

ONE collective agreement
FOR ALL
education support workers

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CUPE / Canadian Union
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ONE FOR ALL:

One Collective Agreement for Saskatchewan Education Support Workers

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INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) is the largest union in the province, representing over 29,000 members who work at health care facilities, school boards, municipalities, universities, libraries and community-based organizations.

CUPE is the predominant union representing support staff in Saskatchewan's PreK-12 education system. We represent just under 6,500 school board employees in 20 of the 28 school divisions in the province, including 15 of the 18 public school divisions and five of the ten separate school divisions.

Our members work as educational and teaching assistants, secretaries, library assistants and technicians, caretakers, bus drivers, computer technicians, social workers, speech assistants, trades workers and in several other classifications.

Our members' work makes our schools work. CUPE members ensure that school children arrive safely to school. They assist teachers in the classroom and work one-on-one with intensive needs students. They maintain school libraries. They supervise outdoor activities and coordinate community events in schools. They generate report cards and exams and maintain school records. They shovel walks, check boilers and clean floors to ensure a safe and healthy environment for students. CUPE members are proud of their work and the critical role they play in ensuring a high quality learning environment in both our public and separate school systems.

While many recognize the value of the work our members provide, CUPE education workers have been denied the same provincial bargaining rights that teachers have enjoyed since the early 1970s. Our union has been seeking these same bargaining rights for over a decade. We have lobbied the provincial government, lobbied both government and Opposition Party MLAs, met with the Saskatchewan School Boards Association and consulted widely with our members. We believe the arguments for provincial bargaining are stronger now than they have ever been with the shift of education funding to the provincial government.

In 1996, CUPE represented about 2,500 school board employees in 40% of the school divisions in Saskatchewan. Over the last 15 years, many more school board workers throughout the province have joined our union. Today, CUPE represents 71% of the estimated 9,100 school board support staff in the province. Our membership in the education sector has increased by 157% since 1996.

CUPE school board locals have made important bargaining gains in a number of areas. However, the costly and time-consuming negotiation of separate collective agreements with each school division has resulted in substantial wage and benefit disparities among school support staff. We believe it is time for one collective agreement for all education support staff in Saskatchewan.

THE CURRENT BARGAINING STRUCTURE

Since 1973, Saskatchewan teachers have enjoyed a provincial agreement that covers all teachers in the province with standard wage rates and benefits. CUPE school support workers, however, must bargain all issues in separate collective agreements with each school division. The time and resources spent to negotiate all of these contracts are substantial.

- ***Number of CUPE education collective agreements:*** currently CUPE has 26 collective agreements in the school board sector, down from 58 in 2006. Two collective agreements are with a private school bus company. After the amalgamation of rural public school divisions on January 1, 2006, our union negotiated one collective agreement to cover all CUPE support staff within each rural school division. We now have 24 agreements with public and separate school divisions.
- ***Time involved to bargain separate agreements:*** most school board negotiations require 10 to 15 bargaining sessions over half a year to two years to complete. Some contracts have taken three or four years to negotiate. Each bargaining session typically takes six to eight hours. That results in 1,560 to 3,120 hours at the table negotiating 26 collective agreements. This does not include the considerable time spent preparing proposals, revising language and consulting with union and employer members.
- ***Resources required to bargain separate agreements:*** on average, each union and employer bargaining committee comprises six to nine representatives. The negotiation of 26 education collective agreements would thus involve anywhere from 312 to 468 combined union and employer bargaining representatives for 6,455 support staff workers.
- ***The cost to employers:*** it is difficult to calculate the exact costs of this inefficient and fragmented bargaining structure. On the employer side, school boards provide a stipend to trustees for each bargaining session they attend. The salary and benefit costs of Directors of Education, Secretary-Treasurers, human resource staff and others at the table are significant. It is common for the employer to cover the wages of the union bargaining committee members if bargaining occurs during working hours – 77% of our collective agreements have this provision.
- ***The cost to the union:*** the costs to the union include the staff time involved with preparing, negotiating and typing up contract proposals and agreements, and bargaining committee expenses which may include travel costs and a minimal per diem.

Wage Inequities

There are vast wage disparities among the same classifications in CUPE's collective agreements with school divisions. For the most part, school support workers in the larger urban centres receive higher wages than their counterparts in rural Saskatchewan. But there also exists significant wage inequities among school employees within urban centres and among workers in various rural school divisions.

