

# Province interfering in school division labour talks: union

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The provincial government is under fire for reportedly interfering in collective bargaining, after issuing a notice to school divisions to direct them to seek direction from cabinet before undertaking labour negotiations with employees.

School boards typically engage directly with the local unions who represent teachers, educational assistants or bus drivers, among other school employees, in collective bargaining.

On Feb. 2, the education department sent Manitoba superintendents a letter indicating divisions must now obtain "a bargaining mandate" from cabinet's public-sector compensation committee prior to engaging in negotiations with both unionized and non-unionized staff.

"Government's traditional function is one of its core duties as the overall steward of public funds. In the current environment, it must also take into account the realities and breadth of the fiscal challenges caused by the (COVID-19) pandemic," states the notice, which was obtained by the Manitoba NDP.

NDP MLAs called out the province Friday for barring divisions from being able to negotiate with school employees in good faith.

"The province is really sticking their nose in something that they really have no jurisdiction in," said MLA Nello Altomare, NDP education critic. "That's why this letter makes me shake my head."

Altomare said the province should be focused on student well-being amid the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than meddling in collective bargaining.

The official Opposition also accused the province of wanting to freeze school staff wages through this new protocol, citing its persistence with Bill 28. The province is currently appealing a court ruling that deemed the legislation, which tried to force a two-year wage freeze on public-sector unions, unconstitutional last year.

The president of the Manitoba Teachers' Society said Friday the directive "clearly constitutes an unfair labour practice."

"If a school division wants to inject this mandate into local bargaining, then we'd see it as a breach of charter rights," said James Bedford, who represents upwards of 16,000 public school teachers in the province.

Should that happen, the union will file an unfair labour practice, Bedford said.

In a strongly worded letter penned to Education Minister Cliff Cullen, Bedford wrote Friday it is "simply untrue" the government has a traditional role in setting broad bargaining mandates.

Cullen was not made available for an interview Friday, but his office issued a statement that backed such claim.

"When the NDP were in government, they oversaw what became one of the worst-performing education systems in Canada. Our government is focused on delivering a stronger education system that puts resources in classrooms, not board rooms," Cullen said in a statement.

The Progressive Conservatives have been in power since April 2016.

Provincewide bargaining is expected to replace the 38 individual collective agreements between divisions and teachers in Manitoba.

The province introduced Bill 45 to streamline bargaining in autumn. It proposes MTS be the teacher bargaining agent and the education minister appoint the employer bargaining agent to represent divisions in the future.

Meantime, Bedford said many teachers in the province are working without a collective agreement.

Last year, an arbitration ruling in the Louis Riel School Division overturned wage freezes in line with Bill 28. Teachers were retroactively awarded salary increases, including a 1.6 per cent hike for 2018-19 and a 1.4 per cent increase for 2019-20.

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