

LEADERSHIP UPDATE

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Navigating Convention Attendance

That time of year is rolling around again when ATA members are checking websites and looking for their program booklets to see who the keynote speakers are and what sessions are being offered at each of the 10 ATA conventions held in February and March.

The *School Act* designates two days of teachers' conventions authorized by the ATA as teaching days for the purposes of salary and benefits. ATA Bylaws under the *Teaching Profession Act* specify that "unless otherwise approved by a convention association, all active members shall attend" their assigned conventions.

The positive side of conventions is the opportunity for teachers to pursue goals from their individual Teacher Professional Growth Plans with access to world-class speakers, a huge variety of programs, and opportunities to network across school districts and locals. Improving professional practice will improve your school and enhance student learning.

Some of your teachers may come to you with questions regarding convention. What do I do if I am sick? Who approves alternative professional development activities? What do I do if I am part-time? I have a sporting event scheduled during convention, so can I leave early? Can I bring my teacher's assistant to convention? Here are some helpful reminders for your teaching staff:

- Administrators cannot direct or give permission for a teacher to work at the school or at home during convention.
- Administrators cannot change the procedures normally used under the collective agreement for teachers to be absent for illness, medical appointments,

compassionate leave or any other leave of absence. The collective agreement must be followed.

- Administrators cannot direct or approve an alternative professional development activity during convention. Only the convention attendance committee of your assigned convention association has that authority. Have the teacher check the website to find out who to contact and what the deadlines are, as well as the criteria for alternative PD.
- Administrators cannot give permission for or require a teaching assistant or educational assistant to attend teachers' convention, because they are not certificated teachers who are members of the ATA and have paid ATA dues, including the convention fee.
- Administrators cannot approve any school trips that would occur during convention time. Convention attendance committees will not give permission for such trips as they do not qualify as professional development. The exception to this is the Alberta School Athletic Association provincial finals. Have your teachers check the website for the form for teacher coaches who must be absent from convention to travel with their teams to provincials.

For more information visit the ATA website (www.teachers.ab.ca). Click on Teachers' Conventions (under Professional Development), then Protocol for Convention Attendance. You can also call Catherine Moir at 1-800-232-7208 or (780) 447-9473.

**As we express
our gratitude,
we must never
forget that the
highest
appreciation is
not to utter
words, but to
live by them.**

—John Fitzgerald
Kennedy



The Unfunded Liability

How does the UFL affect my contribution rates?

The unfunded liability (UFL) of a pension plan is the amount that the plan's liabilities exceed its assets on a given date. The total liability of the plan is the amount of money that, according to the plan's actuary, the plan will need in order to pay all the benefits (including pension, death and termination benefits) that participants have earned to date based on their years of pensionable service and their salaries. As of August 31, 2004, the Teachers' Pension Plan (the Plan) had a pre-1992 unfunded liability of \$6.03 billion.

The UFL exists because contributions from teachers and the provincial government were not made prior to 1992 in the same manner they are made today. From 1956 to 1992, the government did not contribute as service was earned. During this time, many improvements were made to the Plan but were not funded properly.

The UFL increases teachers' pension contributions in two ways—directly and indirectly.

Directly—The funding shortfall for service earned prior to 1992 is being paid for today. This cost is shared one-third by teachers and two-thirds by the Government of Alberta. The UFL contribution amount is based on a percentage of total teacher salaries. As of September 1, 2005, teachers' contribution to the UFL is 3.23 per

cent of salary. Under the current legislation, the UFL will cease to exist in the year 2060.

Indirectly—Any surpluses generated by money in the post-1992 fund are transferred out of that fund to reduce the UFL in the pre-1992 fund. This means that the post-1992 fund, without surpluses to draw upon, is vulnerable to downturns in investments, low interest rates and changes to plan demographics. Indeed, these factors have now caused a new deficiency in the post-1992 fund. This deficiency is being made up by increased contributions over a 15-year period, paid half by the government and half by teachers. Teachers' contribution to the new deficiency is 1.43 per cent of salary.

This year, teachers' average pension contributions are 11.96 per cent of salary. Only 7.3 per cent of salary is required to fund the cost of pensions currently being earned. The remaining 4.66 per cent goes directly to the UFL or to the new deficiency caused by current surpluses being transferred to the UFL.

What effect does the UFL have on teachers?

The average 2006/07 salary of a first-year teacher with four years of education is \$47,510. For the average teacher, the UFL contribution is \$1,535 annually, or \$128 monthly. Currently, that part of the salary is not

taxed because it is contributed to a registered pension plan. After tax, the value of the 3.23 per cent to a teacher earning \$47,510 is \$1,212 per year.

A teacher with four years of education and the maximum experience on the salary grid for the 2006/07 school year earns on average \$75,022. That teacher's annual UFL contribution is \$2,423, or \$202 per month. After taxes, the contribution is \$1,817 per year, or \$151 per month.

