

Local schools clean again as ETFO, CUPE settle with Province

By Tabitha Wells

This week bore much good news for parents and students affected by the two separate work-to-rule strike actions that have been happening in Ontario schools since the beginning of the 2015-16 school year.

Support staffs represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) started talking of strike action in late July and began their work-to-rule in the new school year, and the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) escalated their withdrawal of some services when talks failed to take place between the government and the union.

The CUPE action involved administrative assistants, education support workers, early childhood educators and maintenance staff. One of the biggest impacts this work-to-rule had on the schools was their cleanliness. Although maintenance staff were required to adhere to their contracts, which stated bathrooms, cafeterias and classrooms must be kept clean, along with preventing safety concerns, this left hallways uncleaned.

On Monday, Education Minister Liz Sandals announced that a tentative deal had been struck with CUPE, and CUPE confirmed that their job action would end immediately, pending ratification of the deal.

Although some Toronto-area newspapers said support staff in some schools were continuing their action, locally they have returned to working as usual and the schools are once again being fully cleaned.

Later on Monday afternoon, the Upper Grand District School Board sent out a press release stating that ETFO had also reached a tentative deal with the province, bringing an end to their work-to-rule action as well.

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario has reached a tentative agreement with the Ontario Public School Boards Association (OPSBA) and the provincial government, read the press release. Details of the deal reached Monday were not released, as the agreement must still be ratified by ETFO members and OPSBA.

Elementary school teachers across the province had withdrawn from all voluntary extra-curricular activities, including coaching sports teams and supervising clubs, as well as not sending out progress reports during their job action, which escalated only a few weeks ago.

During a press conference on Monday evening, Ms. Sandals confirmed that fall Progress Reports will be completed, including comments from teachers, and that the deadline for these reports has been extended to December 11 to allow teachers time to complete them.

On Monday, ETFO also sent out a press release, advising teachers to suspend their strike action in light of the tentative agreement.

This round of bargaining has been exceptionally lengthy and difficult but in the end we achieved a tentative agreement that ETFO believes is fair and meets the needs of our members, said ETFO President Sam Hammond. ETFO is a democratic organization and ultimately it is the membership that will determine whether this tentative agreement is acceptable. Local leaders will now focus their efforts on reaching agreements in their respective school boards.

The job action was fuelled by the fact that ETFO members had been working 14 months without a job contract, as their last one ended on August 31, 2014. An all-member vote is expected to be held amongst teachers and occasional teachers regarding the tentative agreement, with the results of the vote hopefully to be ready by mid-November.

Although details of the tentative agreements will not be released until the agreement is ratified, Ms. Sandals stated that the terms are similar to the ones struck with English Catholic and francophone teachers' unions. Those deals included a 1.5 percent raise for teachers, plus a one-percent bonus, with a net zero increase in cost to taxpayers.

The net zero increase was also announced for the tentative agreements struck with CUPE, meaning that any salary increases or bonuses are offset by savings found in other areas, rather than through an increase in funding. Ms. Sandals has confirmed that these savings have not been achieved at the expense of student programming either.

A major difference between the deals reached on Monday with CUPE and ETFO, versus the other unions' agreements is that they did not receive money from the government to cover the unions' negotiating expenses.

Although tentative deals have now been reached at the provincial level, local contracts are required for each of the province's school boards, and an Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) local has threatened job action if it doesn't soon have an agreement with the Toronto District School Board.

There are hot local issues around safety in schools, health and safety ? all those thing are out there,? Doug Jolliffe, president of OSSTF District 12, told the Toronto Star Tuesday, saying one issue is that principals need to be on-site instead of off-site for meetings to provide support for teachers.

Heather Loney, Communications and Community Engagement Officer for the Upper Grand District School Board, said Wednesday that local bargaining ?is taking place with our various unions and talks are progressing well.?