

S4 E2: In Conversation with Jason Schilling, The Alberta Teachers' Association

Episode Highlights

In this episode, Clint Johnston, President of the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF/FCE), discusses the significant teacher strike in Alberta with special guest, Jason Schilling, President of The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA). The conversation delves into how the strike highlighted critical issues such as classroom size and complexity, teacher retention, and the underfunding of public education. Schilling also addresses the political implications of the Government of Alberta's actions and how raising awareness of the issues garnered public support for teachers.

Clint Johnston: Introduction and Overview

One of the most significant moments in Canadian public education this year was the recent teacher strike in Alberta. The ATA's strike garnered national attention and focused on a critical issue facing the profession: increasing complexity and growing class sizes. As a result of the underfunding of public education, the pressures facing teachers and education workers are intensifying, making retaining teachers and recruiting new ones increasingly challenging.

Jason Schilling: Key Issues Facing Teachers in Alberta

Through years of advocacy and The ATA's "The Least" campaign, we've sparked conversations about classroom conditions. The campaign highlighted that despite being the richest province, Alberta spends the least on public education (per student) in Canada.

And so, when the strike began, it made the classroom conditions facing Alberta teachers front and center in the minds of Albertans at the time – and polling shows this.

Systemic and Interconnectedness of Funding and Classroom Conditions

The underfunding of public education is linked to increasing class sizes and complexities, and salaries weaves right into that too. These issues cannot be addressed individually.

School boards are not receiving enough funding to keep up with inflation and a growing student population, as well as to bring the resources in to address students' needs. An ATA membership survey revealed that 90% say their classes have increased, and 58% say the resources to address the needs within their classrooms have decreased over time.



Government Response: Back-to-School Legislation

The Alberta Government had a lot of different options, such as negotiating a settlement, if they would have come to the table to actually sit down and have serious conversations about issues. They could have done a variety of things, but they chose the nuclear option because they didn't want to deal with the disagreement anymore.

The government felt that it was necessary to use the notwithstanding clause to strip the rights away of 51,000 teachers in this province to force a settlement on teachers that has landed with a thud nationally and internationally.

This had a big effect on teachers. They felt demoralized and disrespected. They're angry, and justifiably they should be since they got ordered to go back to work into the exact same situation that they left. The strike might have ended, but the fight has not, because we are still seeing things that need to be changed.

Leadership in Times of Hardship

It's really key to listen to people, to figure out the root problem of the issues. And then try to take what you hear from members and articulate that moving forward in a way that the public and the press can understand. When you're the face of leadership, it's not always easy because you then become the target – when people get mad at the government, or the school board, or a bunch of people who they feel aren't listening to them, they'll turn to their union leadership because they will listen to them.

Public Engagement and Support

As the strike approached, The ATA was very transparent about what was happening – we decided to give almost three weeks' notice to when we were going to go on strike, so that teachers, parents, students, and the community understood what was going to happen so that they had time to prepare. So, when the strike came, it wasn't a surprise.

There was a lot of support for teachers from parents, communities, businesses across the province, and even support from across Canada from labour unions, the CTF/FCE and its Member Organizations.

Teachers flipped the conversation around education in Alberta. Polling shows that support for teachers and The ATA have increased since the strike. The government's use of draconian measures, specifically ordering teachers back without fixing the working conditions, highlighted its refusal to fix the underlying problems.



Education Funding – A National Issue

Across the country, the issues are not identical, but similar; there are retention and recruitment issues, fueled by increasing class size, complexity and composition, violence and aggression in schools. We're all experiencing a lot of the same issues, and funding is the root cause that's not being talked about or addressed. It just seems like provincial and territorial governments aren't willing to take the steps that they know are needed, and it all comes down to political will.

Class Size and Complexity

Class size and complexity are definitely two of the things that are driving members away from the profession. Teachers don't have support or the resources, so they burn out and leave, which perpetuates all the issues that we are seeing.

Class size and complexity are the source of a lot of these issues, but it all goes back to funding. We can't address classroom complexities on the backs of teachers who are already maxed out. You have to put the funding and the resources in there to help people do this job. Teachers and students are the biggest resource that we have within schools, so they should be well-funded. Governments should be putting money into the people that work with our youth to ensure they can be successful and thrive.

Raising Awareness

One of the successes of the strike in Alberta is the fact that this is very much a public conversation. Right now, education is top of the mind for Albertans because everybody knows about the story, and everybody's asking questions now of government as to what they are doing about this and why it got so bad in the first place.