

Ontario introduces the Keeping Students in Class Act

Talks between the Province and CUPE stalled Thursday, setting the stage for a planned strike on Friday.

The government tables the Keeping Students in Class Act earlier in the week.

The Act is being debated and if passed, ensure students remain in the classroom where they belong by establishing a fair and fiscally-responsible four-year collective agreement with CUPE education workers across the province. Students are finally back in class catching up, following two years of pandemic disruptions. We are disappointed that CUPE is refusing to compromise on their demand for a nearly 50 per cent increase in compensation, representing a price tag close to \$19-billion if extended across the sector, said Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education and King-Vaughan MPP. CUPE has now made the decision to strike, putting their own self interest ahead of Ontario's nearly two million children, who deserve to stay in class learning. We are delivering on our promise to parents that our government will do whatever it takes to keep students in class, so they can catch up and get back to the basics of learning. In an attempt to reach an agreement and protect in-class learning for nearly two million students, the government extended an updated proposal to CUPE that enhanced Ontario's offer. Unfortunately, CUPE is proceeding with strike action, even after a good-faith attempt by the government to deliver a deal that is fair for workers and good for students. To ensure students remain in stable classrooms, the Keeping Students in Class Act would, if passed, establish a four-year collective agreement for Ontario's 55,000 education workers that ensures stability for students and includes: A salary increase of 2.5 per cent (increased from an initial offer of 2 per cent) for employees with the top end of their salary/wage grids below \$43,000 annually (increased from \$40,000) and 1.5 per cent (increased from 1.25 per cent) for employees with the top end of their salary/wage grids above that amount for each year of the contract. An increase in benefits contributions resulting in a \$6,120 annual employer contribution per employee by August 31, 2026. Funding through the Support for Students Fund, estimated to support up to 875 teachers and between 1,600 and 1,830 education workers. Modification to sick leave and short-term disability leave plan provisions that protect stability of student learning, while maintaining generous pension, benefits and sick leave programs. To protect against legal challenges, which may create destabilizing uncertainty for students and families, this Act would provide that it shall operate notwithstanding sections 2, 7 and 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and despite the Human Rights Code. The government will continue labour bargaining with Ontario's other education unions to reach fair agreements for workers, while ensuring students remain in-class without disruption. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) criticized the move, noting the Act undermines the free and fair collective bargaining process for 55,000 CUPE members. ETFO President Karen Brown said by creating legislation that imposes a contract on CUPE members, the Ford government has chosen the most draconian manner of legislating away two fundamental rights protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms: the right to bargain collectively, and the right to strike. The Ford government has signalled it is uninterested in reaching collective agreements that are negotiated freely and fairly. And its oppressive use of the notwithstanding clause is another flagrant abuse of power one that continues to attack democracy by trampling on Ontarians' constitutional rights. The Supreme Court of Canada has confirmed that collective bargaining, as well as the ability to strike to support bargaining efforts, are constitutionally protected rights that should not be legislated away by governments that want to avoid the inconvenience of negotiations. This is a move by the Ford government to curb the ability of education workers in this province to effectively advocate for much-needed improvements in public education. It is not only an outrageous assault on our CUPE colleagues, but also a blow to the morale of all education workers in this province.