

news



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N O V A S C O T I A T E A C H E R S U N I O N

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Op-Ed: Loss of experienced educational leaders will negatively impact schools

Last week, the province announced that two dozen of Nova Scotia’s educational leaders have decided to accept a pay cut, relinquish their careers as principals and vice principals and return to the classroom as teachers. The government’s focus on the 97% of administrators, who remain in their roles, indicates it does not see the harm in this loss of experience and leadership. However, if you were to ask the schools and communities directly affected, you would hear a much different perspective.

What the government fails to mention is that just prior to the passage of Bill 72, which bans principals from belonging to a union, some administrators were told that if they wanted to return to the classroom it would not be in their current school—they would have to relocate. In essence, they were given the choice between professional uncertainty OR professional uncertainty with a pay cut. It’s not surprising, therefore, that for now, many have chosen the former option.

Administrators are permanent employees of regional centres for education. Their ability to return to the classroom is limited to options during permanent job postings, when the range of available jobs is most narrow. Does a principal simply take any teaching position, whether it is a fit for their training and experience and/or family dynamic to remain within the safety of a unionized work environment?

Since no special provision for principals to access the complete range of available positions was offered, many principals did not find openings in schools that would allow them to experience success in returning to the classroom. This was not an oversight—it was by design. By ensuring limited access to palatable or desirable alternatives to remaining in administration, you enhance the likelihood that principals stay put.

The government would also have the public believe that administrators exist in a reality where they can freely, without financial consequence, drop a substantial portion of their income to return to the classroom. The fact is that principals, like all of us, have personal factors they have to consider such as: the ability to support dependent relatives, to support children through advanced education, mortgages, car payments, and many other legitimate reasons. To assume that they would easily surrender positions that empower them to reach these goals or meet these needs is not reasonable. How many working people do you know could accept a significant pay cut for the rest of their career without consequence?

Then there is the issue of personal investment. Many administrators have invested years and significant amounts of personal funds in training that has enabled them to lead schools effectively. Being given less than a year to determine whether to return to the classroom creates an incredibly stressful situation.

Keep in mind administrators still have time to decide to return to the classroom, and I know many are waiting to see how this Liberal experiment works out before making their ultimate choice. These first 24 administrators might be just the tip of the iceberg.

Principals and vice-principals begin this year without dedicated representation to advocate for their unique concerns within education. They begin this year forbidden by law from belonging to a union to carry out this advocacy, and without a just cause standard to protect them from arbitrary discipline that has the very real potential to end a career in which these professionals have devoted many years to prepare. They begin this year without elected school boards to address their concerns with the decisions of the completely centralized bureaucracy Government has created. Who can they speak to when that bureaucracy hands down decisions they know will not help the children they are legally responsible to protect and serve?

As August ticks towards September, Nova Scotians would be wise to remember that 2018-2019 is yet another year of system-wide uncertainty in public schools where the truly vulnerable are not only students and teachers. For the first time, with no end in sight, administrators are squarely in the crosshairs of ill-planned change that put them, schools and quality of education at risk. They are there largely because the McNeil government believes it knows what is best without having provided any research or evidence to substantiate its actions.

Given the chaos and turmoil this government has brought to our classrooms and our hospitals over the last five years, I think it's fair to question their judgement. I urge all Nova Scotians to stand with principals over the coming year to ensure their rights, working conditions and ability to act in the best interests of students and teachers are protected in this time of sweeping uncertainty.

- Paul Wozney,
President, Nova Scotia Teachers Union

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