Press Release

Thursday, September 28, 2023

Amidst the growing discontent with the way Bermuda is currently being governed, the Executive Committee of the Bermuda Union of Teachers wants to reiterate our recent call for a thorough and immediate assessment of leadership in the public education system.

The current disinclination of the Department of Education (DoE) to address the long list of concerns we have presented them with leads us to, once again, question the ability of the current DoE regime to satisfactorily fulfill the duties they are charged with, and, most importantly, provide this great country with the world class education system that it truly deserves.

This is not a new concern, and the DoE’s steadfast refusal to address our reasonable objections is becoming tiresome, and downright disrespectful. The BUT represents a body of individual professionals who would thrive in many other education systems across the globe. This, is our home, and we do what we do because we want to make our home better. We do not see the stagnancy of the current leadership at the DoE as a realistic way forward – and ignoring our repeated calls for a necessary assessment of leadership just adds to the approaching impasse. Simply put, this will not stand for long – better must come!

There is absolutely NO excuse for employees of a Bermuda Government Department to go without pay for several months. NO excuse for ANY Bermudian employer to withhold pay that is owed to the point that an employee has their power turned off because they were not able to pay BELCO in time. No excuse for employees becoming delinquent in their rent payments due to money that they have worked for and earned months ago not being paid to them. This is entirely UN-Bermudian, and it is, frankly, embarrassing.

Yet it continues to happen, with no remorse, no alternative support, and with an air of ‘You’re lucky to even have a job’ attached – it's NOT acceptable. People are showing up to work, fulfilling increasingly exhausting duties, and NOT BEING PAID on time to pay their monthly bills. It’s actually quite a shocking situation, and it MUST be rectified. This month, despite previous assurances of weekly payments, substitute teachers were informed last week, before the recent hacking incident, that they won't receive payment until October 6th. This financial disruption impacts their livelihoods.

There is equally no excuse for teachers – who have full schedules – to arrive at school daily and be asked to cover classes for courses that do not have teachers. This situation is untenable, and flies in the face of our Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) – a document that the DoE adheres to strictly
when it suits them, but ignores entirely when a teacher is needed to cover a duty that will put them well beyond the CBA mandated contact hours during the school week.

Now, the Minister of Education wants to throw teachers under the bus, stating that school laptops were not submitted for updating during the summer, which contributed to the system being unprepared to start smoothly in September. This is inappropriate as there are numerous other concerns that the DoE needs to address, including missing contracts, delayed and inaccurate payments, and a shortage of teachers.

However, while discussing IT, many schools still lack Wi-Fi access, yet teachers are still expected to deliver curriculum that depends on internet access. Of course, if we don’t perform miracles, then we’re not doing our jobs.

The Minister goes on to call for collaboration. It will be interesting to see how this will unfold, considering that the Commissioner of Education (CoE) seldom responds to emails sent by the Union on behalf of members who are seeking answers about system issues, missing contracts, unpaid salaries, or similar matters. This lack of responsiveness predates the recent hacking incident. Also, the CoE is refusing to host a Combined Consultative Meeting, which brings all stakeholders together in education, and has refused since she was appointed to the post. This speaks to her autocratic style, and flat-out refusal to collaborate with partners.

Achieving meaningful change in our education system necessitates a willingness to adapt and improve our approaches – on every level. Presently, the CoE is posing significant challenges to education reform; particularly in her decision to reduce substitute availability, and her refusal to allow substitutes to cover for teachers attending crucial professional development sessions aimed at transforming the system. Instead, the CoE prefers to mandate that teachers engage in professional development outside of work hours – a practice that can, and will, contribute to teacher burnout, and hinder our efforts for sustainable reform. It’s imperative that we address these issues, in order to pave the way for necessary change in education.

This level of incompetence, employee abuse, and ineffectiveness would not be tolerated in any other field – and it is not good enough for the Bermuda public education system anymore. We want, we need, we deserve accountability – and our questions will continue until an adequate answer is given.

Respectfully,

Dante Cooper
General Secretary