

## Report of the President

Patrick Etmanski

I look forward to preparing this report each year. It is a way to look back to September and review the year that was...and what a year! Many times this year I stated that, "We are making history!" What an understatement that turned out to be. So, a retrospective will be a big part of my report. The second part of the report will try to summarize where we are right now. Thirdly, a look ahead is always important. Finally, some thanks and reflections on all that was 2020-2012.

In September, the most important item on the radar was the potential for CUPE job action. We were all quite surprised by how quickly things ramped up but the fact there was a Federal Election looming, the strategy was brilliant. Of course we all know how it all played out and CUPE reached a tentative deal which set the stage for much of what OECTA and all the teacher affiliates then experienced. We had a pretty good idea about what was in store for teachers and so we began to prepare. Back in June, the government introduced wage restraint legislation, known as Bill 124 and initiated "the largest public consultations on education ever." Both sides were preparing for conflict. The first bargaining meeting was held in June. Our "Strike Committee" began meeting in October and plans were put in place. A "rally" at The Waterloo Inn on the 28<sup>th</sup> laid out for teachers what the issues were and what lay ahead.

In November, Provincial bargaining resumed after a bit of break and we were all hopeful for an end to the uncertainty. We had been telling teachers for about a year to prepare, to get your financial house in order and perhaps put aside a little money, just in case. Now the possibility of some kind of job action was actually looming as bargaining was not successful. We took a strike vote on the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>. The hope was that the vote would be in the high 90's, and that would put pressure on the government to turn away from the agenda of cuts that had developed. A conciliator became involved in the process and the hope was for de-escalation...but that didn't happen.

December saw OECTA mount a legal challenge against Bill 124 and both sides became more entrenched.

On January 13, teachers took part in before and after school information pickets and for many, this was the first time they were ever asked to do any such action. It was uncomfortable and distressing for most, but it only got more difficult. On January 21 we took part in the first legal strike in Waterloo in any of our careers. The full withdrawal of service was terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. It is something we will never forget. Everyone hoped for a swift end to the difficulties, but again, that didn't happen. There was no movement in the government's position.

In February, things really got rolling. Another full withdrawal on February 4 and then enhanced "Administrative Job Action" began on the 11<sup>th</sup>. The all affiliate walkout on February 21 was a defining moment for us in Waterloo. An unprecedented day of action was planned and executed. It wasn't without problems, but it was still a sight to behold and another memory forever etched in our collective memory. We left Carl Zehr Square that Friday really believing that something had to happen. The public was firmly behind us. Other labour organizations and even parents were voicing incredible support for our opposition to the regressive cuts to education still proposed by the government. OECTA even suspended its planned rotating strikes for the Monday as a sign of goodwill. However, the government didn't see things the same way. The day after our huge rally,

another was held outside the PC Convention in Niagara Falls. It was very apparent to those who attended and the media, that the government did not take us seriously. The level of disrespect was obvious, especially evident in comments made by the Minister, and our goodwill was not reciprocated.

So, another full withdrawal day was planned for March 5. On March 2, the consultations that the government referred to constantly became public through the work of OECTA. It was clear that nobody in Ontario wanted larger classes or mandatory e-learning. Suddenly, the government was interested in talking. OECTA, the Trustees Association (OCSTA) and the government met on March 4. Talks continued on the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>. On the 12<sup>th</sup>, a tentative agreement was achieved....AND WE TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND THANKED GOD WE GOT THROUGH ALL OF IT!

I wish that was the end of my story....but wait, there's more!!! I'll get to that in a bit.

So, we reached agreement. It's not perfect. It's not even great. But, it's the best we could get under the circumstance. And, as all of you know now, those circumstances changed very quickly.

As an editorial note however, the government did go way back on its plans for increasing classroom sizes. The e-learning proposal is now in a form that we can work with. We got 1% per year, and that is NOT ENOUGH, but that is still in the courts. In light of everything that's happened since the 12<sup>th</sup>, I'm not sure where this will land, but I'd doubt that we will see more than the 1%. The financial position of the Province will be very different now!

I was at the Board office on the 12<sup>th</sup>. I was there to support one of the VPs as they worked to protect a teacher. I was in the hallway when the news of the tentative agreement came through. It was a great moment. About 20 minutes later another message came to my inbox. Schools would be closed for the two-week period following the March Break...wait, what????

COVID-19, at first known as the Corona Virus, took over everything we were doing. We saw the issue developing, and I'm sure you remember some of the information that went out. The Board was relying on decisions made by Public Health and as much as we pushed for assurances of cleanliness, disinfectant wipes and hand sanitizer, the board held to their position that things were well in hand. Reference was made to the screening at airports being sufficient to protect all of us. Needless to say, nobody saw what was really coming, and now eight weeks later, Provincial Bargaining seems like such a distant memory.

