



Pre-Budget Public Consultations

Brief Presented to
Honourable Jerome Kennedy
Minister of Finance and
President of Treasury Board

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Introduction

The 2008 Provincial Budget provided some positive news for education in Newfoundland and Labrador. The reports of the Teacher Allocation Commission and the ISSP/Pathways Commission contain significant recommendations and we are pleased with Government's positive response to these recommendations. As the recommendations are actioned over the next few years they will have a significant positive impact on education and in particular, school programming, classroom conditions and teacher working conditions.

There are several areas, however, that need further consideration by Government and that need to be addressed in the 2009 Provincial Budget. These include discretionary leave and substitute teacher days, teacher allocations, and ISSP/Pathways. This brief will focus on these three areas.

The NLTA appreciates the opportunity to present a submission and to be a part of the pre-budget consultation process. We wish you much success as you prepare Budget 2009.

Discretionary Leave and Substitute Teacher Days

FAMILY LEAVE

There is a resounding cry from teachers and recognition from School Districts that there is a serious underfunding of the substitute teacher budget for discretionary leave. Presently teachers are among the few public sector workers who do not have a guaranteed access to family leave. Many other public sector unions have “shall” clauses in their collective agreements.

Teaching is predominantly a female profession, with the present teaching population in this province being approximately 70% female. Females still have the major family responsibilities of child rearing and thus have the highest demand for family leave. Combined with this, many teachers are in what could be characterized as the sandwich generation, caught between the demands of caring for children and caring for aging parents. While the present collective agreement indicates that a teacher may have up to three discretionary leave days for family leave reasons, a teacher must apply and the school board then determines if such leave will be granted. It is reported to us on a daily basis that requests are refused. Also, many teachers do not apply because they know they will not get leave as there are not a sufficient number of leave days available.

One of the main problems with the current practice arises because all substitute days available for family leave are combined in a pool with days for all other forms of discretionary leave. These include:

- Professional Development Leave (Clauses 18.05)
- Teacher Discretionary Leave (Clause 18.09)
- School Administrative Leave (Clause 18.13)
- Curricular and Extra-curricular Activity Leave (Clause 29.03(b))

It is a common trend in schools throughout the province to have been granted on average only 1.5 days per teacher for *all* discretionary leave requests, including family leave. Given that there are very few family leave days available, it is not uncommon for teachers to have their leave requests denied.

Recently a teacher was denied family leave to take her widowed mother, who is living with the teacher, to her cancer treatment because there were no family leave days left. Another teacher whose child was having a tonsillectomy was denied family leave to accompany the eight-year-old on the day of the operation because there were no “discretionary leave” days available at the school. The unacceptable alternative was to leave the child unattended by a parent at the hospital. Sick leave was utilized.

Routinely family leave is denied when teachers request family leave time to accompany their children to doctor or dentist appointments. The scarcity of physicians in many parts of the province often does not allow the scheduling of appointments outside school hours. The result is that teachers are often encouraged to take a full day of sick leave inappropriately rather than the required time as family leave which can often be only a couple of hours or half a day.

KinderStart is a Department of Education program which requires the attendance of a parent at the initial session where pre-Kindergarten students are introduced to the school setting during the school day. Often, teachers who are parents of Kindergarten children are denied leave to attend these sessions and even the initial session – even though the Department requires a parent to be present. Clearly, the expectation is that other parents are expected to take leave from their jobs while parents who are teachers are denied leave by the employer sponsoring the sessions.

The lack of adequate funding to grant such leaves is creating unnecessary stressful situations in the lives of teachers where they have to choose between the sickness of a family member who needs immediate attention or that of coming to work or applying to take a day away from work without pay and lying to the employer by utilizing their own sick leave. Often, the teacher is encouraged to inappropriately use their own sick leave.

We strongly recommend that Government allocate additional funds for the substitute teacher budget and allocate a number of leave days specifically for the purpose of family leave separate from other discretionary leave.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

What it means to be a professional teacher in 2009 is significantly different from what it was even one generation of teachers ago. Those who retire now have seen, over a thirty-year career, an inordinate amount of change and incredible and increasing demands on them as professionals. The beginning teachers of 2009 are entering a much different profession than their predecessors.

While all teachers have completed the requirements for certification and, in most cases, will pursue formal upgrading, there is, now more than ever, a need for teachers to continuously participate in professional development to keep pace with the increasing challenges of the role. Changes in curriculum and curriculum delivery, changes in policy and its implementation, changes in expectations and calls for increased accountability, all place demands on teachers to do more, to do it differently and to do it continuously to a higher standard of excellence.

Currently the professional development available to teachers is primarily dictated by the school improvement plan, is anchored in the school and system requirements and is delivered in a “one agenda for all” model. For the most part, if it happens within the parameters of the school day, it is in the “school close out” format. An individual teacher’s decision to attend a conference or an institute is only supported as long as it is on his or her own time. Requests for leave for this form of professional development are presently considered in the same category of leave as all other discretionary leaves – a situation that can pit colleague against colleague in the competition for days, the antithesis of a professional learning community. Professional learning and the professional’s choice for learning should not be discretionary. It should be expected and supported.

The lack of release time (referenced earlier as discretionary leave) is a major constraint on teacher professional development. Leave for PD must be removed from the general discretionary leave category and a dedicated bank of days (on a per teacher basis) must be allocated for this purpose. Recognizing that those experiences which respond to the needs of the school or the system as a whole are important, individual, teacher-directed PD must also have its place. We need to re-affirm the value of professional development and provide teachers with the opportunities for same.