With the amalgamation of rural school divisions, most of the merged collective agreements brought up the lowest paid workers within a classification to the higher standard in the new school division. This resulted in giving living wages to many low paid women in the education sector. Many education workers also received benefits for the first time after amalgamation.

Despite the progress in improving wages and benefits, there remain considerable wage inequities in the province. The following are just a few examples of the wage inequities facing school support staff:

- An entry-level Educational Assistant working for the Regina School Division makes a maximum wage rate of \$21.00 an hour, while an Educational Assistant employed by the Sun West School Division makes a maximum of \$15.70 an hour – or \$5.30 an hour less (a 25.2% difference).
- An entry-level Secretary working for the Saskatchewan Rivers School Division makes a maximum of \$20.55 an hour while her counterpart in the Sun West School Division makes a maximum of \$15.70 an hour -- a difference of \$4.85 an hour (or 30.9% less).
- An entry-level Resource Centre Assistant at the Regina School Division makes a maximum of \$21.00 an hour, while a Library Assistant at Good Spirit School Division makes a maximum of \$15.98 an hour – or \$5.02 an hour less (31.4% less).
- An entry-level caretaker working for the Prince Albert Separate School Division makes a top hourly wage of \$19.77 while a caretaker employed at Good Spirit School Division receives a maximum of \$15.07 an hour – a difference of \$4.70 an hour (or 23.8% below).

Number of increments varies

It is important to note that the number of steps it takes for different classifications to get from the starting wage rate to the maximum wage rate varies widely. In some collective agreements, the starting and top wage rates are the same. This is especially true for caretaker classifications. In other contracts, a school support worker may have to work as long as 84 months to get to the top wage rate in their classification.

Many classifications do not earn a living wage

Not only is there tremendous variation in hourly wage rates, the hours of work also differ significantly. Most of the 10-month employees, who are typically women, are only paid for 5 or 6 hours a day and only for the days school is in session. Their annual hours of work may be as low as 1,000 or 1,300, resulting in an annual salary that is below the Low-Income Cut off line. Our members work alongside teachers in the schools, but because they are laid off during Christmas, Easter and summer breaks, many have to apply for Employment Insurance benefits to make ends meet.

Disparities in Benefit Coverage

CUPE education locals across the province must negotiate benefit plans separately with each individual school division. The ability to bargain these benefits depends on a number of factors: the resources and financial commitment of the employer, the size and strength of the union local and the trade-offs that are made within an overall compensation package during bargaining. As a result, there exists tremendous disparity in benefit coverage among school support workers.

- ***Extended health care benefits.*** Only 13 of the 26 current CUPE education collective agreements have a 100% employer-paid extended health care (EHC) benefit plan. Although only one-half of our agreements have 100% employer paid EHC, these agreements cover our largest bargaining units (primarily in urban school divisions). The majority, or 60.7%, of our school board workers have 100% employer-paid EHC benefits.
- ***Dental care plans.*** There are 14 CUPE collective agreements, covering 61.1% of our education workers, with 100% employer-paid premiums for a dental care plan.
- ***Vision care plans.*** Only 9 of our agreements, covering 44.2% of our education members, have a vision care plan whose premium costs are 100% employer-paid.

Many of our education bargaining units have limited benefit coverage. For example:

- 5 agreements do not have any extended health care benefits (three of them are small bus driver bargaining units, and two are small separate school divisions)
- 3 agreements do not have a dental plan (all bus driver locals)
- 12 agreements have no vision care coverage

Rural workers have weakest benefit coverage

In the majority of rural school division collective agreements, the employees share the cost of benefit premiums – usually 50% of the costs. Exceptions to this are Ile a la Crosse School Division, and Living Sky School Division which provide a comprehensive package of 100% employer-paid benefits to support staff.

Paying for benefit coverage on a low salary

School support staff who must pay from 50% to 100% of their benefit premiums are also more likely to have low salaries. With low hourly wage rates and limited annual hours of work, there are school board workers who earn as little as \$16,000 - \$18,000 a year.

It is unfair that school support staff should have to pay to get any benefit coverage at all when Saskatchewan teachers have a comprehensive government-paid benefit package that includes vision, dental and extended health care.

THE CASE FOR PROVINCIAL BARGAINING

Provincial Bargaining – Other Provinces

The following provinces have full or partial provincial bargaining for school board workers.

