

Proposed teacher's contract brings relief, frustration

By Saanich News

Published: **June 27, 2012 01:00 PM**

Updated: **June 27, 2012 04:414 PM**

While some Greater Victoria board of education trustees are breathing a sigh of relief over the tentative collective agreement reached between B.C. teachers and the province on Tuesday, others, such as the president of the Greater Victoria Teachers' Association, are speaking out against the deal.

Despite a recommendation of acceptance from the British Columbia Teachers' Federation, GVTA president Tara Ehrcke isn't voting in support of the agreement with the British Columbia Public School Employers' Association.

"I think (the BCTF) was concerned that the government was planning on legislating the concessions they had on the table and it was nervousness of that impending legislation that probably led to the agreement," Ehrcke said, noting her decision to vote contrary to the BCTF doesn't reflect a broader decision made by the GVTA.

"This agreement doesn't solve any of the issues ... around classroom conditions and reasonable wage increases," Ehrcke said.

During the last contract negotiations in 2005, the GVTA did not make a vote recommendation to its members. The outcome of the teachers' vote on the deal is expected by next Wednesday.

BCPSEA chair Melanie Joy said the tentative agreement standardizes provincial language for the number of leaves and establishes a process for determining local and provincial issues.

Acceptance of the agreement will allow schools to resume classes next fall with teachers resuming extra-curricular activities and meetings with school administration.

Saanich and Sooke teachers' association presidents, while unwilling to divulge personal votes, conveyed a sense of relief over the agreement.

"It caught me a bit off guard," said Sean Hayes, president of the Saanich Teachers' Association. "I think it caught a lot of us off guard. By any indication, things weren't going too well. The fact that we have something to vote on is a good thing."

Helming the Sooke Teachers' Association, Patrick Henry is welcoming the tentative agreement as a potential break in the battle between both sides - one he said is mired in media coverage of the province's net zero wage mandate and BCTF salary and benefit requests.

"It's a bittersweet thing," Henry said. "No one wants to prolong this any longer, anyway."

Greater Victoria Board of Education chairperson Peg Orcheron is similarly relieved over what she sees as a very positive sign for the relationship between teachers and the province.

"It was a surprise - a happy surprise," she said. "I'm hoping this opportunity will give everyone a chance to step back from the brink and collect their breath and their thoughts."

Orcheron is hopeful more progress will be made through the fall, including more definition of the split between provincial versus local bargaining issues.

Michael McEvoy, president of the B.C. School Trustees' Association called the tentative agreement a small step in the right direction.

"Over the last number of months, it's been very, very difficult and we're just very pleased that the parties have resolved and worked so hard to reach a resolution," McEvoy said. "There are a lot of issues that are off the table and not a part of the resolution here, but that's a part of collective bargaining. You don't get everything that you want."

Less than 24 hours following the announcement of the tentative agreement, the BCTF issued notice of a civil claim in B.C. Supreme Court against the province.

The claim, the [second made by the union](#) in the last 10 days, is formed on the basis that Bill 22 unconstitutionally infringed teachers' right to free collective bargaining and asserts that government's directions to BCPSEA resulted in bad faith bargaining.

-with files from Tom Fletcher

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