A great deal has happened beginning during the March Break. The announcement of STEAM days took OECTA by surprise as we found out about the initiative the same way you did, and I can tell you that we were not consulted or asked for any input on that initiative. That is the starting point for this part of the year. OECTA felt completely left out of the planning in the beginning and I expressed that I felt this was a disaster. Our perspective is that the teachers who are actually in front of the students are the best people to making plans for those students. As much as this was an incredible challenge, things have improved lately. We don't agree with everything the board plans or asks of teachers. We keep coming back to the fact that we are all doing the best we can right now and there should be some recognition of this fact. Instead of increasing teacher tasks, everyone should be engaged in supporting teachers to provide learning for students, and trusting teachers to ask for help if they need it.

A second important challenge has been the whole idea of synchronous communication and we continue to advise teachers to be very cautious about its use if they choose to use it at all. I won't go into the details of this problem here, but I want to put our message out there again.

OECTA has serious concerns about the use of synchronous communications in the Teacher Led Distance Learning that is currently happening. Our advice is to steer clear from anything that increases professional risk.

**Synchronous communication for learning is inherently more risky for members and we strongly advise against it.**

So, that's pretty much what brought us to today.

The current state is not what I'd describe as normal or even stable, but it is where we are. People are struggling. We've heard that loud and clear, but they are doing their best. What more can anyone ask of somebody who is doing their best? I've communicated a few times over the past few weeks my thoughts and I'd like to re-iterate a few points.

- 1) We don't know everyone's individual circumstances, especially right now. There are family issues, care issues, physical and mental health issues, and all of these impact what someone does and how they do it, on a daily basis. We cannot get into the blame game or more importantly a competition to see who is working harder or better. This isn't about "trending" or the number of "hits." What we are doing, and what we have always done isn't about self-promotion. What we do is for the students. If we make that our focus, then we are not doing anything wrong.
- 2) Stop comparing!  
I've heard from teachers who make comments about other teachers. Some look at what their children's teachers are posting and measure themselves against that. Or, they measure teachers within their schools against them. None of this is positive. We are all professionals and we are all doing what we can to support student learning.
- 3) Take care of you! I know how easy it is to slip down the rabbit hole when you are working in your "home office," whatever that means to you. You sit down to do one little thing and suddenly it's 3 hours later...and I AM talking about work here!! You have professional responsibilities, that is true and very important. Make sure you are taking appropriate breaks, getting the rest and sleep you need, and taking care of yourself and your loved ones.
- 4) Remember that your students and their families are going through the same things that you are going through. Don't judge them! We've had questions about what to do if it looks like the work being handed in isn't coming from the student. Understand what might be going on in somebody's home. Cut people a lot of slack and remember, they are doing their best too. We have no way of knowing and no right to intrude into the lives of others. Take what is given to you at face value and move on. Will anyone really suffer if Dad completes Suzie's work? Is it authentic? Nope!! This is a new reality but it won't be this way forever.
- 5) Talk to people about what you are doing. Reach out if you are struggling! Your families, friends, colleagues, administrator, and OECTA are there for you. Talk to somebody if the pressures are overwhelming. Call a teacher friend or talk to your administrator if you need help with your program or the endless IT issues. Call OECTA if issues arise and you just

don't know who to call. It's not silly. It's not weird. It's not an imposition. People need people, especially now. Lean on each other!!!

In terms of our current state, I want to say a few other things.

Social media is an interesting distraction, but for the most part it is individual opinions. Very often, it does not reflect reality. One example I can give has to do with the other teacher affiliates and the views of some about the others. There has been chatter out there that OSSTF and/or ETFO are upset that OECTA settled first. I can tell you that I've asked questions of people in leadership positions, and that just isn't true. Nobody is completely happy with the "deals" we got, but there isn't any finger pointing going on.

The same can be said about much of the teacher talk on social media. I've talked about how teachers are portrayed in movies and television. We are either bumbling idiots or geniuses!! Neither is completely accurate...ever! Again, take what is being said with a grain of salt. Maybe what you see will inspire you and maybe it will anger you...but it's not about you! Let it go, and keep doing what you're doing....your best!!

We are at another spot where the unknowns outweigh what we do know. You've been so flexible all year. Keep it up.

Information continues to flow that will hopefully bring some clarity to what we are doing and what will happen in the coming weeks. So much is left to interpretation and we are trying our best to limit that interpretation or at least have some input into it. There is still so much to be worked out around the end of the year. Exams are cancelled, but what exactly does that mean? Report cards will be completed but what subjects and strands. And what about marks???

What happens next? What will it look like in June or in September?

I think we can be pretty sure that at some point teachers and students will return to the schools. Every single day, I hope that the Minister will finally make the long-awaited decision about the rest of the school year. I'm sure that the grand experiment in Quebec puts a great deal of pressure on the Ministry to get us back in June. We are a long way from June but if we are going back, there is a lot to do. There are many HUGE decisions to be made and specific protocols to keep staff and students safe must be in place before anyone walks through the door. Closing the schools was the easy part. Re-opening is vastly different.

We have dedicated Health and Safety people, teachers, who represent you! They are working tirelessly to understand all the issues of re-opening and they are advocating on your behalf for protocols and procedures to protect the students, and all staff as we begin to look at going back.

What about the physical nature of our classroom, hallways and schoolyards? Can we even do what we need to do? We are now in the area of the great unknown. I hope that caution will be exercised in planning. Everyone wants to be back. It's what we know and it's what is best for learning. It might not be best for people and there is much to work out. There are more questions than answers.