- ***New Brunswick.*** Approximately 2,200 CUPE school bus drivers, custodians, tradespersons and maintenance workers are covered by one province-wide collective agreement in New Brunswick. Teaching assistants, school administrative and clerical staff, library assistants, school intervention workers and student bus attendants are covered by another provincial agreement. There are 3,300 CUPE members covered by this agreement.
- ***Prince Edward Island.*** This province also has two provincial collective agreements: one covering 381 Educational Assistants and Youth Services Workers; and another agreement covering 625 bus drivers, mechanics, administrative staff and maintenance workers. Teaching assistants greatly benefited from the implementation of pay equity in PEI. CUPE is the only union representing school support staff.
- ***Nova Scotia.*** CUPE and seven of eight school divisions recently negotiated a provincial framework agreement. Major issues such as wages, benefits and pensions are bargained provincially, and local school divisions and CUPE locals continue to bargain local issues. There is also a commitment to undertake a reclassification review. CUPE represents 3,700 support staff in Nova Scotia
- ***Newfoundland and Labrador.*** There is one provincial agreement for CUPE education support staff and one provincial agreement for support staff represented by NAPE.
- ***Quebec.*** All classifications of school support staff are covered by one provincial collective agreement in Quebec.
- ***Ontario.*** CUPE represents 50,000 workers and 105 bargaining units in the JK-12 education sector. On May 27, 2008 a Provincial Discussion Table Agreement

- was reached between CUPE, the Ontario School Boards and the Ministry of Education. The agreement covered common benefits, language on Violence in the Workplace, professional development training, a standard 7-hour workday and increased number of paid days for Educational Assistants, and a commitment to review the funding formula for custodial budgets. Individual CUPE Locals bargained the terms of the PDT and other local issues with their employers.
- **British Columbia.** CUPE represents 26,000 support workers (87% of all support staff) in 51 of 60 school divisions in B.C. School division support workers do not have a provincial agreement but their negotiations are governed by a common Letter of Understanding negotiated between the BC Public School Employers Association (BCPSEA) and CUPE representatives. BCPSEA is mandated by the government to bargain the provincial government wage mandate. Local bargaining implements the provisions in the Letter of Understanding.
 - **Saskatchewan.** Education support staff do not have provincial bargaining but teachers have enjoyed provincial bargaining rights for wages and benefits since 1973 when *The Teacher Collective Bargaining Act* was passed. The legislation established the composition of bargaining committees and outlined the items to be negotiated provincially and locally under the new bi-level bargaining structure. Salaries, principals' and vice-principals' allowances, pension, group life insurance and sick leave were among the items to be negotiated at the provincial table. Substitute teachers' salaries, sabbatical and educational leaves, pay periods and special allowances would be covered by local collective agreements negotiated between the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation and each school board.

Our Provincial Bargaining Proposal

CUPE's provincial bargaining proposal would replace the current 24 collective agreements that are negotiated separately with 20 school divisions with one provincial collective agreement covering all classifications in both the public and separate school systems. The two agreements negotiated with Rilling Bus would not be part of this process. Bargaining would take place at one central table. Where necessary, local agreements and letters of understanding addressing local issues would still be negotiated at the school division level.

The structure of the union and employer provincial bargaining committees would need to be determined by each party. That said, the structure could follow the example set by the health care sector where the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO) acts as the bargaining agent authority for the health region employers. This process allows for representation of different types and sizes of health care employers from across the province on the SAHO bargaining committee. Union members elect their bargaining committee in accordance with their provincial council bylaws.

**Table 1
Proposed Bargaining Structure for
Education Support Staff**

| | Current Bargaining Structure | Proposed Bargaining Structure |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| # of CUPE Collective Agreements | 24 | 1 |
| # Support Staff Covered | 6,412 | 6,412 |
| Estimated number of combined bargaining team members | 312-468 | 20 |
| Estimated time in face to face negotiations | 1,560 – 3,120 hours | 60-80 hours |

In the school board sector, an employer provincial bargaining council could be established that would act as the bargaining agent. The bargaining council and individual school divisions could all be identified as the employer under the terms of the provincial collective agreement. Though much would depend on the exact model adopted, we believe provincial bargaining rights for school support staff should be enshrined in legislation under *The Education Act*, which now outlines the bargaining process and structure for teachers, or in a stand-alone piece of legislation.

