

Arbitrator awards Pembina Trails teachers pay raise

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MIKAELA MACKENZIE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS FILES Manitoba Teachers' Society president James Bedford.

AN arbitration board has ruled teachers in Pembina Trails School Division should receive pay increases dating back to 2018 — a decision that marked a defeat for the provincial government's effort to freeze wages of public-sector workers.

The new four-year collective agreement includes increases of 1.6 per cent for the 2018-19 school year, 1.4 per cent for the 2019-20 year and 0.5 per cent — the projected rate of inflation for 2020 — for the current school year. The increase for the upcoming school year will be tied to the 2021 inflation rate.

James Bedford, president of the Manitoba Teachers Society, said the increases are a much-needed cost-of-living pay increase for teachers, and will set a benchmark for future contracts.

"In global terms, the settlement reflects cost of living," Bedford said.

"In our memory, we've never had a pay raise into the future that said, 'We're going to use an independent standard to establish what cost of living is.'

Bedford acknowledged the increases aren't substantial, especially for teachers who are coping with the added challenges of working during a pandemic, but he said it is encouraging to see cost-of-living increases cemented into teachers' wages.

"It's significant because the government's rhetoric for the last three or four years has really not been supportive of (teachers') work," Bedford said.

The school division had argued it couldn't afford to increase salaries. The Tory government has cut grants to divisions or given increases that are less than the inflation rate. In addition, it has prevented them from increasing property taxes to account for changes to provincial funding. In its decision, the arbitration board acknowledged Pembina Trails had been hamstrung by underfunding and the inability to increase taxes. "Its senior administration, needed now more than ever to deal with the (pandemic), has been hobbled by arbitrary cutbacks dictated by the ministry. Discretion to manage surplus has been constrained. None of these facts is in dispute," the decision said.

On Thursday, Education Minister Cliff Cullen released a statement that said the government has always bargained "in good faith" with public-sector partners, in "a manner that respects taxpayer dollars." The new collective agreement restricts Pembina Trails' use of term contracts to ensure more teachers are hired on a permanent basis. Typically, Bedford said, term contracts should only be used for teachers who replace those who are on leave, or when teachers are hired to meet specific short-term demands.

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