

Opinion-Editorial  
By George Abbott  
Minister of Education  
Feb 10, 2012

Abbott welcomes inquiry into teacher bargaining process

VICTORIA - Since being appointed Education Minister last March, I've had the pleasure of visiting 95 schools and half of the province's 60 school districts. I've met with hundreds of teachers, students, parents and administrators.

Every visit and every meeting has only reinforced in my mind that British Columbia has a great education system, filled with people who are passionate about what they do.

I've seen first-hand how important teachers are to student success.

I also know how important it is for teaching assistants, administrators, principals, parents and teachers to work together to support learning. It takes co-operation and a team of people to help students reach their full potential.

Unfortunately, the current teacher's strike makes this kind of co-operation virtually impossible.

Teachers are not attending staff meetings nor any other meetings at which the principal is present. There are no collaborative meetings between teachers, principals, vice-principals, district staff and education assistants. There are no written communications with principals, whether they are student marks, progress reports, or report cards. Unfortunately, it is often the very students most in need of our educational teams who bear the brunt of the union's actions.

Almost a year ago, employers and the teachers' union sat down to negotiate a new contract. We made it clear from the outset that we had a net-zero mandate. But employers also wanted to talk about how to improve benefits for teachers, how to ensure the right teachers are matched to the right jobs, and how to support good teachers so they can become great teachers.

Then last fall, government put \$165 million in new funding on the table to deal with class composition issues. And yet - like everything else we brought forward - the teachers union walked away from discussions on how to best use those funds. Their singular focus has been to secure a large salary increase - 15 percent over three years -- and other major compensation improvements estimated at over \$2 billion.

Despite 11 months of negotiations and nearly 80 bargaining sessions, there are few signs of progress. We have successfully negotiated agreements with all other major public sector unions. The teachers' union, unfortunately, steadfastly refuses to accept British Columbia's economic and financial reality. The union's proposal to increase personal income taxes by 25 per cent to pay for their wage demands is completely unreasonable and ignores the needs and challenges of families across this province.

The strike is having a real impact on students and creating a strain in our schools and classrooms. There is rising anxiety, frustration and concern amongst all educational partners about the length of time this

dispute has gone on and the impact on 500,000 students across British Columbia. Government would prefer to negotiate an agreement, but we cannot let the current impasse drift indefinitely.

I am simply not prepared to see a school year pass without every parent in B.C. getting a fulsome accounting of how their children are progressing in school. I am particularly concerned about the impact on vulnerable students.

This past week, in an effort to resolve this issue, I asked Labour Minister Margaret MacDiarmid to appoint a neutral party to inquire into the status of negotiations. It may well be that this individual can find reasons to be optimistic about continuing negotiations - or it may be that government will need to look at other ways to resolve the dispute.

This past fall, we announced BC's new Education Plan to transform education and better prepare students for the 21st century. It has been a great success. Now, more than ever, we want teachers to work with all the educational partners to improve our system.

But to move forward, we need to restore some degree of normalcy to what remains of the school year. And I sincerely hope the neutral party, working with the employers and the teachers union, can help us find that constructive path.

George Abbott  
Minister of Education