

Should OECTA organize ECEs?

Delegates at OECTA's 2010 Annual General Meeting (AGM) will debate resolutions to determine whether OECTA will position itself to organize early childhood educators (ECEs) as members. This unusual action is proposed because the government's new Early Learning Kindergarten Program (ELKP) changes the way Kindergarten programs will be delivered everywhere. Legislation to implement the ELKP, the Full Day Early Learning Statute Law Amendment Act, was introduced on February 17. Among other requirements, teachers and ECEs are to collaborate and cooperate with each other "with respect to matters regarding provision of Junior Kindergarten, Kindergarten and extended day programs." OECTA is reviewing the legislation carefully and will provide a response upon approval by the provincial executive. Despite concerns about how it will be implemented, OECTA supports the vision of ELKP.

OECTA's Provincial Executive believes that the best way to protect teachers and the quality of the ELKP, is to organize and be the sole representative for teachers and ECEs that are responsible for the program in Catholic schools. If OECTA does not represent ECEs, other unions will. Consequently two different unions would represent the two groups that will work together so closely in the ELKP classroom.

There are a number of sound arguments to support this position.

A Community of Interest

It is important to note that the ELKP will create 1,300 new positions for Kindergarten teachers in Catholic boards across Ontario. The Premier and Minister of Education have stated explicitly that a teacher must be present in every Kindergarten classroom. To clarify how they will work with teachers under the ELKP, roles and duties for ECEs are being defined through the Education Act and its Regulations. Although ECEs are not teachers, their work will be more closely related to teachers, than to other non-teachers working in schools. Some fear that a future

government could try to reduce the costs of the ELKP by replacing teachers with ECEs. In this event, OECTA would be much better positioned to protect teachers in classrooms, as the representative of both teachers and ECEs. This would not be the case if ECEs belonged to a non-teacher union, whose interest would be served by increasing the number of ECEs in the classroom at the expense of teaching positions.

A Catholic Community

OECTA represents members on all workplace matters including denominational issues. Experience has taught us that these matters are best addressed beyond public scrutiny. In today's Ontario, a public debate over denominational rights would serve only those opposed to public funding for Catholic schools. Given the nature of the ELKP, the Ontario Catholic Trustees' Association (OCSTA) has advised its boards to hire Catholic ECEs. Unless OECTA represents ECEs in Catholic schools, other unions could exploit denominational issues publicly, to the detriment of the system. OECTA's experience, gained through years of advocacy for Catholic teachers, positions the Association to best address sensitive denominational issues in a manner that does not jeopardize the system.

A Labour Community

If OECTA negotiates first contracts for ECEs, the Association would be able to ensure that working conditions for ECEs are aligned with teachers and avoid overlap and role confusion that would be a source of conflict for ELKP teams. Bargaining these first contracts for ECEs would not require teacher collective agreements to be opened. Instead, a Letter of Understanding would be appended to existing teacher agreements. In other jurisdictions where teachers and ECEs are represented by a single union, professional development opportunities and job security are enhanced and aligned for both groups.

Now or Never

Negotiations for first contracts for ECEs who will work for Catholic boards will begin shortly. There will be just one opportunity to organize them. It must be done before first contract talks begin. Non-teacher unions will organize ECEs if we do not. Under current labour laws OECTA will not have a second opportunity.

Coming up: Eligibility for OECTA membership