A provincial agreement would eventually standardize job descriptions, classifications, wage rates and benefits for CUPE school board support workers across the province. The guiding principles for this process could be established in an initial framework agreement.

Provincially Funded Benefits

Standardized benefits for all CUPE school board workers would be a key element of a provincial agreement. As noted above, these benefits vary considerably from one CUPE school board local to the next (see Appendix A). About 40% of our school board members have to cost-share their benefit premiums.

As part of a framework agreement, the provincial government could commit funds to close the benefit gap among school support workers. Our calculations from five years ago estimated it would only cost an additional \$6 million annually to ensure that every school board support worker received full benefit coverage: group life insurance, AD&D, long-term disability, extended health care, dental and vision.

Benefit coverage of our members has improved since then and benefit costs have increased, so we do not know what it would cost to bridge that gap today.

A preferred option would be to establish a provincially funded benefits plan that would cover the full cost of premiums for school support staff. The cost of such a plan would depend on a variety of factors, including the total number of staff covered and the level of

benefit coverage. CUPE supports the model of a Benefits Trust which would provide the union the ability to have input into the level of benefit coverage. Currently CUPE has no input into the SSBA Benefit Plan in which 16 of our bargaining units participate.

Currently, 16 of our bargaining units have benefits provided through the SSBA Benefits Plan. Six of our largest bargaining units in Regina and Saskatoon have separate benefit plans negotiated with different carriers.

Bringing all education support staff into one benefit plan would reduce the school divisions' administrative costs involved in providing benefits to 6,400 employees. Costs would also be reduced through economies of scale. With a larger pool of insured members, the costs are spread over a larger group thus reducing premium costs.

The cost of providing a provincially funded benefit plan to school support staff would be substantially less than what it costs the provincial government to cover the full premiums for teachers' benefits. In the 2010-11 provincial budget, the government allocated a total of \$27.4 million for teachers' benefits – \$15.5 million for an extended health plan, \$10.1 million for a dental plan, and \$1.8 million for group life insurance.

The provincial government funds the full premium costs of benefits for the vast majority of provincial government and public sector employees in Saskatchewan – approximately 60,000 public sector employees. This includes provincial government employees, SIAST, agencies, health care workers (represented by SUN, HSAS, CUPE, SEIU and SGEU) as well as teachers.

CUPE school support workers deserve to be treated the same as other public sector workers in Saskatchewan. School support workers and their families should have access to provincially funded benefits, just like teachers and other public sector workers.

ADVANTAGES OF ONE PROVINCIAL AGREEMENT

There would be many advantages to establishing a single provincial agreement to cover all school support staff in Saskatchewan.

Cost Savings

Provincial bargaining would produce significant cost savings, since only a fraction of the bargaining representatives would be required to negotiate one agreement. School divisions could redirect the funds and time spent on negotiations to other educational priorities. Provincial bargaining would allow for the more effective and efficient use of staff, negotiators and resources, and facilitate the resolution of immediate workplace concerns.

A provincial bargaining framework that includes a provincially funded benefits plan would free up substantial monies from school boards' budgets to spend on other

priorities, such as new positions, supplies or building repair. Direct provincial funding of benefits could save school divisions hundreds of thousands of dollars in premiums for support staff.

Furthermore, the provision of fair wages and benefits – with adequate funding from the provincial government - would assist all Saskatchewan school divisions in their efforts to recruit and retain support workers, which would reduce turnover costs.

Improving Administration

A single provincial agreement with uniform contract language would likely reduce the time and costs involved with grievance and arbitration procedures. As the language gets tested through the grievance procedure in different situations throughout the province, both the union and employer would develop a similar understanding of how the contract provisions are to be applied. Interpretation and application of specific language could be shared among school divisions, which would reduce the need to arbitrate the same issues in different school divisions.

Rural school divisions and CUPE Locals have recently gone through a process of amalgamating collective agreements with much success.

Fairness for School Support Staff

Addressing the wage and benefit disparities through a provincial agreement for school support staff is simply a matter of fairness. Why should an educational assistant or secretary in one school division be paid 20% to 30% less than their counterparts in another school division who perform the exact same work? The work performed is just as valuable, regardless of where it is performed. When one school board worker is paid less or receives fewer benefits than another doing the same work, the implication is that their work is less valued. This principle of fairness was understood by rural school divisions who ensured that lower paid jobs were brought up to the higher wage rate during the amalgamation of school divisions.

