

22 octobre 2013

Déclaration de l'honorable Liz Sandals

I'm pleased to rise in the House this afternoon to introduce a bill that would provide a clear role for government in labour negotiations in the education sector, while continuing to respect the collective bargaining process. If passed, the School Boards Collective Bargaining Act would be a unique, made-in-Ontario approach to collective bargaining in the education sector, with clear and accountable roles for government, trustee associations, school boards and employee groups.

When I was first appointed Minister of Education, my first priority was to rebuild relationships with our partners so we could move forward with a common purpose to improve student achievement. This means putting previous challenges behind us and working toward a bright future. This innovative legislation I am introducing here today will help the education sector move forward with a clear process and common understanding of collective bargaining in the education sector.

This proposed model for labour negotiations would establish two forums for discussion: a central table for significant province-wide issues and a local table to address purely local issues. Negotiations would take place at each level, guaranteeing that all issues, whether large or small, can be discussed in a clear, consistent and focused way.

The central negotiations would also include a clear, legally defined role for government. The previous process only included the local school boards as employers and federations or unions as employee representatives, without a prescribed role for government as the funder. There was also no legal status for the trustee associations to provide central representation for the school boards. We think that needs to change to better reflect current realities. The government does have a vested interest in the outcome of negotiations and requires a formal role at the central table.

The legislation would also provide for three-party ratification of any central agreement. This means that a central settlement will only be reached if all three parties—government, trustee associations and employee groups—agree to it. This ensures that all parties have a clear role and are accountable during the negotiation phase, while ensuring everyone plays an essential role in the final outcome.

Speaker, this made-in-Ontario approach to collective bargaining was developed through extensive consultations with our education partners. We listened to their feedback. We used their input to draft a bill that respects and reflects their interests.

With this innovative legislation, our government is making its intention clear. We need a better way to bargain collectively, so everyone is part of a clear and consistent process.

It is so important to have the provisions of the School Boards Collective Bargaining Act in place before the next round of negotiations. Current contracts in the education sector expire in August 2014, meaning the collective bargaining process will need to begin in the new year. We also know that next round won't be easy, as many of the fiscal realities from the previous round of negotiations remain, and I think all our partners, many of whom are in the gallery, understand

that getting a new bill won't create easy negotiations—they will simply give us clear rules. But it is critical that we have this process in place that encourages discussion, promotes innovative ideas and ensures every partner has a clear role to play.

The School Boards Collective Bargaining Act will help us put that process in place, and I look forward to the support of all the members of the House on this very important piece of legislation.

Réponse de M. Rob Leone (PC)

I'd like to rise with a response to the minister's statement on the recently introduced School Boards Collective Bargaining Act.

I know I don't have a whole lot of time because I'm going to share this response with my colleague from Prince Edward–Hastings, but I do want to say that we've been here for nine and a half months with this government. We've cleared the decks for the last month with a programming motion. We've been waiting to see what kind of jobs plan this government is going to put forth, and we've failed to see that. Again, we have another piece of legislation that has been introduced that does not talk about how we're going to kick-start private sector job growth.

Having said that, I think that this is a bill that has a capacity to encourage some debate in the sector. It outlines a particular role with respect to how collective bargaining should be rolled out. We will be carefully examining this bill and talking to the stakeholders in this sector.

I do want to state, though, that one of the stakeholders and one of the partners in education that we should be consulting on an ongoing basis, that I think has not been really readily understood within this piece of legislation nor the minister's remarks—are the partners that are our parents and students and what they say their priorities are with respect to the education sector. I'd be interested to talk to them to see what they're suggesting. I know, from our first foray into the education sector, they're certainly concerned about the fact that we're spending \$8 billion a year more in education while we have close to 300,000 fewer students. In the meantime, test scores have flatlined and some areas have declined.

We want to actually understand whether we're investing money in the right places in the education sector. I'm not sure this bill is going to get us any further down the line in terms of understanding what our priorities are, but those are certainly ones that we want to put forward.

Certainly, we had a private member's bill in this Legislature that we debated recently with respect to regulation 274. It's another priority that our party and our caucus has put forth in the education sector. Again, we're not really sure how that's going to play out with respect to this bill.

At the end of the day, we are interested in discussing this with our partners in education, as the minister suggests, and with the stakeholders in the sector. I look forward to the debates that we're going to have on this matter.

Réponse de M. Peter Tabuns (NPD)

I rise to address the introduction of this bill, the School Boards Collective Bargaining Act, 2013. We received the bill and plan to review it carefully. It is a big departure for Ontario, Speaker, one that needs to be studied carefully. I know there have been months of discussion. I appreciate the minister, the minister's political staff and ministry staff giving briefings yesterday, which allowed us to at least get a sense of the shape of this bill.

Parents and students, teachers and education workers, trustees and principals all will want to see how this bill is going to change education in this province and change education in their lives.

This province and all concerned with education went through a searing experience with Bill 115 last year. This bill will not prevent a repetition of that experience, and that's unfortunate. Bill 115 violated constitutional rights. This bill will not provide more protection than the Constitution.

That's one issue, and one that has to be kept in mind as we go through our review of what's before us. The other is the issue of funding. The head of the Ontario Public School Boards Association has already warned that cuts to education budgets could lead to conflict with or without this bill.

Respect for democratic rights embodied in the Constitution and adequate funding are key to making education work. Without those two things, even the best bill—and I make no judgment at the moment—can't prevent further conflict.

This province deserves a high-quality education system. The people in that system—the students, the people providing the education and the support, the leadership and the trustees who provide political guidance—all deserve a framework within which they can do what they have to do: build Ontario's next generation.

Speaker, I'm looking forward to this debate, but I will make it clear in the course of this debate that Bill 115 could not have been prevented by this bill. Other things have to be uppermost in our minds if we want to ensure we don't go through that kind of conflict again.