

Provincewide education bargaining will be a challenge

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OPINION

Teachers in Neepawa get paid an extra \$44.26 per child for teaching a class with more than one grade.

Agree to be the acting principal in Seven Oaks whenever needed, there's \$1,160 in your pay packet each year.

A high school department head in St. James-Assiniboia receives an extra \$1,442 a year.

And a teacher with 10 years' experience gets paid \$8,211 more in Thompson than she'd be paid in McCreary or Glenella.

The Manitoba government will bargain provincewide with the Manitoba Teachers' Society when the current collective bargaining agreements expire on June 30, 2022, and those existing school division CBAs are widely disparate to a serious degree.

When the province imposed amalgamation in 2002, every new employee CBA featured the higher or highest remuneration from the former deals in every category. Anyone who's read the newspaper since the 2016 election knows the Manitoba government is not into public-sector wages and benefits largesse.

So, where does one start?

How about considering whether Manitoba continues the decades-long practice of having no teacher strikes or lockouts? Feel free to shudder.

Or how about the length of the school year? Remember when it was 200 days until June 30, which meant starting school in August most years? It was the NDP early in the millennium that decreed school would start after Labour Day and include 10 in-service and professional development days, leading to some years as short as 183 instructional days.

And let's talk money.

Teachers have settled for uniform percentage increases the last three sets of CBAs, but salaries were already far apart, and working conditions continue to be all over the map.

(Throughout, we're using the latest CBA data available on the MTS website at www.mbteach.org.)

As of 2018, a typical Class 5 teacher in Thompson's Mystery Lake with maxed-out seniority was paid \$99,435 a year, while the same teacher in McCreary-based Turtle River got \$91,224, with everyone else in between. It was \$93,347 in Louis Riel and Pembina Trails. Stonewall (Interlake) was \$91,972, Steinbach-based Hanover \$93,375.

Starting salaries? Thompson paid \$64,033, Winkler's Garden Valley \$58,839. In other words, go north, young grad.

Teachers are classified by educational credentials — a university degree and education degree being the most common — with annual incremental increases for each year working, maxing out usually at 10 years. Current CBAs include more than 350 increments.

Among the latest information available, the fifth-year increment is \$3,047 in Neepawa (Beautiful Plains), \$2,996 in Beausejour (Sunrise), River East Transcona \$2,950, Lakeshore \$3,188, Turtle Mountain \$3,383, Louis Riel \$3,588, Altona (Border Land) \$3,609. Imagine trying to find common ground.

Teachers' struggle for prep time during the school day is the stuff of legends, but forget uniformity: Gimli (Evergreen) and Portage la Prairie teachers get 30 minutes a day; Southwest Horizon and Gladstone's Pine Creek have the equivalent of 210 minutes every six days; and Prairie Spirit gets 240 minutes every six days.

Principals and vice-principals will become management and therefore no longer in the union — they're paid now based on where they sit on the teacher grid, plus tens of thousands of dollars more, sometimes based on the age levels in a school, sometimes number of students, even number of teachers.

Substitutes? You want a spread, we've got a spread: daily pay in Morden (Western) is \$148.91, in Flin Flon it's \$191.01, Thompson's rate is \$205.07, and Gladstone (Pine Creek) pays \$153.03.

Teachers also receive a wide range of different local personal-leave days based on dozens of criteria: bereavement, holy days that require they not work, the need in many rural areas to have a whole day to see a dentist in Winnipeg. Anyone remember the prolonged battle by Jewish teachers in four Winnipeg divisions in the 1990s to have the right not to work on their holiest days, while it's a given there's no school on Christmas or Easter?

Divisions have enormous ranges of what moving expenses they'll pay — or not — if they transfer a teacher. Some don't pay teachers unless they make it to school on snow days, even if the kids stay home. Some dangle cash for retiring early, offering more money the earlier they give notice.

Divisions in recent years have awarded days off for extracurricular duties, at the principal's discretion: one day for 50 hours in St. Norbert (Seine River), a max of two days in Lord Selkirk; half a day for 25 hours in Seven Oaks, to a max of two half-days.

The search for common ground will be labour-intensive. Happy bargaining.

Nick Martin is a retired Free Press education reporter.

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