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President Carol Henderson Speaking Notes  
Media Conference, February 26, 2013

Good afternoon and thank you for joining us today at Barnett House and on the telephone.

My name is Carol Henderson and I am President of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

I am joined today by the members of the Association's provincial executive council—teachers who have been elected by their colleagues to represent them. They come from all corners of the province, from Grande Prairie to Calgary to Irvine. They teach at all grade levels from Kindergarten to Grade 12. Some are administrators, working in schools or central office. They are here today to demonstrate the solidarity of our profession as we make an important announcement today.

As you know, the Minister of Education Jeff Johnson presented me with an offer last Wednesday for a tripartite framework agreement that would settle teacher collective agreements for the next 4 years.

Council spent time yesterday carefully considering the offer from the Minister and concluded that it fails to meet the legitimate concerns of teachers or to create conditions that will ensure the best possible teaching and learning occurs in Alberta's classrooms.

Provincial Executive Council voted unanimously, to reject the Minister's offer.

To begin with, there are no provisions in the offer for placing reasonable limits on the amount of time that teachers can be assigned to work by their employer boards.

What provisions there are for limiting the amount of time teachers are in the classroom are so full of loopholes that you could drive a school bus through. We have proposed in the past fair and flexible solutions to both these issues. They are not reflected in this offer.

I can't stress enough the importance of these time issues to teachers. It is not just a matter of workload—teachers today have to prepare for larger, more complex classes. They have to respond to students with special learning needs who are now included in almost every

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classroom. With the promise and challenge of transformation in the education system, teachers must have the time to improve their teaching and student learning. All this takes time.

And without dealing effectively with issues of assignable and instructional time, there is nothing in the Minister's offer that will improve teaching and learning and very little otherwise to compel teachers to accept.

In financial terms, the Minister's offer is actually worse for teachers than what Mr Johnson said he was willing to accept in December. We have all heard that the government is facing a financial challenge, and in response, the Association expressed a willingness to freeze salary grids for two years and accept increases of 1% in year three and 3% percent in year four.

But while we have been willing to help, let us be clear—solving the Government's budget problems is a shared responsibility for all Albertans and not just a burden to be borne by teachers or other men and women providing public services.

Finally, there still remains the need to guarantee stability for teachers. The government wants to lock teachers down for a term of 4 years. So it is only fair that government not change the rules of the game. Before teachers can guarantee stability for school boards and the province, they need to be guaranteed stability for themselves.

Given all these short comings, Provincial Executive Council cannot endorse this offer. We have also heard from our members, and have concluded that the Minister's offer would not receive approval from teachers working in each and every school board. And this, along with school board approval is a necessary condition for any provincial agreement to be implemented.

We are well aware of the consequences of our decision. The letter Minister Johnson sent along with his offer contained what can only be regarded as thinly veiled threats to implement salary rollbacks and reductions in teaching staff if he doesn't get his way. Teachers do not respond well to ultimatums.

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There is no justification for the Minister and government to reduce funding to the education system simply because we don't have a provincial agreement. If the money is available today, it should be available next week and after the budget.

Such threats are particularly disappointing because the Association has been working for months to reach agreement with government. We have offered flexible and practical solutions to teachers' workload issues, and guaranteed stability for students, parents, teachers and the province. Our efforts have been rejected.

So where to now? We have a long and successful history of local collective bargaining and teacher bargaining units are actively negotiating with school boards across the province. We are still very much at the early stages and there are no threats of strikes or lockouts on the horizon.

School boards exist for a reason—they are elected by their communities to provide leadership in education. Let them get down to work with their teachers to conclude collective agreements, as has been the norm for decades.

I have to say that local bargaining has not been moving forward as quickly as we would have hoped. This is due to the Minister of Education's comments about bargaining and his stated intention to review potential settlements while the financial situation remains uncertain.

So the solution now is to let local collective bargaining work. We've said "no" to the Minister's offer, but we are saying "yes" to collective bargaining, and "yes" to fair solutions with 62 locally elected school boards."