We recommend that Government allocate additional funds for the substitute teacher budget and specifically allocate leave days for the purpose of professional development.

Teacher Allocations

The Department of Education had clearly indicated that the number of teaching units to be deployed in the province for 2008-09 would be greater than the number in 2007-08. That is, the application of the new teacher allocation model was to be sufficient to absorb the full allocation of teachers from 2007-08, plus additional units. An additional \$3.46 million had been allocated in last year's provincial budget in anticipation of additional units being required.

All of the "numbers-driven" elements of the new teacher allocation model have been applied for the 2008-09 allocations, with the exception of special education units. As a result, there are approximately 120 more teaching units in 2008-09 than in 2007-08. This is certainly a positive development for our schools and the new model has the promise of greatly improving the delivery of our educational programs.

However, there are several areas of the new model which require additional resources in order to be fully implemented. Some of the key areas that still need to be pursued with the Department in the coming weeks and months include:

- Application of the "needs based" portion of the model
The "needs-based" portion of the Teacher Allocation Model must be fully implemented for the 2009-10 school year to provide for identified needs not addressed by the "numbers-driven" parts of the model. This will require additional teaching units to address those identified needs.
- Very small schools
Government needs to address the concerns expressed by the Teacher Allocation Commission and implement the "needs-driven/school developed" allocation model in consideration of the programs that can be reasonably delivered at the school level as well as those that can be offered through the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI). Many of our very small schools are still struggling to provide a full educational program with the result being a severe toll on teachers in terms of workload.
- Improved specialist allocations
The new allocations, while a major improvement, are still not sufficient to meet the needs for teachers in the specialty areas, especially in primary and elementary grades. The formula for the allocations of specialist teachers must be improved.
- Allocation model for high school grades
No class size maximums have yet been applied to grades X through XII. It is now time to reassess the allocation process for high schools.
- French Immersion
The new allocation model makes no separate provision for schools that offer a French Immersion stream. This means that the total number of students at a grade level in a school is considered when the maximum class sizes are applied to determine the number of teaching units to be allocated for that grade. That is, the French Immersion and English streams are not considered separately. This creates great inequities in class sizes in those schools.

- Improved class size maximums for Kindergarten
The current class size maximums for Kindergarten is 20 per session or 40 students per teacher. Considering the needs of the Kindergarten students as well as necessary student assessment, reporting, parent teacher interviews and such initiatives as the KinderStart program, these numbers are unreasonably high and compromise the education of students at this critical entry to formal education.
- Implementation of the allocations for special needs
Because the model of categorical support and the process of approving same are currently under review by the Department of Education (as a result of recommendations from the ISSP/ Pathways Commission), the revised allocations for special education teachers have not been implemented for the 2008-09 school year. Instead, the usual allocation of non-categorical teachers will continue with applications for categorical support being processed at the Department level as in previous years.
- Improved class size maximums
Every effort must be made to reduce the class size maximums to the levels recommended by the Teacher Allocation Commission.

We urge Government to continue to respond positively to the recommendations of the Teacher Allocation Commission by allocating the necessary fiscal resources to provide additional teaching units to address those critical areas which still need attention.

ISSP/Pathways

The NLTA is pleased with the changes to the ISSP process and the Pathways Model for Special Education programming. The Government is commended for recognizing the workload issues, the volume of paperwork and the roles of teachers, administrators and parents around the challenges of the current model of special education programming.

The Commission to Review ISSP/Pathways released its report on December 2007 titled *Supporting Services, Supporting Learning*. The report contained recommendations to create an environment of support for teachers and students and to help ease the burden of teachers' workload. The report and the changes it will make will have a significant positive impact on teachers and some of their workload issues. The NLTA supports the vast majority of these recommendations and is committed to work with Government to see those recommendations actioned sooner rather than later and to resolve the concerns it has on the recommendations it presently cannot support. We recognize that the acceptance of these recommendations is step one. The implementation process is still a major part of the success of the Commission. The NLTA will continue to work with all other stakeholders to ensure that the concerns raised in the ISSP/Pathways Commission Report are addressed and the Commission's recommendations become a reality for the children of our schools, for the teachers who teach them and for the society which has a responsibility to ensure that our future generation has the tools it needs to become tomorrow's leaders.

We recognize that actioning a number of these recommendations will require additional financial resources for the Department of Education. Now that Government has accepted the majority of the recommendations, it is important that the Department of Education and the School Districts be provided the financial and human resources to ensure the recommendations can be implemented thoroughly and expeditiously.

We urge Government to provide the financial and human resources to ensure the recommendations of the report of the Commission to Review ISSP/Pathways can be implemented thoroughly and expeditiously.

Conclusion

Addressing the issues outlined in this brief will mean a greater commitment by Government to maintaining and increasing the resources allocated for education in the 2009 Budget. The NLTA urges Government to make that commitment and to demonstrate it in real terms when the budget is presented to the people of the province.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. We strongly recommend that Government allocate additional funds for the substitute teacher budget and allocate a number of leave days specifically for the purpose of family leave separate from other discretionary leave.
2. We recommend that Government allocate additional funds for the substitute teacher budget and specifically allocate leave days for the purpose of professional development.
3. We urge Government to continue to respond positively to the recommendations of the Teacher Allocation Commission by allocating the necessary fiscal resources to provide additional teaching units to address those critical areas which still need attention.
4. We urge Government to provide the financial and human resources to ensure the recommendations of the report of the Commission to Review ISSP/Pathways can be implemented thoroughly and expeditiously.