A teacher in one school division receives the same salary and benefit coverage as their counterpart working in another school division. Health care workers and provincial government employees are paid according to the work they do and receive the same benefits regardless of where they work in Saskatchewan. MLAs from rural and urban communities receive the same level of compensation. The same standard should apply to school support staff. Every school employee should be paid the same wage rate for doing the same work.

The wage and benefit parity that would eventually result from one provincial bargaining agreement would make a real difference in the lives of Saskatchewan school board workers and their families. Many school board employees' incomes fall below the Low

Income Cut-Off Line. Yet the same employees who can least afford it are expected to pay half the premium costs for supplementary health and other benefits – or to do without.

The provision of 100% employer-paid benefits would not only put \$100 to \$160 per month in the pockets of many school board workers who are currently paying premiums, but more importantly, it would provide access to health services like prescription drugs, dental care and orthodontic treatments for their children, the costs of which can be prohibitive to many workers. The provision of paid benefits would put more money into the pockets of education workers than any proposed tax cut the government is considering.

Supporting Rural Communities

While all school support staff would benefit from a provincial agreement, the impact would be most pronounced in rural Saskatchewan, where school board workers tend to receive lower wages and typically have to pay half the costs of their benefits.

Like other public sector workers, CUPE school board employees living and working in rural Saskatchewan make a vital contribution to their communities. A 2004 study by the Centre for Rural Studies and Enrichment concluded that public sector employment is essential to helping small communities survive and flourish. The study, entitled the *Economic and Social Contributions of the Public Sector in Rural Saskatchewan*, found that the work of the 55,800 public employees living in rural Saskatchewan at that time generated an estimated 21,762 additional spin-off jobs.

The Centre also found that public employees living outside of Saskatchewan's two major cities spent 75% of their wages in rural communities. Every \$100 spent by public employees generated an additional \$44.34 of spending in their community. In addition to economic contributions, the study found that 73% of public employees surveyed in Melville and Meadow Lake volunteered in their community, providing an estimated \$200,000 in free skilled labour.

The income that rural school board workers receive, however modest, helps support local businesses in their communities and, in many cases, family farms. Many CUPE education workers also volunteer for local charities, sports teams and church groups, which further strengthens and enriches life in their communities. The wage adjustments that many rural school board workers would receive as a result of a provincial agreement would be spent at local businesses, helping support rural communities across the province. As noted above, the provision of 100% employer-paid benefit coverage would also free up funds to be spent in the local economy.

CONCLUSION

The current bargaining structure for school board support staff is costly, time-consuming and inefficient. More importantly, the negotiation of multiple contracts with individual school boards has created huge wage and benefit disparities across the province. In many cases, wage gaps of \$4 to \$5 per hour exist between school support workers doing the exact same work.

Only about 60% of the school support workers represented by CUPE have 100% employer-paid extended health and dental benefits. Most rural school support workers pay half the cost of benefit premiums. These inequities are unacceptable.

School support workers need to be recognized and valued for the important role they play in our education system. This recognition must start by eliminating the significant wage and benefit disparities that exist across the province. It's a simple question of fairness.

The province continues to enjoy booming resource revenues and strong economic growth. For only a modest cost, the provincial government could help ensure fairness and equity for Saskatchewan school board workers. The fact that school divisions can no longer set mill rates and are dependent on the provincial government for funding places a greater responsibility on the government to provide fair and equitable wages for support staff.

We believe that the public would support government funding for provincial bargaining. A recent public opinion poll conducted for CUPE by Viewpoints Research revealed that 67.3% of Saskatchewan residents support provincial bargaining rights for education support workers. This poll was conducted in December 2010 with a margin of error of plus or minus 4%.

A provincial collective agreement for school support staff would have a far-reaching, positive impact for workers, school divisions and communities across the province. This impact would be most pronounced in rural Saskatchewan, where support workers' wages are typically lower and benefit coverage limited. Any wage increases resulting from a provincial agreement would be spent at local businesses, which would help sustain and strengthen rural communities.

CUPE education workers are committed to achieving the same provincial bargaining rights and provincial benefit coverage as Saskatchewan teachers and other public employees. It's time to replace the current fragmented system of negotiations with a modern, efficient process of provincial bargaining. We urge you to support ONE collective agreement FOR ALL education support workers.

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