Keeping the current contribution and salary constant in 2006 dollars, teachers who begin their careers in 2006 and teach for 30 years will each contribute more than \$66,000 to the UFL over the course of their careers.

The other way the UFL will affect teachers comes from the 6.65 per cent of salary contributed by the taxpayers of Alberta, which includes teachers. The 2006 Alberta Education budget allocated \$152 million as the government's contribution to the UFL. These funds are included in the government's education spending totals but do not go into the classroom. Given that the UFL is currently scheduled to be retired in 2060, this is a significant amount of taxpayer money contained in the education budget that is not being spent on education.

For more information, contact Sandra Marcellus at Barnett House at (780) 447-9403 (in Edmonton) or 1-800-232-7208 (elsewhere in Alberta).

For further information, visit www.teachers.ab.ca or contact Member Services at the Alberta Teachers' Association, 447-9400 (in Edmonton) or 1-800-232-7208 (from elsewhere in Alberta).

Has the Professional Learning Communities Fad Faded in Your School?

Remember the Alberta Commission on Learning (ACOL) report released in 2003? Many recommendations in that report have been adopted, some are still in abeyance and others may have faded off into the sunset. One recommendation that was embraced with enthusiasm by school districts and the Association was Recommendation 13, which stated that all schools in Alberta should become professional learning communities (PLCs). Indeed, leading experts made many a trip to Alberta for speaking engagements at district PD days, teachers' conventions and conferences in the years following the release of the ACOL report. As well, many AISI Cycle II projects were focused on the development of professional learning communities. But a scan of recent conference programs and AISI Cycle III projects finds little mention of PLCs. Maybe PLCs were a fad that has run its course—or have the deeper underlying concepts been integrated into school operations?

There is a strong body of research to support the need for ongoing implementation of many of the features of professional learning communities if schools are to realize the goals of enhanced student learning and increased high school completion.

- Professional collaboration: The development of professional

practice is supported throughout a teacher's career by ongoing collaboration with colleagues at the school or district level. Professional learning teams are an excellent way to facilitate professional collaboration on many levels and to sustain a culture of learning in the school.

- Ongoing PD to enhance professional practice: Professional development is more than adult pull-out workshops. Professional development in a PLC includes a wide range of activities, most of which can be implemented at the school level, such as book studies, action research, mentorship, online learning and collaborative processes to reflect on student and teacher work.
- Use of data to guide improvement initiatives: Teachers need to develop the skills of data collection and analysis. Our classrooms are rich sources of quantitative and qualitative data about student learning. These data help teachers know if the strategies they are using have resulted in student learning and offer the evidence needed to change practice.
- Professional reflection: Professional reflection is the means by which

learning, renewal and growth continue throughout a teacher's career. To be effective, professional reflection must be deliberate, systematic and rigorous. Most teachers engage in personal reflection, but very few have experienced the power of the collaborative reflection that is possible in an effective PLC team.

Hopefully, professional learning communities have been more than a passing fad on the educational landscape in Alberta. The Association has developed a new series of six workshops called Building Capacity for Professional Learning Communities to help schools learn structured processes for collaboration and professional reflection. These workshops can get your staff through the implementation dip and onward to realizing the benefits of professional learning communities.

To learn more about these workshops visit the Association website at www.teachers.ab.ca and click on Workshops, Courses, and Presentations or call Professional Development staff at 1-800-232-7208.

Call Sooner: Helping Administrators and Teachers

Collegial relationships are important in collaborative schools. Collegial relationships exist when teachers share ideas and knowledge, exchange techniques and approaches, and collaborate on instructional projects. In schools where collegiality is the norm, these professional, interactive, supportive relationships are accepted, enhanced and encouraged. When teachers and administrators work together, the level of commitment, energy and motivation is likely to be higher and improvement efforts are more easily implemented. These relationships have a key impact on schools and provide the opportunity for teachers to work together on improvement activities.

In collaborative schools, the natural give and take between professionals means that conflict,

disagreement and discord will sometimes occur. But these situations can be worked out for the good of students. Collaborative school cultures do not develop overnight. They are shaped by the ways principals, teachers and other key people reinforce and support underlying norms, values, beliefs and assumptions.

The Council on School Administration initiated the Call Sooner campaign a number of years ago to facilitate strong professional ties between teachers and administrators, and to promote the guidelines of the ATA code of ethics. The staff officers of the ATA are here to help members work in a positive and professional climate. As professionals we need to be proactive and Call Sooner—rather than later.

Upcoming Sessions

Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Workshop

January 11 in Calgary

January 15 in Edmonton

If you are interested in attending, please e-mail Marilyn Terlaan in Member Services at marilyn.terlaan@ata.ab.ca.

Banff Leadership Seminar: Teaching for Tomorrow, with Ian Jukes

March 18–20, 2007

Banff Park Lodge, Banff

For information on registration please contact Margaret Patterson at margaret.patterson@cssd.ab.ca.