OECTA is here! We are advocating on your behalf. Remember that our role is advisory! Decisions are made by the board and direction is given to staff. We have a voice at the table, but it is only one voice even though it represents so many. You will receive direction from the board and from your administration. If it seems wrong. If it makes you uncomfortable physically, emotionally, morally or professionally, call us! It is okay to call or email. We are here to support and to advise. We can't tell the board what to do. We try! Trust me, we do attempt to offer direction but the board is under no obligation to do what we ask.

As we move forward, trust that your voice, your thoughts, sometimes even your words are appreciated. Sometimes, we only know what you tell us. We act and advocate, and bring YOU and your concerns forward!

Finally, I want to express some thanks and then I will end with a brief reflection on the year as a whole!

I know this hasn't been easy and seems to be getting more difficult as we travel down this road. We travelled an incredibly bumpy and twisty road from September to a tentative Provincial Agreement, only to find ourselves thinking we were on an off-ramp but finding out we just merged onto an even bumpier road. You are all doing the best you can. Nothing more should be expected. Give yourself the permission to admit that you are doing your best and just keep moving forward. Keep your students as your focus and you (and they) will be fine.

So many people helped us get here. I can't even begin to list their names. But, please help me thank the people who helped with all the job action tasks. Organizing and carrying out information pickets, full withdrawal days, rallies and other events take a huge cast of characters. If you know any of these people in your school, thank them! I depended on them. We all depended on them. A meeting would be called with one day's notice and they would all show up. They were there for us...and more importantly, they were there for you.

We had lots of people volunteer their time and energy to help with what we did this year. From ordering busses and getting out strike cheques to judging young authors entries, from putting together strike signs to driving around the region delivering things, we appreciate everyone who helped pull all of what happened this year together.

I want to thank the PSIC (Strike Committee). Sometimes with only a moments notice, they would spring into action and make things happen. Some of those things we've never done before and we were all learning on the fly.

I want to thank Simon. I keep promising him things will slow down but I'm never right! He's had quite a year of learning. I don't think he can ever pull the "new guy" card again. I always know I can go to Simon and whatever I ask will get done. I want to thank Jeannette. Jeannette did double duty this year. Not only did she continue to represent her members in the professional and meticulous way, she served on the Provincial Bargaining Team. She represented all of us in Waterloo so well and I appreciate it. I want to thank Ed. The first thing I want to thank him for is NOT packing it in early! Ed retires at the end of this year and wouldn't it have been easy just to fold the tent and call it a day? Not our Ed. Thanks for sticking with us through thick and thin. As Ed brings his career in Waterloo to an end, I want to thank him on behalf of all of you for his service to and support of Secondary and Continuing Education teachers. You're one of a kind

buddy! I want to thank Mark Devlin. The treasurer role is never easy, but Mark continues to do it with enthusiasm and conscientiousness. He really does make sure your money is taken care of! The Unit Executive have been my sounding board this year. I so appreciate their support and especially their candor in discussions and their advice and direction through VERY challenging times.

And then there is Cathy. Nothing much would happen without Cathy. She has been the rock in the office for a long time and she continues to be an incredible resource and a hard working member of an incredible team. You know, I'm certain there are many other places where someone in Cathy's role might just be putting in time, but she really believes in what we do at OECTA and she is an integral part of all of it. We all appreciate what you do Cathy! Our gratitude is heart felt and you are appreciated! (Even though we completely missed Administrative Assistants Day and almost missed your Birthday!!).

I couldn't do what I do without the love and support of Teri-Lynn. I need to publicly say thank you to her. She listens when I am frustrated, and she advises when I'm unsure, and she is just always there at the end of a long. And, I couldn't do what I do for you without her!

I want to end this section by thanking the membership. We asked a lot of you this year. There were meetings and votes and pickets and red shirts and strike days, and learning from home...and so much more. You lost salary and time, and probably sleep! I know I did! As much as I thanked the people above for all they did this year, NONE OF IT would have happened without your support and co-operation. You stepped up for your students this year..in countless ways! You did. We all know it. Thank yous are just words but I can tell you that so many times this year I was in awe of you. You went above and beyond. I'm looking forward to a break over the summer and I'm sure you are too. You deserve it!

Thank you!

So, it was quite a year, and this was quite a report. I think I may have set a new record here. So much needed to be said. We made history this year. It's true. So much has happened that we will never forget. Young teachers will reflect on these days years from now with nostalgic memories. It was difficult and uncomfortable, but we did it. You did it. Some of you will be retiring soon. Look back over your entire career and love all you did. Don't dwell on this blip! There has never been a year like 2019-2020. In so many ways it was extraordinary, and in so many ways it was not. We did what we do. We may have done it differently and through adversity, but we did it. Your students will not remember the amazing lesson you posted on D2L, but they will remember you. They will remember that you cared, and you were there, and that they were listened to and respected by an amazing teacher. So, for the next few weeks, however they unfold, remember to be an amazing teacher. You care so much and you have done and continue to do amazing work.

We made history this year. Here's hoping 2020-2021 is incredibly BORING!!