

Life lesson

Redford has run out of our money to pay teachers more

Counsellors will tell you that one of the greatest sources of friction in most relationships is money, or more aptly, the lack of it.

Alison Redford was able to count on the support of Alberta teachers during the Progressive Conservative leadership race in 2011 by promising to increase the education budget by \$107 million.

It was the same approach former premier Ed Stelmach used before the 2008 election. He signed a costly five-year deal in 2007 that tied teachers' wages to the average increase in Alberta weekly earnings, even though the benchmark is ill suited for such calculations. It resulted in teachers' salaries climbing almost 23 per cent, to the point Alberta educators are now paid 20 per cent more than their colleagues in other parts of Canada.

Stelmach's folly didn't end there. He also offered to cover the \$2.2-billion liability in the teachers' pension plan. It should have been an either-or proposition — instead, Stelmach signed away billions of dollars to buy labour peace prior to an election, with little sense of the long-term cost.

With Redford having to fill a \$6-billion hole in her upcoming budget because of lower-than-expected energy royalties, the premier quite rightly points to the generous compensation already being enjoyed by teachers and other publicly funded workers, such as doctors. Redford has said it's unlikely they can be offered salary increases in contract talks that have already proved acrimonious.

The teachers' union had pitched a four-year deal that would freeze wages this year and next, but it capped

so-called assigned hours at 1,200 a year. Although the cap is already in place in many districts — and the union says teachers often work hours beyond the limit — the province said it would be unworkable in rural areas with smaller teaching staffs.

Redford is hosting an economic summit in Calgary on Feb. 9 and hopes to tap the wisdom of industry, academic and non-profit leaders. But even before the one-day session begins, it's clear a focus on public sector compensation has to be among a mix of remedies to the government's strained finances. Albertans are all for maintaining strong education and health-care systems, as the government has pledged, but they don't want funding to simply disappear into fatter pay packets.

Predictably, the Redford government's tone isn't sitting well with the president of the Alberta Teachers' Association. With some justification, Carol Henderson notes the Tories are hardly a model of fiscal restraint themselves.

"I think when it comes to savings, they need to look in their own backyard," Henderson said of the Tories, observing they too are better paid than their political colleagues elsewhere in Canada.

Redford is learning that when you point a finger, there's usually three fingers pointing back at you.

The premier is also discovering that when money becomes scarce, many relationships become strained. Having picked up where Stelmach left off and bought the affections of teachers with the public's money, she has little choice but to reject a wage increase. Regrettably, the cupboard is bare.