

# Preparation time: the snowball effect

By Christine Brown

This past August, the delegates to the 2004 ETFO Annual Meeting passed two motions concerning the current round of collective bargaining. The first directed the Federation to take a strong stand in ensuring that all local teacher collective agreements include 200 minutes of weekly preparation time.

The second was a directive that all occasional teacher locals bargain a provision which guarantees an occasional teacher the timetable of the teacher she or he is replacing.

Such timetabling provisions can assist occasional teachers in many ways—for example, by limiting the amount of supervision time an occasional teacher will be required to do. However, there is also a clear link with the preparation time issue. By passing this motion, the delegates directed the Federation to take an equally strong stand to ensure that occasional teachers are given, among other things, their proper allotment of preparation time.

However, it is not just the delegates to the ETFO Annual Meeting who are talking about workload. In September, a COMPAS survey commissioned by the Ontario College of Teachers revealed that “time constraints” was the number-one issue for teachers who responded to the question: “What is the greatest challenge as a teacher?”

Preparation time is an indispensable tool: no teacher can function without it, and all children deserve the benefit of a program which is organized, carefully planned, and which treats them as individuals. The only question is how big a portion of this work will be done during the day at school and how much will be done at home, well into the night. While it is simple self-

preservation to prefer the former to the latter, the overall implications are broader than that.

Increasing preparation time to 200 minutes per week will involve a certain amount of workplace re-organization, and as we know, change never occurs in a vacuum. As one example, the recent government initiative to begin lowering class size in the primary grades is already creating positive spin-off effects, both within individual schools and within school boards as a whole.

The same is true for increases in preparation time. As these are phased in over the next few years, the potential exists for larger, systemic benefits to accrue both to the education system and to the profession.

As you think and talk about this issue in the coming months, consider the following broader ramifications.

## Stress, workload, and health are intertwined

This relationship is complex but documented. Last year Bill Wilkerson of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health spoke about the effects of workplace stress on the mental well-being of teachers. He noted, “The rate of work-related ill health and disability among teachers is scandalous.”

Increasing preparation time can neither cure the common cold nor solve the conundrum of teacher stress. However, it *can* help alleviate workload problems, which are key causes of that stress. Preparation time is a quality-of-life issue, and we should not be ashamed to couch it in those terms. The benefit to society of a teaching force that is healthy and productive and enjoys low rates of absenteeism

and long-term disability is something even the Fraser Institute should be able to understand.

## It’s a question of professional recognition and respect

Why should anyone care about the recognition and respect accorded to elementary teachers as a profession? So that elementary teaching remains a career capable of attracting, and retaining, the best.

At the secondary level the need for a reasonable amount of preparation time has long been a given. By contrast, elementary teachers have long fought the stereotype that the important work they do is little more than babysitting. One unfortunate consequence of such a mindset has been the mistaken belief that elementary teachers can walk into a classroom and deliver an educational program with little need for preparation or forethought.

Years ago there was a notable gap between the salaries of elementary and secondary teachers. Following much hard bargaining by elementary teacher unions, that gap has disappeared. It is now time to address another major gap, this time in working conditions.

## Teachers are educating the whole child

Among other things, this means encouraging children to be physically active, appreciative of the arts, and capable of obtaining and using information in an appropriate way. Unfortunately, available data show a significant loss over the past decade of specialist positions, such as music, art, physical education, English as a second language, and guidance

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teachers. The latest People for Education *Tracking Report* reveals that in 2003/04 only 40 per cent of schools reported having either a full- or part-time music teacher, compared to 58 per cent in 1997/98.

While classroom teachers have picked up the slack to the best of their ability, this has created additional job stress in itself. More importantly, children have been denied the services of specialists trained to deliver these important curriculum components.

When more teachers must be hired so that more preparation time can be scheduled, the opportunity exists to add specialist teachers and provide much-needed program enrichment. This serves the interests of *everyone* with a stake in public education – pupils, teachers, parents and the larger community.

## More adults in a school mean a better, safer learning environment

The ingredients that go into making up a secure school are many, and the mix is complex. However, the most important element is the human one, that is, the complement of school staff on site daily. The reality is there are now fewer caretakers, school secretaries, educational assistants, and lunchroom supervisors. These ill-conceived cuts mean schools are not run as well and pupils are not as well served as they once were. While boosting the teacher complement will not compensate for these lost positions, it may help to make schools safer learning environments.

On one level, preparation time is merely one component of an individual teacher’s working conditions. A little more planning time will not automatically transform a competent teacher into an outstanding one. Viewed in a larger context, however, more preparation time system-wide helps to create the potential for large-scale improvements in the quality of program which teachers are able to offer.

Preparation time is about individual teachers, to be sure, but it is also about enhancing the quality of the education system overall.

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