by a new premier wanted to deal with unfunded teacher pension liabilities dating from before 1992. It also wanted to avoid any possibility of a strike going into an election year in 2008. The result was a five-year teachers' agreement worked

out with government participation and the premier's intervention. Each of the 62 boards still had to ratify the agreement, but they did so under heavy political pressure. The new framework builds on the precedent and firmly establishes the government as a party in negotiations — but without the political pressure, for now.

Ratification of an agreement by the end of January would firm up a big piece of the 2012 budget. It would offer labour peace in schools. It would take the government into a spring election with the "stable and predictable" school funding that Premier **Alison Redford** has promised. Other school issues will be dealt with in the Education Act and more may crop up. But settling one big item is a big political win.